

Paul Scott's Hippie

The Evolution of Genre and Aesthetic in Anglo-Indian Fiction

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## ***Hanging On***

**A Novel**

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## Abstract

### 'Paul Scott's Hippie' and *Hanging On*

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This thesis consists of a critical essay examining the evolution of genre and aesthetic in English fiction about South Asia, and a novel about a family of Sri Lankans settled in England.

In the essay I question how a contemporary English novelist can place himself amongst the cohort of those earlier writers who have written about South Asia, since the relationship between the former colonists and colonised has changed so greatly. I demonstrate that generic elements were established in the earliest examples of this fiction, which remained notably constant throughout, even up to the late work of Paul Scott. However, I show that the aesthetic attending this *Anglo-Indian genre* begins with an affirmation of the benefit to the subcontinent which the colonial project might bring and ends with a repudiation of that idea. I seek to break new ground by arguing that the repudiation is so unequivocal in the work of Scott and others that this fiction comes to express an aesthetic of apology.

I argue that Scott recognises that it has become possible no longer to write within the *Anglo-Indian genre*, and that his final novel, *Staying On*, has evolved into the *Commonwealth genre*.

My novel, *Hanging On*, is an echo of Scott's last novel. It examines the life of a man who wishes to remain more-or-less British, rather than become independently Sri Lankan, and the legacy of his position as it filters down through the generations of his family in Luton. Cultural difference is now the prime source of conflict, rather than political power, and it aims to demonstrate that cultural hybridity is the paradoxical consequence of the racial rigidity which accompanied the colonial project to its termination.

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## **Preface - Fact Before Fiction**

Such was the extent of the British Empire, and so recently its end in memory, that it continues to exercise influence on the lives of many around the world. It may not be unexpected, therefore, that personal accounts are beginning to emerge as a research methodology in literature, whereby family archives form the starting point for broader critical studies. Niall Ferguson, for instance, begins his history of Empire with an account of his family as colonists (Ferguson 2004), Mary Louise Pratt writes of her colonial upbringing in Canada (Pratt 2007), and Bart Moore-Gilbert turns a personal quest for his father's history into an exploration and assessment of the British in India before Independence (Moore-Gilbert 2014). I seek to contextualise both my novel and the relationship of fact and fiction in the colonial project through research within my own family archive.

When I married, there was no accompanying peal of old church bells, neither quaint village green nor too-busy city street, nothing of the usual English way of life, whatever that might be, and yet the deed was done in Lancashire, in English, under the rites of the Church of England, and an important part of the wedding breakfast was trifle.

I didn't spot it at the time, but the principal guest at my wedding was not timeless tradition, or even those habits which come to be thought of as such, rather it was history. The difference is that the one depends on no change, possibly stagnation, whilst the other demands a forward drive, with the looking backwards done, as it were, in a rear view mirror. And the view behind us? It was the receding memory of Britain's imperial past.

The location of our wedding was a fine country mansion, Quernmore Park Hall, situated on the edge of one of England's most scenic landscapes, the Forest of Bowland. This house was owned in the mid-nineteenth century by one William Garnett, esq., who was high sheriff of Lancashire at the time. He had come into his considerable fortune as the son of John Garnett, a merchant in Jamaica (Burke 2010), when one of the few possible sources of funding for such a purchase, other than for the established aristocracy, was through the exploitation of opportunities thrown up by the mercantile expansion of the Empire.

At the time, the house was owned and occupied by an order of Anglican

monks, the Society of the Sacred Mission. Here, again, there was a colonial past, as the order was founded in the late nineteenth century for the purpose of facilitating the spread of Anglicanism throughout Empire and beyond (Society of the Sacred Mission 2011).

I had been told that the order had come by this property when one of the brethren, freshly arrived in Lancaster to act as chaplain for the emerging new university, had been tapped on the shoulder by an elderly gentleman called Garnett, descendant of the Jamaican merchant. The monk was asked if he was *Roman* or *Anglican*, and upon giving the *correct* answer, it was explained to him that his interlocutor was childless and would be leaving the bulk of the estate to his nephew. However, since the nephew had embraced Roman Catholicism, he was only going to get the Home Farm, and not the Hall – and would the Order like the Hall for themselves? Thus SSM acquired a new house, some of the fifteen or so brethren who moved in came to be closely involved in life on the campus of Lancaster University, and I became a particular friend of one of them.

My wife and I married on July the fourth, a date which reverberates in colonial history, and amongst the handful of guests posing for photographs amidst the imported rhododendrons, was a nun who had recently retired from her own missionary work in southern Africa, my Canadian mother, and a couple of Christian Sri Lankans, who were there because it was their daughter who was the bride.

Also present was my grandmother, a woman of no religious affiliation whatsoever (and possibly no belief either) yet who, in a strange echo of the prejudicial history by which SSM had acquired the Hall, objected far less to my marriage to a South Asian than she had to my brother's marriage to a Roman Catholic a couple of years earlier. It seems that religious prejudices lingering from the sixteenth century can be stronger than racial prejudices withering after the end of Empire, although this might not be apparent from the reading of Anglo-Indian fiction.

This flurry of postcolonial festivity arose because I had met Sharmini as a fellow undergraduate, both of us students of music in the western tradition. Whilst it may pass without remark that I, having grown up in Cheshire, was studying Viennese music in Lancashire (though there is history in this fact alone, of course), it is much harder to take for granted either my Sri Lankan wife's interest

in this tradition or her presence in the north of England as a student, certainly for anyone who might have gleaned their knowledge of the subcontinent from fictional accounts in English literature.

A key element in this study is my assertion that narratives about the British colonial presence in South Asia are generically derived and socially driven, my first evidence for which is that they generally omit the native Christian<sup>1</sup>, whereas the history and experience of my wife's family attests to a different, altogether more humdrum relationship of tolerance, born in part of evangelism-with-perks.

Selvaretnam, my late father-in-law, was born in 1919 in British Malaya. He was the second child of parents who had settled down to a life of prosperity on Penang, having emigrated from Ceylon the year before. An outpost of the Raj, the Straits Settlements had had close ties with colonial South Asia dating back to the eighteenth century occupation of Penang by the East India Company (EIC), one of the consequences of which was the commonplace movement of economic migrants from other parts of the Empire (Howe 2002: 21). There had been widespread migration of labourers from Tamil Nadu to Malaya, supported by the English who required a workforce to exploit the two principal natural resources, rubber and tin. Sinnathamber's move to Penang from Jaffna was equally unremarkable as it followed a well-established pattern of migration of Tamil professionals from Ceylon, whose services were to provide the foundation of the business community.

This legacy is still evident in Malaysia today, where there is an easily discernible class divide between the descendants of these two groups, and when I first visited I was welcomed into a community of Anglophone doctors, lawyers, engineers, accountants who considered themselves Sri Lankan Tamils, yet whose servants considered themselves to be Indian Tamils. Neither group seemed to consider themselves to be Malaysian, neither group spoke more Malay than was absolutely necessary, and the upper classes spoke only enough Tamil to communicate their needs to the lower classes.

Crucially, whilst the servants were generally Hindu, the professionals came from families with a well-established Christian background, pointing to the

<sup>1</sup> The complex history of Christianity in South Asia is beyond the scope of this essay. Its establishment in the subcontinent is ancient, probably pre-dating its spread through Europe, although it expanded greatly through the evangelical enterprises of Europeans from the earliest colonisation by the Portuguese. Although a small minority, it remains the third largest religion in India (2.3%) and fourth in Sri Lanka (6%). (Norton, 2008)

strong generational advantage which might accrue to those subjects of the Indian Empire who converted early to the religion of the occupiers (Holt 2011: 565). And it is unsurprising that Jaffna, as the earliest and largest of the Methodist missions in South Asia, should have been the source of this curious professional diaspora.

During WWII my father-in-law joined the army, the British army, with which he saw active service and rose to the rank of major, a dark-skinned officer under whom served pale-skinned British officers and other ranks. On his demobilisation, he was offered the choice of a scholarship at Cambridge or entrance to the Inns of Court, and he chose the latter, subsequently being called to the bar from Grays Inn. He was a senior lawyer by the time I knew him, top of the tree in Penang, and had twice turned down the offer of a judgeship because his Christianity prevented him from feeling able to hand down the death sentence, as might have been required. He was particularly friendly with one of the English lawyers who had stayed on after Independence, although in a rare moment of pride, he was keen to tell me that his superiority as an advocate had long since driven this poor man back into the office, to concentrate on what would have been solicitor's work in the differentiated legal system of the UK.

There is a great deal of persistent prejudice amongst the peoples of South Asia, such that my father-in-law was determined to find a pale-skinned wife to dilute his own great darkness, so he travelled back to the mother country to find a bride, whom he met in Colombo. She joined the Tamil Christians of Penang, but remained always a Sri Lankan abroad. They produced four daughters, all of whom were sent to England to study. The eldest (who was to become my wife) arrived initially with a music scholarship to Sherborne School for Girls, arranged by the Bishop of Winchester after he had heard her play violin and piano in a concert of western classical music he attended at St. George's Church in Georgetown – as if she'd come from the Home Counties.

Naturally Rohini, my late mother-in-law, was another Anglophone Christian Tamil, otherwise the match could not have been made. But her history was somewhat different, and removed from the separateness of the Jaffna Methodist community of her husband's family. She belonged to a line which had sufficient self-confidence to possess a family tree, on which document could be found the source of the social preferment which had enabled her family to hold their heads high amongst the Singalese majority outside Jaffna – her father was



the Principal of Uva College in Badulla, and her brothers, another teacher, a surgeon and a lawyer, had each trained in England. Family history records that this professional standing stemmed from 1855, when my wife's great-great-grandfather, Sedonade Modliar Mathusela Rasakaria Canagaratne Modliar, converted to Christianity for the sake of his promotion to the rank of Chief Mudaliyar of the Eastern Province, a senior position in the British-created native administrative class<sup>2</sup>.

These biographies belong to people who were born and raised under the rule of the Indian Empire. Yet the facts of their lives seem to differ wholly from the fictional lives portrayed in English fiction. They were not nationalists, not desperate for independent government, not restricted in their movements, not religiously constrained. In fact, they appeared to be more than content to belong to a system which, for them, brought security and social standing, and as such remained stalwart friends of the British community which 'stayed on' after Independence, amongst whom no hint of either racial or social tension could be detected. Indeed, when my wife's sister married a convert to Christianity, whose family had originated in the Hindu Tamil Nadu diaspora, more complaints were voiced amongst her family than there had been on my account, in a manner remarkably analogous to my grandmother's prejudicial remarks not long before.

It is this family, this history, which has provided the raw materials for my novel, and which prompts me to examine the very different image of the colonial project in Asia as projected by the literature which it threw up.

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<sup>2</sup> The certificate confirming this promotion, signed and sealed by Sir Henry George Ward, Governor of Ceylon, is still extant in the family.

## 1. Introduction

My novel, *Hanging On*, is related to Paul Scott's *Staying On*, his final novel, which won the Booker prize in 1977. He was writing about an English couple who have grown into old age in independent India, and I am writing about a Sri Lankan couple who, post independence, have grown old as immigrants in England. Other than this simple, imperfect symmetry, the novels have nothing in common whatsoever, no characters, no plot points, they're written decades apart, set in different historical periods, and so on. What can it possibly mean when I compare my novel so audaciously to Scott's?

There's a long history of English fiction about South Asia, and an even longer one of non-fiction, so I'm placing myself at the chronological front of a large cohort of writers, many of whose members have been highly distinguished. This is a precarious place to be and it seems appropriate, therefore, to be certain of my position, to understand exactly what it means to be writing within this world, and how Scott and I are connected.

In a critical literary account, infused with modern scholarship and historical reflection, I will seek to demonstrate that there is a strong sense in which Scott provides the last word on the matter of genre in novels about South Asia in English, the *Anglo-Indian novel*, in particular in his set, *The Raj Quartet* (*The Jewel in the Crown* (1966), *The Day of the Scorpion* (1968), *The Towers of Silence* (1971) and *A Division of the Spoils* (1974)).

However, for the last word to be his, it is necessary for the first word to belong to another, and Sydney Owenson, who published *The Missionary: an Indian Tale* in 1811, appears to have been the first writer of the Anglo-Indian novel<sup>3</sup>.

Using these authors as my beginning and end, I shall examine the way in which the Anglo-Indian genre persisted, whilst its aesthetic evolved to suit the socio-political requirements of the 'home' readership in Britain, since, as Said points out:

Western writers until the middle of the twentieth century [...] wrote with an exclusively Western audience in mind, even when they wrote of characters, places, or situations that referred to, made use of, overseas territories held by Europeans. (Said 1994: 78)

<sup>3</sup> There were epistolary precursors in *Hartley House, Calcutta* (anonymous, 1789) and *Translation of the letters of a Hindu Rajah* (Elizabeth Hamilton, 1796)

Ian Baucom addresses the issue of this 'history of cultivated confusion' (Baucom 1999: 3) in his study *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity*, in which he suggests, for instance, that Ruskin is reduced to being a 'wholly conventional and unoriginal thinker' by the bias of the newspaper reports he has read following the uprising of 1857 (Baucom 1999: 76). The implication is clear, that if a man who, we must assume, is usually an unconventional, original thinker is so affected by accounts of India which are beyond his ability to interrogate, how much more so the 'person in the street', reading voraciously the fiction generated by imperial imaginings.

I will reference Rudyard Kipling and Leonard Woolf as stepping stones, the first because his writing is often regarded as epitomising the Empire at its peak. In my view, however, Woolf's *The Village in the Jungle* more completely represents the colonial project as perfected and complete than anything even in Kipling. These two writers straddle the top of the arc of the aesthetic trajectory I will describe, seeming to represent a turning point. I will not be referencing directly either Forster or Orwell because they represent a continuation of the downward curve, rather than a turning point.

The meeting of English and South Asian cultures has interested many writers since the *Raj Quartet* was published, and there is little sign that this material is about to dry up. Given that I am arguing that Scott has the last word on the Anglo-Indian genre, it follows that this newer work must belong to a new genre, which evolves from the earlier one yet which differs so significantly that it cannot be seen merely as a development of it. Whilst *Staying On* is described by many as a light postscript to the epic tragedy of the *Quartet*, I will argue that this is in fact a much more important work than that, that it is the first novel in the new genre, that Scott is showing us the way forward.

The use of the word 'genre' in the title of an essay about a 'kind' of literature generates challenges which are not easily met, since 'genre' is a complex idea without a precise meaning. The concept had been central to critical thinking since the time of Aristotle, and classical genres were described and adumbrated routinely. However, the repudiation of genre which followed the collapse of the Neoclassical ideal of generic taxonomy has, in ebb and flow, persisted for two hundred years, causing David Duff to begin his introduction to *Modern Genre*

*Theory* with a clear warning when he writes, 'In modern genre theory, few concepts have proved more problematic and unstable than that of genre.' (Duff 2000: 1).

The Romantic revolt against classical genre theory coincides, moreover, with the historical rise of the novel, rendering it a 'kind' of literature which had not been subjected to classical scrutiny, and one which has developed, therefore, within a critical atmosphere which has never been wholly conducive to its classification by genre. Attempts have been made to describe the novel generically by, for example, EM Forster in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) and Robert Liddell in *A Treatise on the Novel* (1947), and by many others since, but Paul Scott himself is not alone in making no reference to the term whatsoever in *On Writing and the Novel* (1987), and it seems probable that novelists don't set out routinely to write according to the laws and definitions which Benedetto Croce describes as the mistake of those who give scientific weight to a word, or become enmeshed in phraseology (Croce 2000: 28).

So, as a novelist, there is sense in which I would seek to recuse myself from the task of producing a working definition of the term 'genre' as I have used it here. However, as a reader and critic, it is necessary for me to be as precise as possible without resorting to a full exegesis of contemporary genre theory (for which I do not have space), since I will be seeking to enumerate features of novels, and find interconnections, which I will argue are generic. My dichotomic position reflects, somewhat, the two sides of the theoretical generic coin.

Croce, in Alastair Fowler's view, carries the 'Romantic repudiation of categories of genre [...] to a logical conclusion' (Fowler 1990: 153). His position centres on his view of the difference between intuitive, aesthetic, and logical, generic, knowledge. He writes in 1902:

Error begins when we try to deduce the expression from the concept, and to find in what takes its place the laws of the thing whose place is taken; when the difference between the second and first step has not been observed, and when, in consequence, that we are standing on the first step, when we are really standing on the second. This error is known as the theory of artistic and literary kinds. (Croce 2000: 27)

By this he means that it is not possible to discuss a work of literature from within a generic framework, because to do so excludes the possibility of appreciating its aesthetic; it is to commit a philosophical category mistake, since

'art and history do not construct concepts of class, but represent concrete and individuated facts' (Croce 1913: 263). As a consequence, each work of literature is a singular aesthetic expression, to which the idea of genre has no relevance.

However, Croce goes on to acknowledge that it is not 'scientifically incorrect' to group works together 'if it be only with a view to be understood, and to draw attention to certain groups of works, in general and approximately' (Croce 2000: 28). This flaw in the purity of Croce's position is reflected later by Wittgenstein, who argues for the coherence of groups in family-like relationships, not as hard-edged classes, which idea is developed by Fowler in *Kinds of Literature* (Fowler 1982: 41). Derrida had argued in 1980 that the 'law of genre' was contradictory, not least because that textual clues as to the membership of a generic class cannot become part of that genre (Derrida and Ronell 1980), but Fowler disagrees, arguing that genre is a continually metamorphosing dynamic, in which 'kinds' (here he deliberately reintroduces the renaissance term for genre) are reassembled, practised, changed:

[generic] repertoires are not means of classification so much as a resource of signs in a language or coding system that allows economical yet intelligible communication. Change of the repertoires is continual, for new works signify precisely by their modulating of specific previous states of the genre. (Fowler 1990: 158)

For my purpose, recognising that 'it is likely that genre theories will always [...] compete with author theories' (Duff 2000: 16), I seek to take a position somewhere between Croce and Fowler. The essentially diachronic, familial model which Fowler advances - especially the idea of 'kind' of literature - supports very well my argument that the Anglo-Indian genre evolves over time, but not to the extent that it becomes possible no longer to identify a continuity of family relationship.

I detail below (ch.5) the tropes which I have identified, which are often both thematic and structural, and which, I argue, amount to generic elements. They include devices to emphasise the otherness of India: the differentiation of 'religions of the book' from the 'paganism' of Hinduism; the frequent use of Indian vocabulary; the existence of female sacrifice, including the inevitability of the failure of interracial relationships; the a-historical omissions of Christian Indians. European colonists are universally accomplished, stories are set at frontiers, not

either at borders or in established colonial trading centres. Most importantly, the politics of power over the land runs through this literature.

At the same time, I am going to argue that we are entering a post-postcolonial period in which Croce's position is utterly relevant, when each novel must be read hermeneutically on its own merits, and neither according to the synchronic mores of 'Commonwealth Literature', nor the the generic strictures of postcolonial literature.

I seek in this essay to break new ground by proposing a hitherto unidentified aesthetic which persisted in the period after independence, and which I have labelled the *period of apology*. This aesthetic is implicit in, for example, Said's observation, 'Many people in England feel a certain remorse or regret about their nation's Indian experience [...]' (Said 1995: 18), and I will suggest that the postcolonial discourse and the aesthetic of apology arise in the same period. By framing my work in post-postcolonial terms, I will be arguing for a move away from postcolonial criticism as the set of principles it appears to become in the writing of, for example, Bart Moore-Gilbert.

It is my hope, moreover, to reintroduce Scott as a pivotal figure in modern scholarship for, whilst a great deal has been written about him, he has not hitherto been placed explicitly at the centre of an apologetic aesthetic. Much of the existing writing on Scott, represented in this essay by, for example, Robin Moore, Michael Gorra and Hilary Spurling, was written following the wave of interest in him which arose after the broadcast of Granada Television's adaptation of *The Raj Quartet* (Granada Television 1984), and he has failed largely to draw the attention of modern critics or theorists since. Given that there is now a greater historical distance from his work and its period, it seems appropriate to return to his novels with a view to their reassessment within the contemporary intellectual climate.

## 2. The Periodization of Anglo-Indian Writing

There is a pertinent example of the way in which India has come to be imagined in *Le Musée d'Art Moderne* in Nice, a work by the late French artist Serge III which consists of ten triangular canvasses about 70 cm high, arranged as a group in a larger triangle. Each canvas represents a sea, so that the Black Sea is painted black, the Red Sea red, Coral coral, Yellow yellow, the Dead Sea is black with a white cross, the Channel has a physical sleeve (*une manche*) stuck on it. The Indian Ocean is painted marine blue and has a hand-sized cluster of pink, fluffy feathers stuck in the middle. It is clearly a reference to the luxurious Eden which we all know India to be – don't we?

This European troping of India as a landscape of the exotic and feminine has a long history, stretching back to the Early Modern period, when the first popular accounts begin to appear. The Mughal Empire had reached its apogee, in both its splendour and geographical extent, whilst Europe was itself pre-industrial. In many respects, India at that time would have seemed to have been a wonderful place by comparison, to the extent that the folk memory of that wonder has persisted, even such that it was incorporated into a French avant garde painting in 1970. The 'hegemony of European ideas about the Orient, themselves reiterating European superiority over Oriental backwardness' (Said 1995: 7), does not seem to have arisen in the Renaissance, as Said suggests.

That we in the West acquired our first sense of India from the writings of early European travellers is certain, because travel was very difficult, and remained so until the opening in 1869 of the Suez Canal, nicknamed 'The Highway to India'. It is surprising, though, how many early traveller-writers there were, and how much material they produced. Europeans have been writing about India<sup>4</sup> for centuries, and as early as 1600 there is enough work beginning to appear that a tradition emerges. It is instructive to reflect on the manner in which this tradition has been examined because, of course, its criticism forms an adjunct to the same literature.

Major works of criticism examining this area have ranged from Bhupal Singh's early *A Survey of Anglo-Indian*, (1934), to *Under Western Eyes* (Rajan 1999). For my purposes, Pramod Nayar's *English Writing and India, 1600-1920*

<sup>4</sup> As a short form, henceforth I shall refer to India, which should be taken to include the entire South Asian subcontinent.

(2008) is the most useful, since his focus is on the aesthetics of this writing. He argues that from the outset non-fictional writing, largely taking the form of travelogues, intentionally opens up dialogues of colonialism, that

[...] particular aesthetic modes trope India in specific ways in order to demonstrate English control and power over it. The various tropings of India were *transformative* in nature, proposing particular roles for the English in India. In the early mercantile age it helps English rhetorical or narrative control over Indian variety and vastness. The later aesthetics of the picturesque and the sublime map a colonial shift from a primitive, poor and desolate India to an altered and 'improved', 'Englished' one. (Nayar 2008: 3)

He divides the three hundred and twenty years included in his study into five aesthetic periods, arguing that each reflects the perceived needs of the 'home' readership of the moment.

Thus he argues that the first aesthetic, which he terms the *marvellous*, is intended to allow the English to become familiar with an Indian landscape of immense variety, yet great difficulty which, through description and narration, allows the reader to explore and explain Indian difference. The transformation of India from a place of 'enviable plenty' to one of 'wicked excesses' indicates that it is a land too vast to be governed by the native population, a trope, he argues, which allows the writer to assert that it is a place not only worthy of European interest, but that the triumph of Early Modern culture over nature could well be brought to this distant land to the benefit of all.

His second aesthetic, the *monstrous*, runs more or less in parallel with the first, and he argues that its focus is to take that which is frightening in India and turn it into the grotesque, the 'ludic', so dehumanising Indian space and making it radically different. Both the *marvellous* and the *monstrous* periods are considered by Nayar to be 'proto-colonial aesthetic modes' through which the English mapped India as 'different, inhuman, chaotic, varied and dark' (5).

As anterior moments of the colonial phase (1750 and after), these two aesthetic modes of the *marvellous* and the *monstrous* play crucial roles in setting up the grounds for intervention and transformation. (5)

Mary Louise Pratt takes a similar position when she writes about:

how travel books by Europeans about non-European parts of the world went (and go) about creating the "domestic subject" of Euroimperialism'; how they have engaged metropolitan reading publics with (or to) expansionist enterprises whose material benefits accrued mainly to the very few. (Pratt 2007: 4)



When the EIC acquires its political power in the 1750s, a new aesthetic period begins, the *sublime*, which is the first overtly to trope India as a borderless place of waste and desolation. In this way, the English invite themselves into the emptiness of their new territory, with a remit to bring about the improvement and exploitation of an otherwise unused space, thus ‘revealing the full transformative power of the imperial aesthetic sublime project’ (Nayar 2008: 5).

Overlapping the *sublime* period, which Nayar limits to 1820, is his aesthetic of the *picturesque*, running from 1790 to 1850, which locates ‘paganism within the beauty of the landscape’, and so focuses on the ‘improvement and cultivation of Christian natives’. The landscape becomes the ‘site of Christian Georgic labour’, descriptions of poverty leads to the proposition that Indian variety becomes unified in a picturesque, primitive garden of Christian faith, thus serving the ‘colonial evangelical project’. (5)

Nayar’s final aesthetic period is what he terms the *luxuriant*, from the later 19thC until 1920, by which time India is well-mapped and documented, under the control of the British government and not the EIC, and the colonial focus shifts to the jungle, combining danger with beauty, the aesthetics of risk when hunting ‘transforms the landscape into a triumphal space’ and ‘empowerment’ after the turmoil of 1857’. (6)

Nayar, therefore, sees the trajectory of the written colonial project as starting with an aesthetic of mercantile exploration through accounts of distant travels, and ending in the *shikar* memoirs of a well established ruling class with time on its hands. However, in allowing so much overlap, he seems to be arguing not so much for strict periodization as for the existence of shifting aesthetic modes.

It is a commonplace, of course, to chop up the history of culture into manageable chunks, and to attach names thereto. Broad terms such as ‘Romantic’ or ‘Modernist’ are familiar, but the micro periods such as Nayar describes are specialised, more specific and, importantly, singular to their creator. Allen Greenberger had already adopted a similar approach in his somewhat earlier book, *The British Image of India* (1969), in which he proposed three aesthetic ‘eras’, of *confidence* (1880-1910), *doubt* (1910-1935) and *melancholy* (1935-1960), periods which are discrete.

Unlike Nayar, his focus is on fiction, and he begins his preface:

The relationship between literature and history is clearly an intimate one. Literature is particularly important in spreading ideas and images about things which are unfamiliar to the general reading public, thus helping to shape opinion and through it policy. At the same time it is an expression of views about many subjects. Thus from several angles literature can serve as an important source for the historian. (Greenberger 1969: unpaginated preface)

This view of literature-as-history is taken up by Pascale Casanova when he writes of literature as 'at once stake, resource and belief (Casanova 2004: 82), presenting the case that this aesthetic exchange is a two-way process<sup>5</sup>. Although Nayar and he are concerned respectively with non-fiction and fiction, Greenberger's beginning suggests that they are interested in the same idea, the shaping of beliefs in and of India for a readership which has had no direct experience. Nayar seems to be principally concerned with a representational aesthetic, whereas Greenberger is more interested in identifying attitudes and psychologies, differences which might be expected given the different foci of their work.

Greenberger sees the principal characteristic of his first era as being that the English are represented as naturally superior, best fit for rule as if emerging from the aristocratic, chivalric tradition, in an age when 'manliness' was a quality to be desired. The Englishman is fair, hard-working, no philanderer, qualities which entitle a man to rule, and leadership is the true test of the worth of both an individual and his race. (Greenberger 1969: 13)

This view was later echoed by Said when he wrote:

[...] if the obdurately material natives are transformed from subservient beings into inferior humanity, then the colonizer is similarly transformed into an invisible scribe, whose writing reports on the Other and at the same time insists on its scientific disinterestedness and [...] the steady improvement in the condition, character, and custom of primitives as a result of their contact with European civilization'. (Said 1994: 203-4)

Greenberger refers to Kipling's 'His Chance in Life', arguing that in this literature to have even some white blood is to be naturally superior, as illustrated by Michele d'Cruz, who is 'very black' with 'seven-eighths native blood in his veins':

The native Police Inspector ran in and told Michele that the town was in

<sup>5</sup> The question of literature generating history, and vice versa, is complicated by demand for literature arising from not just socio-political expectations, but also the presence of external factors such as book clubs and societies, and market-altering prizes such as the Booker (see Casanova 2004: 120). Alas, this interesting topic is beyond the scope of this essay.

uproar and coming to wreck the Telegraph Office. The Babu put on his cap and quietly dropped out of the window; while the Police Inspector, afraid, but obeying the old race-instinct which recognizes a drop of White blood as far as it can be diluted, said, 'What orders does the Sahib give?'

The 'Sahib' decided Michele. Although horribly frightened, he felt that, for the hour, he, the man with the Cochin Jew and the menial uncle in his pedigree, was the only representative of English authority in the place. (Kipling, 'His Chance in Life' quoted in Greenberger 1969: 14-5)

Greenberger's second era, *doubt*, is one, he argues, in which the general loss of confidence in the whole system of Western civilization, especially after the Great War, is reflected in English fiction about India. The British still suffer out of duty, and the loyalty of child-like Indian servants is to be expected, but now these elements are used self-consciously, as if protesting too much, even by those writers who seek to defend the Raj. There are other writers who openly oppose it, and those who doubt it, feeling that it is not an inherently bad system, but one which has ceased to be effective. Issues of race and nationalism begin to appear commonly in this fiction (83). Orwell and Forster he labels as doubters, doubtful not of what English rule is doing to India, but because of the damage it does to the English out there, authority corrupting those who hold it (84), quoting Forster:

The great blunder of the past is neither political nor economic nor education, but social; that he was associated with a system that supported rudeness in railway carriages, and is paying the penalty... Never in history did ill-breeding contribute so much towards the dissolution of an Empire. (Reflections in India: I – Too Late?, quoted in Greenberger, 1969: 89)

His final era, *melancholy*, is represented by writers who emerge from the doubters of the previous era. To these writers, although Empire is clearly at its end, it is still a living institution in need of neither defence nor attack. The English characters are disinterested in history now, rather they are drawn into an early nostalgia for the India they have grown to love. It is interesting that Greenberger ends this period in 1960, since at this time the emergence of fiction which is apologetic is becoming clear, and his era of *melancholy* will be replaced by my period of *apology*.

In short, Greenberger's three eras reflect a shift in aesthetic from the British feeling secure in their empire of 1880, to them drifting ruefully in 1960 into a nostalgia for that which is now lost. British civilization has gone from the best that can be to that which has been rejected by those who, once upon a time, seemed to have depended upon it.

Nayar and Greenberger comment on different types of writing, over different periods, from different periods. Yet not only do they adopt a similar technical approach to their analyses, which seems to suit both their agenda, but they also make clear that histories of Anglo-Indian writing must, of necessity, address not just the generality of cultural trends, but also the socio-political attitudes which attend the shifting tide of the British colonial project. Many others working in this field agree (Crane, Marzec, Parry, for instance) that Anglo-Indian fiction, has a historical context beyond the scope of most.

As stated, one of the aims of this essay is to break new ground by proposing an additional aesthetic period in Anglo-Indian literature, one which follows Independence and which I shall call the *period of apology*. I shall argue that, like all the aesthetic periods through which this literature passes, it is not one which seeks to deal in hard facts, rather that it seeks to answer a need in the 'home' readership which, in turn, symbiotically generates the creative drive of the fiction. It was during the period after Independence that my parents-in-law enjoyed their early adult years together, their own independence which, as I have shown, corresponds hardly at all with the turbulent experience of those characters who appear in novels of the time.

In seeking to root the generic elements and shifting aesthetic which make Anglo-Indian literature what it is, it has been necessary to choose carefully those examples which will form the core of my study. From the uncountable English novels about India – ranging from single titles by, say Walter Scott (1827) and A.T. Quiller-Couch (1903), to fifteen by Maud Diver (1907-13) and remarkable fifty-one by E.W. Savi (1910-33) (Singh 1934: 311ff) – I have sought those which received a critical reception such as suggests they were considered at the time to have had literary merit, and which also achieved significant sales and, therefore, reach. In this way, I have attempted to avoid the pitfall of judging a work by the standards of the present, rather than of its day when, from within its own aesthetic period, its greatest influence would have been felt.

Most of the commentaries on Anglo-Indian fiction look no earlier than the mid-nineteenth century. Whilst it is the case that there was relatively little literature before that period, there was some. Indeed, in *Henry VIII* (1613) Shakespeare described the Field of the Cloth of Gold thus:

[...] and tomorrow they

Made Britain India; every man that stood  
Show'd like a mine. (Shakespeare: I.i)

Dryden wrote his play about the contemporary Mughal emperor, *Aureng-Zebe*, in 1675. The playwright hadn't been to India and the pursuit of accuracy doesn't seem to have been an issue, causing Rajan to write of a 'fictional Aurangzeb unrecognizably transformed' (Rajan 1999: 68). Dr. Johnson commented in his *Lives of the English Poets*:

Aureng-Zebe is a tragedy founded on the actions of a great prince then reigning, but over nations not likely to employ their critics upon the transactions of the English stage [...] His country is at such a distance that the manners might safely be falsified and the incidents feigned. (quoted in Rajan 1999: 69)

Owenson's *The Missionary: an Indian Tale* in particular can be seen to be important – indeed, it must be considered that it played a substantial part in laying the foundations on which the genre was subsequently built. This appears to be the first Anglo-Indian novel to achieve widespread sales, and is considered to have influenced, amongst others, Shelley, who admired it publicly and took inspiration from it for his own orientalist works (Franklin 2006: 25). For reasons which I shall set out, I will be considering this text in relation to a 17<sup>th</sup> century non-fiction travelogue by François Bernier, which was one of Owenson's principal sources.

Kipling will be my next reference, and in particular the widely-read *Kim*. Published as late as 1901, it reflects an earlier aesthetic, more typical of the late nineteenth century, when it was first conceived. By contrast, *The Village in the Jungle* (1913) by Leonard Woolf, although published only twelve years later, demonstrates strong elements of early Modernism, and is one of the very few English novels set in Ceylon. I shall use these texts as mid-point stepping stones on my journey, with a view to establishing the existence and nature of the Anglo-Indian genre before coming to consider Scott.

And, with regard to Scott, I shall concentrate on the first of the 'Raj Quartet', *The Jewel in the Crown* (1966), which is relatively unusual for being a post-independence novel set in a period of national unrest which is neither 1857 nor 1947. It is, additionally, rarely treated as a free-standing novel which, as the first of the Quartet, it was for two years.

### 3. The Emergence of a Genre

#### *The Missionary: an Indian Tale*

How many ways can there be to classify English novels about India? Given that I am going to argue that there is a single genre supporting a shifting aesthetic, this question might not be the most obvious starting point. However, there is a fundamental issue to be addressed, and that is whether or not the novelist had first-hand experience of India.

There are two types of novel, therefore, one written from personal knowledge and the other written from the experience of others. This is important because authors writing fiction on the basis of mere research, either shuffling in the over-sized shoes of the traveller or standing on his shoulders, are tapping into the older tradition of non-fiction writing, thus ineluctably connecting the two, and bringing the issue of genre to bear on both. It is also important since, as Said puts it, '[...] texts can *create* not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe' (Said 1995: 94), connecting travel writing and other non-fiction firmly to the origins of the Anglo-Indian novel.

Critically, of my four major references, only one was composed without the benefit of personal experience – and it was the first. With her goal differing from Dryden's, Sydney Owenson, Lady Morgan, was a thorough and careful researcher, whose text in *The Missionary* is never less than convincing, a masterly evocation of a world she had never visited, relying on a 'Jonesian vision' and demonstrating 'a subtle understanding of the Hindu symbolism of the interaction of ascetic and erotic heat' (Franklin 2006: 25). In an age when the journey to India was so demanding that men (and usually only men<sup>6</sup>) typically made the return journey only once in a lifetime<sup>7</sup>, why would she, particularly since she was writing about a period substantially before her own<sup>8</sup>. By 1811 there was already an abundance of non-fiction for her to consult, and there were orientalists amongst

<sup>6</sup> Some families did travel – we can be sure, for instance, that W.M. Thackeray's mother was in India at the time when Owenson was writing, because he was born in Calcutta that same year.

<sup>7</sup> That is if they made the return journey at all – at the end of the eighteenth century in Bengal at least one in three wills of EIC factors left property to an Indian wife and children. (Dalrymple 2002: 34)

<sup>8</sup> Balachandra Rajan is unequivocal: 'The novel about India was originated by women.' (Rajan 1999: 123)

her aristocratic circle who maintained personal libraries where she could find it<sup>9</sup>.

One reference in particular emerges as important in her research, Bernier's great work, *Travels in the Mogul Empire, A.D. 1656-1668*<sup>10</sup>. Yet this is a source which precedes her novel by nearly a century and a half, one which belongs to the period corresponding to Nayar's proto-colonial aesthetic modes of the mysterious and monstrous, far removed from her own fashionable aesthetics of the picturesque and the sublime. Consequently, the first major Anglo-Indian novel, the one which might have the strongest claim to lay the foundations of the genre, is the result of cross-fertilisation between two discrete cultural periods, which in turn might account for the sense that this hybridised form is unique in English literature.

Bernier (1625-88) was a French physician who travelled in India, serving for twelve years as the personal doctor of the Mughal emperor, the same Aurangzeb. Owenson found his account of these years so compelling that, by sleight of hand, she seeks to make her construct seem all the more real with the suggestion that, in his non-fiction travelogue, he had written about the hermit's cave in which her eponymous fictional hero spends his declining years (Owenson 1811: 277 footnote referencing Bernier, 1934: 419). By this action alone, she provides unequivocal evidence, from the outset, that the exposition of a truth based on historical fact is not one of the primary objects of the Anglo-Indian genre. Perhaps she and Dryden had more in common than it seems.

But what of historical fact? If my claim is that the absence of native Christians points to a generic device, then the absence of any knowledge that they exist would seem to be a counter argument. Whilst it is one thing deliberately not to include a familiar societal grouping for the sake of problematizing a fictional community, it is an altogether different thing not to have invented it, believing it to be absent anyway. So could Owenson, whose Christian community is confined

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<sup>9</sup> Owenson's principal source was the library of the Dublin lawyer, Sir Charles Ormsby, to whom she wrote:

I have at last, waded through your *Oriental Library*, and it is impossible you can ever feel the weight of the obligation I owe you, except you turn author, and some friend supplies you with rare books that give the sanction of authority to your own wild and improbable visions. Your Indian histories place me upon the fairy ground you know I love to tread, 'where nothing is but what is not', and you have contributed so largely and efficiently to my Indian venture, that you have a right to share in the profits, and a claim to be considered a silent partner in the firm. (Franklin 2006: 166)

<sup>10</sup> First translated into English in 1671-2 by Henry Ouldinburgh. (Bernier 1934: 477)

mainly to 17thC Portuguese Goa<sup>11</sup>, have known there were Christians distributed throughout India by reading Bernier? Simply put, yes she could:

It is certain that this Prince [Jehangir] evinced the utmost contempt for the laws of the *Koran*, and expressed his admiration for the doctrines of our creed. He permitted two of his nephews to embrace the Christian faith, and extended the same indulgence to *Mirza-Zulkarmin*, who had undergone the rite of circumcision and been brought up in the *Seraglio*. The pretext was that *Mirza* was born of Christian parents [...] (Bernier 1934: 287)

[...] the irreverent behaviour of Christians in their churches, so dissonant from their belief of the peculiar presence of God upon their altars, and so different from the conduct of the *Mahometans* [...] (Bernier 1934: 292)

The importance of the seventeenth-century travelogues like Bernier's is not just that they provide a source of information about the nature of India, but that they begin also to shape the expectations as to what sort of information *should* come out of India, especially at a time when the public opinion of the EIC was low (Fulford and Kitson 1998: 267-9). And a glimpse of what was expected in these orientalist times is given by Owenson in a letter dated August 26<sup>th</sup> 1818:

[...] Lady Cork called on us at seven, and took us to dine at Sir George Cockerell's, the richest nabob<sup>12</sup> in London. Such a palace! [...] The dessert was literally an Eastern apologue – elephants, pagodas, rajahs, forests, and flowers: [...] I sat next to a yellow Indian judge<sup>13</sup>, just arrived *en passant par* St. Helena, and who offered me a written account of his interview and conversation of two hours with Napoleon. (Owenson 1818)

As she would have known, Bernier writes of elephants, pagodas, rajahs, forests and flowers (Bernier 1934: 276, 399, 208, 427 and 243) and it is quite plain that Owenson is conjuring images in her letter which are familiar currency, familiar for at least a century and a half. These are images which she uses herself throughout *The Missionary*.

Of elephants she writes:

This group, which resembled, in form and movement, the personification of the first hours of Love and Youth, was succeeded by the Guru, mounted on an elephant, which moved with a majestic pace; his howdah, of pure gold, sparkling to the radiance of the rising day. (Owenson 1811: 76-7)

<sup>11</sup> For an account of how Indianised Portuguese Goa had become at this time see Dalrymple, 2002: 11-14.

<sup>12</sup> In this context, a *nabob* is one who has returned with great wealth to Europe from a career in the East, a term made familiar by Samuel Foote's play *The Nabob* (1799). (Dalrymple, 2002: 36 footnote)

<sup>13</sup> An interesting mention of skin colour here, of which there is none in *The Missionary*



Of pagodas:

As he passed the portals of the pagoda, he was struck by the grotesque figure of an idol, before whose shrine a crowd of deluded votarists lay prostrate: (82)

Of rajahs:

[...] were frequently succeeded by the lofty towers of a Mogul fortress, or the mouldering ramparts of a Rajah castle; (57)

Of forests:

It was his ambition to make for himself a distinct and distinguished character; and, like the missionaries of old, or those pious sancassees so highly venerated in India, he pitched his tent on the skirts of a neighbouring forest [...] (61)

And of flowers:

On every side the golden flowers of the associa, the tree of religious rites, shed their rich and intoxicating odours. (81)

In Nayar's classification, writing of the mid seventeenth century exhibits certain traits, amongst them the representation of difficulty, variety and wonders. As for the need for intervention, the organisation of India by the west, the writer of this period should also be drawn to rhetoric as a means to persuade the 'Home' reader, and he should demonstrate that there is everywhere prosperity, but that it has tended toward excess and now needs to be reigned in. On the whole, Bernier does all of these things. Taking the elephant reference noted above (276), for example, he first establishes that elephant contests are novel, even 'amusements', and that they are suitable for seventeenth-century ladies to watch. However, the reference continues:

A wall of earth is raised three or four feet wide and five or six feet high. The two pondrous beasts meet one another face to face, on opposite sides of the wall, each having a couple of riders, that the place of the man who sits on the shoulders, for the purpose of guiding the elephant with a large iron hook, may immediately be supplied if he should be thrown back. The riders animate the elephants [...] until the poor creatures approach the wall and are brought to the attack. The shock is tremendous, and it appears surprising that they ever survive the dreadful wounds and blows inflicted with their teeth, their heads, and their trunks [...] the mud wall being at length thrown down, the stronger or more courageous elephant passes on and attacks his opponent, and, putting him to flight, pursues and fastens on him with so much obstinacy, that the animals can be separated only by means of a *cherkys*, or fireworks, which are made to explode between them [...]

The fight of these noble creatures is attended with much cruelty. It frequently happens that some of the riders are trodden underfoot, and killed on the spot [...] So imminent is the danger considered, that on the day of combat the unhappy men take the same formal leave of their wives and children as if

condemned to death. They will be somewhat consoled by the reflection that if their lives should be preserved [...] a sack of *Peysas* (equal to fifty francs) will be presented to them the moment they alight from the elephant. (Bernier 1934: 276-8)

There is much to appeal to the European reader in this passage. There is the courtly life, the martial, the domestic, the sporting. The elephant is both ferocious monster and timid working beast, humans are both disposable and valuable, the spectacle familiar<sup>14</sup> yet unimaginable, the King cruel and beneficent and, most importantly, India seems to be a place worthy of Europe's interest, yet certain to benefit from Europe's intervention. This is a good example of the sort of writing which Nayar expects to find in his *marvellous* and *monstrous* aesthetic modes.

Whilst there is an evident correspondence between some of Owenson's images and some of Bernier's, that alone doesn't amount to convincing evidence of her being influenced by his older aesthetic, particularly since elephants, pagodas and the like have been familiar, almost standard, images of the Orient from their earliest description in the west<sup>15</sup>. The issue of hybridity in her novel rests on being able to demonstrate that she was influenced by the aesthetic of Bernier's period in addition to that of her own, even if at the time it would have been more *zeitgeistlich* than *a la mode*.

Although Owenson writes *in* the period when the EIC is gaining more political power in India, rather than solely mercantile, she writes *of* a time when the British presence was relatively insignificant. Her story concerns an aristocratic Portuguese monk called Hilarion, who is sent to India as a papal nuncio in 1635. The job given to him, as a Franciscan, is to counter the heretical influence, as Pope Innocent X<sup>16</sup> would have it, of the Jesuits already there.

Disgusted by the pomp of the Jesuit establishment in Goa, he sets off alone to perform his sacred duty:

<sup>14</sup> Bear baiting and cock fighting were commonplace in the seventeenth century – only the scale is different – and mounted men were still charging at each other with lances since, although in a state of decline, jousting survived into this period. (Young, 1987)

<sup>15</sup> For example, in 1667, whilst Bernier was still in India, Gianlorenzo Bernini unveiled a statue of an elephant supporting an obelisk outside Santa Maria sopra Minerva in Rome, the inspiration for which came from *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* by Francesco Colonna, which was first published in 1499 (Virtual Roma). The toes of Bernini's elephant are wrong, indicating that he'd never actually seen one, but it remains unmistakably an elephant for all that.

<sup>16</sup> For all the thoroughness of her research, Owenson slips up here, as Innocent X doesn't ascend to the papal throne until 1644, nine years after the date she has Hilarion created a nuncio by him.

The route which he laid out for his mission, was from Tatta to Lahore, by the course of the Indus, and from Lahore to the province of Cashmire [...] to pass that boundary which the hallowed footstep of christianity had never yet consecrated, to preach the doctrine of self denying faith in the land of perpetual enjoyment... (Owenson 1811: 20)

He encounters a Hindu of great holiness, with his sacred granddaughter, Luxima. The Christian monk, 'the man without a fault', and the Brachmachira of Kashmir, 'at once a widow and vestal', struggle, at great length, to avoid falling in love (a masterly achievement of Owenson, who keeps him suspensively from so much as kissing her hand until page 148), whilst they each argue the merits of their religions. Two young people this passionate about their faiths are going to be passionate about different matters too, and ultimately they can't help themselves with regard to each other, when they begin meeting secretly in the fecund jungle between her isolated dwelling and his ascetic cave.

It is important not only that, in a Jonesian sense, their races are equal, but that they are of equal rank, since a pairing couldn't arise otherwise. However, the genders are important in this proto-colonial model since, as Rajan asserts:

Owenson does make evident in Hilarion the disabilities of an intelligence that shuts out feeling. Luxima is not subjected to the same critique, and her languid passivity fits a regrettable stereotype which licences domination of the East by the West. (Rajan 1999: 136)

The lovers are found out and banished, he from his Eden, she from her caste and rebirth, pursued initially by the Hindu supporters of the grandfather. They flee through ever changing landscapes, through desert, through grass taller than themselves, through dry winds which burn their lips, yet always – always – they manage to come across a sheltered knoll where there is some water and berries.

Flights of many-coloured paroquets, of lorys, and of peacocks, reflected on the bosom of the river the bright and various tints of their splendid plumage [...] it was here that the sweet sumbal, the spikenard of the ancients, spread its tresses of dusky gold over the clumps of granite, which sparkled like coloured gems amidst the sapphire of the mossy soil – it was here that [...] the wanderers reached the shade of a natural arbour, formed by the union of a tamarind tree with the branches of a *covidara*, whose purple and rose-coloured blossoms mingles with the golden fruit which to the Indian palate affords so delicious a refreshment. (Owenson 1811: 187)

At one point on their flight, they even have a river each in which modestly to perform their morning toilet.

When they arose, the twilight of the dawn conducted them to the respective bath, which innumerable springs afforded[...] (187)

Throughout, although they travel a distance of around 2,500 km from Kashmir to Goa, they see hardly a living soul to disturb their private paradise, except in the form of what Nayar calls monsters, by which he means large crowds (an army, a caravan), bloated imperial courts and fakirs (Nayar 2008: 40). This troping of landscape is typical of his aesthetic modes of the seventeenth century, and it is this which allows Owenson to create her serene and generous landscape. India becomes for her a ‘land of perpetual enjoyment’, there are exotic birds of many colours, there is a hint of an ancient, mystical culture given voice through ‘Hindu bards’, the granite sparkles like gems, and delicious fruits are coloured gold. The landscape yields all that can be desired to support life, and it does so without the intervention of farm workers; there is water everywhere, yet it never rains. This must surely be a place to which western nations with colonial aspirations might turn with excited anticipation.

At the same time, however, the absence of ordinary people indicates that there is no ownership of the land, except by the all-powerful, and therefore despotic emperor. Different regions are traversed, different terrains, but there are no borders, no challenges, as it is all the same land with the same, tyrannical owner. Worse, though, is the fact that the march of Dara’s army is threaded into the tale – he is the older brother of Aurangzeb, who has staged a coup, and he means to reclaim his throne, as he sees it, throwing the empire into a state of civil war. So the land which the emperor owns has no emperor to own it, and is therefore in real and immediate need of government. This, argues Nayar, is the sort of invitation to proto-colonial intervention which might be expected in the seventeenth century, here being replicated in the early nineteenth. We might conclude, therefore, that Owenson does write in part from within the aesthetic of an earlier age.

With respect to the aesthetic of her own age, in relation to the non-fiction for the period around 1811, Nayar uses the term ‘the missionary picturesque’, a coincidence, which suggests there is an open and shut case for the argument that *The Missionary* follows his schema. However, the non-fiction to which he refers describes an India in which the locals are so amenable to contact with wandering evangelists that the ‘Word’ can be taken freely wheresoever it is required, by

whomsoever is available, including solitary women. This is not the case in Owenson's novel so, by Nayar's analysis, it is not clear that she is writing with the aesthetic of her own age. From the outset, she contemplates the *sublime*:

The mountains; the ocean; the lake of subterraneous thunder, the vestiges of Roman prowess; the pile of monastic gloom: magnificent assemblages of great and discordant images! (Owenson, 1811: 3)

And on first sighting India, Hilarion gazes shoreward:

...the shores and mighty regions of the east presented themselves to the view, while the imagination of the Missionary, escaping beyond the limits of human vision, stretched over those various and wondrous tracts, so diversified by clime and soil. (Owenson, 1811: 15)

However, this is the *sublime* of Romanticism, not the *negative sublime* to which Nayar refers, and these passages relate firstly to the situation of Hilarion's monastery in Portugal, and secondly to his Europeanized view of a feminised India before he has made footfall. They are atypical of Owenson's description of landscape otherwise, as she chooses instead language such as that on page 187, quoted above. It is as if she asserts her willingness and ability to treat with the *sublime* specifically to underline the *alternate* manner in which she tropes the Indian landscape, a landscape which is different to the familiar-if-exciting landscape of Europe, one which can only be known and understood by those who have seen it for themselves. The double irony here is that she had seen neither Europe, closed as it was at the time by Napoleon, nor India – except through the eyes of Bernier. It is true that her India is a borderless place, yet it is anything but desolate, tending still towards the edenic, so Nayar's *negative sublime* aesthetic appears not to pertain.

It is worth considering momentarily the description of his arrival in India by a real monk, Bede Griffiths, who travelled there in 1950.

It was not the poverty and the misery which struck me so much as the sheer beauty and vitality of the people. On all sides was a swarming mass of humanity, children running about quite naked, women in saris, men with turbans, everywhere displaying the beauty of the human form. (Griffiths 1982: 8)

This would suggest that the first focus of a religious man arriving in India would be the people, not the landscape. It is true, we must suppose, that the population in the mid-twentieth century would be greater than in the mid-seventeenth, but not by so much that there are no people at all. Moreover, John

Masters describes the scene when the first of his Savage characters arrives in India at about the same time as Hilarion:

The houses were all sizes and patterns and colours, There were low hovels, such as men use for pigs in England; and white-washed houses with thatched roofs and children playing in the square doorways; and, in the distance, a tall, flat-sided tower of dark red stone. (Masters 1958: 102-3)

Masters is making one of the choices facing storytellers when the facts are unknowable, just as was Owenson, each creating an initial image of a historical India. It is clear that Owenson's choice was to strip out the population and its built environment, to render India empty and available.

Nayar's *picturesque* mode is more promising, insofar as Owenson clearly relates what she describes as the paganism of the Hindus to the landscape.

All breathed the mystery of a consecrated spot, and every tree seemed sacred to religious rites. The bilva, the shrub of the Goddess Durga, the high flowering murva, whose nectarous pores emit a scented beverage, and whose elastic fibres form the sacrificial threads of the Brahmins; the bacula, the lovely tree of the Indian Eden; and the lofty cadamba, which, dedicated to the third incarnation, is at once the most elegant and holy of Indian trees; all spoke that the ground whereon he trod was consecrated; all gave a secret intimation to his heart, that his eyes then dwelt upon the secluded retreat of the vestal Priestess of Cashmire. (Owenson, 1811: 61)

But, as I have noted, the landscape is largely devoid of agricultural workers of any sort, typical of the Romantic Eden, consequently it could hardly be considered the 'site of Christian Georgic labour', and so this writing does not match Nayar's description of the *picturesque*. Furthermore, although Owenson has Goa as a centre of Christian work ('work' being a reminder of The Fall, which has no relevance in the Eden further north), there is an absence of native Christian characters, and the work of the European Jesuits, in her frame, is malign. Indeed, Hilarion is the only decent Christian on the entire subcontinent in this novel, and his love for Luxima could hardly be considered an attempt at conversion.

The end comes after the fleeing couple are arrested and taken, separately, to Goa, she to be imprisoned within the walls of a Dominican nunnery, out of the reach of her lover, out of earshot of any news of him too. Hilarion is arrested by the Inquisitors, and disappears into the *Santa Casa*, his whereabouts and condition a mystery, although we are left in no doubt that he is enduring torture. In a passage of great power, Owenson describes his reappearance, in procession, on

the first available festival of the *auto-da-fé*:

That awful day at length arrived [...] a multitude of persons of every age and sex, Christians, Pagans, Jews, and Mussulmen, filled the streets, and occupied the roofs, the balconies, and windows of the houses, to see the procession pass through the principal parts of the city [...] the scarlet standard of the Inquisition [...] preceded a band of the *familiars of the Holy Office*, dressed in black robes, covered with black crape [...] each unfortunate, as his sentence was pronounced, was led to the foot of the altar by the Alcaid, where he knelt to receive it. Last of this melancholy band appeared the *Apostolic Nuncio of India*. (Owenson, 1811: 254-5)

Owenson has already shown her orientalist colours by her willingness to interpret the East (Said, 1995: 3) when, for example, she earlier allows Luxima to chide Hilarion, as an *infidel*, for his prejudicial attempts at what we would now term ‘inter-faith dialogue’, when he has already disavowed the Hindu *Trimurti*, despite its clear reference to the Christian Trinity:

Thou, the daring infidel, who in the temple at Lahore denied all faith in the triple God, the holy Treemoortee, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiven[...] (Owenson, 1811: 63)

And at the point when the Missionary is about to be consigned to the flames, Luxima (who has escaped her captivity) emerges from the crowd, ready to perform *sati* on his pyre:

Luxima, whose eyes and hands had been hitherto raised to heaven, while she had murmured the *Gayatra*, pronounced by the Indian women before their voluntary immolation [...]in a voice scarcely human, exclaimed, ‘My beloved, I come! – *Brahma* receive and eternally unite our spirits!’ – She sprang upon the pile[...] (Owenson, 1811: 260)

The act of *sati*<sup>17</sup> was an institution which fascinated orientalists, who saw in it something of the wild and mysterious East, as exciting as it was unfathomable.

With its immolation of a living woman on her husband’s funeral pyre, this act... catered to an English obsession with death as spectacle. Although English observers in the eighteenth century had valorized *sati* as an heroic act of romantic self-sacrifice, by Bentinck’s time [1829] it was seen as emblematic of India as a land of a barbarous and blood-thirsty faith. (B. D. Metcalf & T. R. Metcalf, 2006: 82)

<sup>17</sup> *Sati*, *suttee* – different spellings arise because of the difficulty of transliterating from the original, सती. In devanagari, each consonant carries with it an implicit vowel sound which, although usually represented in the Latin alphabet as an ‘a’, is pronounced as a neutral vowel much nearer in English to the ‘u’ sound in, for example, ‘purr’ (which is why, when a longer ‘ah’ sound is required, the commonly seen double ‘aa’ is used) – thus the letter स, usually represented as ‘sa’, might be written as ‘su’, and ती (modified त, ‘ta’) as either ‘ti’ or ‘tee’, giving rise to the variation in spelling of the transliterated word. We will meet this complication again when considering the name हरी, which can give rise to Hari, Hurree or Harry.

In this brilliant conflation of ideas, Owenson combines the delightful horror of the Inquisition's ghastly means of execution with a supreme act of love, the voluntary immolation of one who, by this widow's deed, declares herself simultaneously to be the condemned man's wife. This perfect bringing together of a single image with roots in both the east and west, clearly favours the context of the eastern tradition, placing Owenson's ideas here very firmly within her own intellectual period, even if they don't otherwise accord with Nayar's analysis.

One further event in this extraordinary tale will become important in due course, being that the lovers, largely due to the confusion brought about by Luxima's extraordinary appearance at the site of execution, are able to effect an escape. Nonetheless, one of them in this tragedy is going to die – we know that already – and it is *she* who receives the fatal injury, not *he*. Rajan argues that 'this dramatic unraveling of the novel's beginning raises troubling questions about the possibilities of relationships between cultures' (Rajan 1999; 135), questions which are still being asked by Scott over a century-and-a-half later.

Note too that in the passage beginning on page 245 (*ultra*), Owenson categorises her onlookers by religion as 'Christian, Pagan, Jews and Mussulmen' – this is a significant reference as it dignifies religions 'of the book' with a name, yet casts aside Hinduism as something primitive, a religion to be dismissed.

In *The Missionary*, then, this early and important Anglo-Indian novel, it is clear that Owenson has drawn widely from the non-fiction writing of an earlier age, in particular Bernier and the seventeenth century, and that this has had a significant effect on elements of her aesthetic mode. However, she is of her own Enlightened age as well, not only in respect to her alignment to the orientalism which was characteristic of the period (Said, 1995: *Ibid.*) but also in the self-evidently Romantic writing of this novel:

The mythology of love [...] deliberately confuses yearnings for a more-than-natural, a sublime apotheosis, with a purely erotic fulfilment [...] a wild infinity over an orderly bounded vista [...] (Kermode & Hollander, 1972: 6)

This influential novel, early in its use of characters' points of view and streams of consciousness, seems to introduce aesthetic hybridity from the outset as an element in the genre of the Anglo-Indian novel.



#### 4. Intermediate Stages

##### *Kim*

Kipling is a problematic author to read, especially for those imbued with childhood memories of characters from *The Jungle Book* (1894), whether they stem from membership of the Scouting movement or the Disney animated film. These anthropomorphic tales of animals, in the popular imagination, bely his reputation as a racist, jingoistic remnant of an earlier age and they, together with countless jolly, bouncing poems, contribute to the difficulty in gaining a sense of how he was read in his day, and thus what the influence of his aesthetic might have been. This is a problem compounded because academic criticism of Kipling itself represents a dis-unified body of thinking.

As early as 1940, just four years after his death, critics are already thinking about Kipling in such a way as to leave us in no doubt at all that his work belongs to an earlier aesthetic:

However great the art of Kipling may be, it is not looked at in the wrong perspective if the writer is replaced in a movement of the national consciousness, which he has chosen to serve. No less than to the history of literary forms, he belongs to that of the mind of a people. No one has done more to give permanence to the imperialist feeling in the making, by means of pregnant words, and of moving or stirring images and rhythms. (Cazamian, 1940: 1296)

But in 1916, Arthur Compton-Rickett, although grumbling about Kipling's weaknesses as a journalistic writer of fiction in his chapter, 'Some Writers of To-Day', continues nonetheless:

But give Mr. Kipling India – the India of magic and superstition, the India of famine and pestilence, the India of the Civil Service – and the result is a series of unforgettable snapshots; clear-cut and vivid, tensely dramatic, everywhere suggestive of the clash of civilisation and barbarism, and the yawning gulf between the psychic temperaments of East and West. (Compton-Rickett, 1947: 669)

This assessment of Kipling as the writer who most-completely captured the *clear-cut* of Anglo-India might seem extraordinary a century later, although there are contemporary commentators, Salman Rushdie amongst them (Campbell 2006), who do consider that Kipling penetrates East-West difference in complex ways. For a few, I suspect it could have seemed exceptional in its day too, written at the mid-point of the Great War when Indian troops were dying in their thousands for the sake of Empire, the sacrifice of the 'barbaric' East on the

Western Front. Nonetheless, nationalistic fervour was presumably at a peak (a different aesthetic from that in which Cazamian was writing in WWII), and what it makes clear is that readers *believed* Kipling's version of India. But given that orientalist fictions such as Owenson's, and proto-colonial accounts such as Bernier's had been believed in their day, why wouldn't they? Highlighting the importance of the contemporary aesthetic to both fiction and fact, Greenberger observes:

The relationship between literature and history is clearly an intimate one. Literature is particularly important in spreading ideas and images about things which are unfamiliar to the general reading public, thus helping to shape opinion and through it policy. (Greenberger, 1969: unpaginated preface)

Greenberger here identifies the importance of literature to the society it serves, and by which it is interrogated, an issue never more important than when that literature describes a distant world unknown in reality to the majority. In his analysis, *Kim* belongs to the era of confidence, so we should expect to find the English striding through India with the insouciance of aristocracy (*ἀριστοκρατία*: 'rule by the best able'), completely unshakable in their belief in duty and, although facing real dangers, capable of rising to the challenge of defending that which is rightfully theirs. And that is more or less exactly what can be found on the pages of this novel.

Kim, although living on the streets as a beggar and pedlar of small services, so darkened by the sun that he is generally taken to be an Indian boy<sup>18</sup>, nevertheless shows the degree of leadership which might be expected of an Englishman. In this he is subtle, sophisticated, so that, when he declares himself to be the Lama's disciple, his *chela*, there is never any doubt that he is the capable, down-to-earth half of the pairing, the one who keeps them safe as they embark from Lahore on their journey along the Grand Trunk Road, Kipling's great metaphor for India.

Later, Kim will succeed in his English education, triumph in his work in espionage, show unlimited courage when required, and contained modesty when not. He is in every respect a fine example of the ruling race, and this despite his humble, impoverished, half-Irish origins. But he has become so much a part of the country, and it of him, that his story will end with him by the Lama's side, once

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<sup>18</sup> This appears always to be a one-way deceit, light skin to dark – Richard Burton in Mecca, for instance.

more a *chela*, but now in the person of the knowledgeable, self-conscious Westerner – Kim, it appears, exhibits anachronistic, but streetwise, orientalist leanings.

The Lama represents the unknowable spiritual life of India, and so it is apt that he is less capable in earthly matters than Kim – indeed, the master will require rescue from the enemy by his Figaro-like servant, for whilst he has something of the unfathomable about him, he has nothing of the solid skills by which India, decades after the horrors of 1857, has been brought to order through good governance. It is probable that the English readership could have identified with this gesture as being emblematic of the success of the colonial project. Moreover, Kipling ensures that his readership is excused the task of identifying too closely with the Lama's spirituality by removing him by a degree from the India with which they would have become relatively familiar (if only through Kipling's other writings). He is neither Muslim ('not quite Christian') nor Hindu ('pagan'), but instead a Tibetan Buddhist, no sort of a challenge to the *status quo*. He speaks 'an unknown tongue [...] of the mountains' (Kipling, 1994: 98), and, most certainly, is not a native Christian, not a saintly individual descended from one who might have been converted by Owenson's character when he too was in Lahore. Uniquely, the Lama has a vision of 'all Hind, from Ceylon in the sea to the hills' (Kipling, 1994: 381), which derives from his spiritual gifts, yet describes coincidentally all of the Indian Empire as it was at that time, truly a god-given territory, conflating the Grand Trunk of the journey with the Grand Soul of his destination, and both with the grand achievement of the colonial project.

The Lama is a well-developed character, more so by far than the simply-drawn Indian characters with which Kipling populates his story otherwise, and thus, from the outset, he contrasts the capable, assimilated Anglo-Irish boy with the innocent, spiritual Tibetan, neither of them belonging to India, yet both passing easily for opposite sides of the same coin. Their stories are played out against a backdrop of espionage with the Russians, who would seek to threaten not territory which the English 'occupy', but which they 'own', at some point after the Second Afghan War, less than ten years before the novel was conceived.

The landscape is immense and varied, although knowable, not mystified in a Forsterian sense, so reminding us of the landscapes of Owenson and, therefore, Bernier, and the tendency towards the depiction of Nayar's monstrous crowds and

fakirs persists, most notably in the crowd on the train to Umballa (Kipling, 1994: 43), consisting of, amongst many others, a courtizan from Amritzar, a fat Hindu moneylender, a Sikh sepoy, and so on (but no native Christians...). This passage demonstrates that Kipling is one of the first English authors to differentiate Indians for the 'home' reader, to dispel the idea of a single nation (Greenberger 1969: 126). Like the extraordinarily colourful wedding procession (Kipling, 1994: 86), it brings to mind opera choruses such as act 2 of Puccini's *La Bohème*, in which dialogue becomes fragmented banter, and ideas meld into a hubub, the babel which insists on the overwhelming dependency of this land on a unifying, ruling class.

Nayar's fifth aesthetic mode, the one to which *Kim* should belong chronologically, describes the luxuriant lives of those at the top of the social tree in India, and bears no clear relationship with this work by Kipling. Having already noted a divergence from Nayar's non-fiction schema in Owenson's novel, it seems to have become more complete in *Kim*, suggesting that fiction and non-fiction have parted company fully, despite their common ground in the travelogues of the seventeenth century and the orientalism of the late eighteenth. This argues that what was once hybridity has become, by now, normalised, a single genre forged from the genres of earlier aesthetic periods. It will become clear that the Anglo-Indian genre is, from this point onwards, relatively fixed, that the foundations laid by Owenson have now been built upon.

This picaresque novel achieves, more than anything, a wholly convincing sense of otherness, with its relentlessly colourful prose, frequent recourse to native words, ceaseless movement. Not a page passes without the mention of an element of Indian life which would have seemed alien to the 'home' readership, and the now-historical observations of Compton-Rickett (*ultra*) are undoubtedly correct when he writes of 'unforgettable snapshots'. But wherein lies the clash of civilisations which he perceived, when India seems to muddle along as well as might be expected under this version of English rule? Wherein lies the 'barbarism' too, or the 'yawning gulf between the psychic temperaments of East and West'? Nothing in the novel represents these things, not even to modern sensibilities, and the foe is unequivocally Russian, fellow Europeans.

It would seem that there is a lingering expectation which draws on the earliest of the non-fictional representations, which accompanies Anglo-Indian

literature as it passes through history. In its strongest manifestation, even from an author who is in no doubt about innate white superiority, the sense of *barbarism* is never more than implicit in *Kim*, and the gulf seems easily to be bridged by each side seeking to serve the other. The fearful acts of immolation and sacrifice which Owenson describes, for example, are completely absent from Kipling's text, and it might be the case that Compton-Rickett is drawing on the same sort of folk memory which prompted Serge III to trope his painted 'Indian Ocean' in Nice as edenic, one from the *monstrous* mode in Nayar's description, and the other from the *mysterious*.

### *The Village in the Jungle*

Leonard Woolf returned to England in 1911, having spent seven years in the Ceylon Civil Service (CSS), a period which he described with great lucidity in *Growing*, the second in his five-volume autobiography, written nearly fifty years later.

All that I was taking [...] to prepare me for my task of helping to rule the British Empire was 90 large, beautifully printed volumes of Voltaire (the 1784 edition printed in Baskerville type) and a wire-haired fox-terrier [...] (Woolf 1961: 12)

From the start removed by some great distance from the pragmatic, hands-on Kipling, and certainly not an obvious colonialist, Woolf nevertheless prospered in Ceylon. He achieved rapid promotion, and expressed the view later in life that had he continued with that career he would have been made a governor and given a knighthood (247). The Indian Empire was for him a job, not the place where he was born – it was a job he chose to do and, despite his protests later in life about all that was wrong with the Empire, do well, which connects him as firmly as Kipling with the Imperial project. Indeed, during his short career in Ceylon, Woolf represented all that Kipling admired and respected, and he knew it:

I remember sometimes in those rides with Rachel suddenly waking up [...] from a rather gentle, romantic dream, and asking myself whether I was indeed Office Assistant to the Government Agent, Central Province [...] or whether in fact we were living a story by Kipling [...] (151)

It may well be a moot point that the sweep of Kipling's aesthetic was still so great during those pre-war years in Ceylon that it was unclear to Woolf whether Kipling had described the life he was living, or he was living the life Kipling described. However, once back in London on a year's leave, sharing a house with his old Cambridge chum, Thoby Stephen, the attractions of a life lived under conditions which most of us would now find deplorable palled in comparison with the attractions of his host's sister, one Virginia Stephen. Consequently, he resigned his position, wrote a novel and married, in that order.

The novel *The Village in the Jungle*, one of very few set in Ceylon, is a great curiosity. Now largely forgotten in the West, it enjoyed two print runs in its year of publication, 1913, and four subsequent reprints. By 1929, Leonard had achieved sales of over two thousand copies, and earned £63, better than Virginia's first novel over the same period (Ondaatje 2005: 236).

The village was called Beddagama, which means the village in the jungle [...] It was in, and of, the jungle; the air and smell of the jungle lay heavy upon it [...] The jungle surrounded it, overhung it, continually pressed in upon it [...] if the axe were spared [the jungle] would creep in and smother and blot out the village itself. (Woolf 1913: 1-2)

So the novel begins, with the immediate assertion that the village was called Beddagama, and thus that it stands no more. We realise from the first page that this is no edenic wilderness, and Woolf continues in a vein reminiscent of Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* (1899), in an introductory passage which extends to two thousand words, underlining the fact that this jungle is a dreadful place to live:

All jungles are evil, but no jungle is more evil than that which lay about the village of Beddagama (3)

If you walk all day through the jungle along its tangled tracks, you will probably see no living thing [...] Yet the shadows are full of living things, moving very silently, themselves like shadows, between the trees, slinking under the bushes and peering through the leaves. (5)

Only the elephants remember the great rivers [...] the deer and the pig have forgotten... many die of thirst and weakness [...] (8)

The colonial history of Ceylon is very different from that of India, and the two countries were never considered as one, even under British rule. There is considerably less writing about Ceylon, too, so it is a test of my thesis to consider this one important Anglo-Ceylonese novel, examining whether the genre still seems to fit. If it does, we might be confident that the short form 'Anglo-Indian' should be considered truly to equate to 'Anglo-South Asian'<sup>19</sup>.

The village consists of just ten houses, each in its own compound, mud on rough jungle sticks, under a thatch of coconut palm leaves. Below the village is a tank, a mere depression in the ground, in which the year's scant rainwater collects, and below this the thirty acres of paddy fields which, should the tank ever be full enough, can be irrigated by simply breaking through the bund.

Silindu is the focus of our attention at first. He is the laziest man in the village, even when clearing the vital *chenas*. This is because he is a hunter really,

<sup>19</sup> The same might also be said of Orwell's Burmese writing. Orwell's life in South Asia, indeed, shared some characteristics with Woolf, in that he spent a handful of years as a colonial servant before resigning during his first home leave. However, he was writing half a generation later, and already *Burmese Days* is critical of the colonial project in a way that *A Village in the Jungle* is not.

creeping out into thick jungle or laying awake beside a water hole through the night, to shoot deer and pig with a ancient, muzzle-loading gun. His reputation is earned because ‘he slept with his eyes open like some animals... and would start up from the heaviest sleep in an instant fully awake’ (13). And we are told that, although no man knew the jungle better than Silindu, his fear of it was great, despite which ‘he loved it in a strange, unconscious way [as] the wild buffalo loves the wallow, and the leopard the lair among the rocks’ (14).

Silindu’s wife gives birth to twin daughters and because of the pressures of life in the jungle, he, an untypical hero to be sure, beats her to death for her failure to produce a boy. He ignores Punchi Menika and Hinnihami until they reach the age of three, when he makes eye contact with one of them:

Little toad! Why have you left the pond? [...] Is the belly full that you have left the pond for the jungle? (26).

The rest of the village, comes to regard the Silindu's as *Veddas*, a term often identified with Yakkas, or devils, as Woolf explains in one of his several footnotes<sup>20</sup>. Woolf’s novel is fixated on the monsters within the eponymous jungle – indeed, the jungle is its own monster, driven as it is by devils, like the monsters of the seventeenth century aesthetic.

One of the daughters makes a good marriage, but the happiness doesn’t last, as the village witch doctor takes a fancy to her sister. He is a bitter man, with a face mauled by a bear and a body racked by parangi, whose wedding proposal is rejected, whereupon the witch doctor places a curse on Silindu, who becomes mortally ill. The family go off on a pilgrimage to a religious festival, where they ‘happen to meet’ the witch doctor whose advice is to speak to a particular holy man, whose advice in turn ‘happens to be’ that if Hinnihami gives herself to the witch doctor, her father’s illness will go away. This is an example both of an unruly crowd and a fakir as monster, echoing the tropes established by Owenson a century earlier.

Silindu recovers, and some months later the issue of the union between Hinnihami and the witch doctor is born. She nurses simultaneously her child and a starving fawn brought home from the jungle by her father – suckles the child and the beast side by side – and comes to love the fawn more than the child. The

<sup>20</sup> A curious error by Woolf, in fact the Vedda are the jungle-dwelling aboriginal people of Sri Lanka, whose worship is animistic. That Beddegama is a village without the typical place of formal worship, suggests that the population is entirely Vedda, and not Buddhist Sinhalese.



villagers attribute to this behaviour another onset of drought and disease during which many die, including the children of both daughters. They stone the fawn to death, and Hinnihami dies soon afterwards, her human heart broken in this inhuman place, a place not yet benefiting from the control of colonial government.

The pressures of life in this terrible jungle result in father and son-in-law being imprisoned. Neither man survives gaol, being such an alien environment, and only Punchi Menika is left as the village population disperses and the jungle moves in. She dies alone, as a ‘great boar grunted softly, and glided like a shadow towards her into the hut’ (307).

That Woolf’s landscape is a negative form of Owenson’s Eden can be accounted for, I suggest, because it is a work of emerging Modernism. The perception of the jungle is relative, the principal characters stand outside of society, they belong to no institution or tradition except that of managing decline, they suffer the full burden of alienation, there is a supremacist vision of modernity as the only way forward for mankind, and the focus of the story switches between characters. Silindu emerges as the most important of these, because he is the one capable of taking decisive action, the commission of a double murder (not forgetting that he is already beaten his wife to death). It is hard to think of another novel of this period which does more to break with earlier models.

Nayar’s aesthetic for the period around 1913 is called ‘the sporting luxuriant’, in which hunting emerges as the predominant theme. Here, in Woolf’s novel, hunting is a major theme referenced by the *Hamadoru* (judge) the only significant white character in the novel:

Silindu caught sight of the gun and rifle, and stopped. ‘Ah! the Hamadoru is a hunter, too? He knows the jungle?’ he asked eagerly.  
 ‘Yes, I know the jungle.’  
 ‘Good; then the Hamadoru will understand. The evil and killing there [...]’  
 (Woolf, 1913: 244)

But despite this suggestion of the *shikar* experience of Nayar’s aesthetic, this is not a novel about colonial excesses, and Silindu hunts for food, not trophies.

Moreover, Nayar’s aesthetic has the them-and-us-ness of the two races becoming more pronounced than ever, but in this novel the peoples now pulled apart are not the English and the Sinhalese, but the population-at-large of the modernising island and the jungle-dwelling Vedda. Fernando, a businessman from

the town of Kamburupitiya to whom many villagers owe money, moves into the village to protect his investment – he is in no doubt about the backward step this represents to him:

I was born in Colombo, which is no village, but a town. Aiyoy! what a town it is! How pleasant! The houses and the noise and smell of the bazaar for miles, and the dust and people everywhere! What folly to live here, like a sanyasi on the top of bare rock! (Woolf, 1913: 157)

So far removed from the life of modern Ceylon are the village dwellers that neither Silindu nor Babun survive their periods of imprisonment, because it is too alien an environment for village people (whose jungle environment seems far more alien to ‘modern’ man). When she inquires at the gaol about her husband, and learns that he has died, the native guard speaks with Punchi Menika as might a white prison guard in Kipling:

‘Ah,’ he said, as she passed him, ‘they never come out. I told you so.’

‘He is dead, father.’

‘Yes, they never come out. Go back to the village, child.’

‘I am going, father.’ (Woolf, 1913: 300)

There appears to be no hint of racial segregation in the novel other than within the village, where it is noted that Fernando ‘was not Sinhalese, and spoke Sinhalese very badly [...] Some people said he was a Tamil: his black skin and curly hair pointed to the fact that he had Kaffir blood in his veins.’ (144). This looks like a negative form of Kipling’s assertion that a drop of white blood makes a man superior, the idea of innateness being consistent.

The court officials are natives, whilst the judge is white, but this is a matter of rank and education (as it had been for Woolf – these scenes are clearly autobiographical in some degree), the degree of homogenisation being key:

... the jailer came to Silindu’s cell accompanied by a Singhalese gentleman dressed very beautifully in European clothes and a light grey sun-helmet [...] [he] took a document out of his pocket and began reading it in a high pompous voice [...] Silindu continued to stare vacantly at the gentleman.

‘Do you understand, fellow?’ said the latter.

‘I don’t understand, Hamadoru.’

‘Explain to him, jailer.’

‘You’re not going to be hanged, d’you understand that? You’ll be kept in prison instead – twenty years.’

‘Twenty years?’

...Silindu did not understand it. He could understand a week or two weeks, or a month, or even six months, but twenty years meant nothing to him. (Woolf, 1913: 280)

Thus the divide is made absolute, not between coloniser and colonised, but between those who have accepted the ‘superior’ qualities of a modernised western aesthetic, and those who have not. Whatever Woolf’s later claims about his anti-imperial leanings, there seems to be no suggestion in this novel that he found anything about the colonial project unacceptable except that there remained people who had failed to benefit from the goodness it had brought.

In Greenberger’s analysis, *The Village in the Jungle* belongs chronologically to the era of *doubt*, where it can hardly be said to sit easily, unlike the marginally later novels of Orwell and Forster. Given that by his classification we have a choice of those who are robustly pro-Empire, in a lingering, Kiplingesque manner, those who are as robustly anti-, and those who aren’t so sure, it is difficult to see where Woolf sits. There is no British stiff upper lip, the white judge clearly enjoys his job, and works easily with his native colleagues, so there is no sense of suffering for duty, justice is seen to be fair and even-handed and issues of nationalism aren’t even aired. In this respect, the novel appears to be, in effect, a fictionalised account of the situation in Ceylon as seen through the eyes of a CCS officer who, by his own account, had a pretty good time of it – his one regret being that the entire population isn’t yet *civilised*. The assumption projected is that the British way is the best, and that the colonial project is purposed on improving the lives of those less well placed by dint of race, which places Woolf, paradoxical though it may seem with this Modernist novel, firmly in the old school. And, as discussed in relation to Kipling, this is an aesthetic which has persisted from the earliest of proto-colonial writing.

I suspect that Woolf’s cool and measured approach in telling what is, after all, a dreadful story, is a reflection of the cool and measured way he went about his own CCS work, as described in *Growing*. It seems probable, therefore, that there is a degree of honesty in his story telling which is absent in other Anglo-Indian novels, and that he slots into the aesthetic of others without noticing, and certainly without intending to.

## 5. Towards a Generic Genealogy

Before moving on to *The Jewel in the Crown*, it would be appropriate to review the changes in aesthetic we have seen in *The Missionary*, *Kim* and *The Village in the Jungle*, for it is this which separates novels of different periods. On the other hand, these discrete aesthetic beads are threaded onto the continuous string which is genre, the thread which unites them, without which we would be unable to refer to the Anglo-Indian novel as a class at all. And having examined now three novels – it takes three points to make a trend – we're at a position when we can begin to take genre into consideration.

It is worth stating the obvious first, for the sake of having stated it, and it is that a novel is a novel, so it must be reasonable to assume at least the potential of generic homogeneity as a starting point. Defoe, who is described by Michael Alexander as 'a 'voyage writer', a writer who makes you see' (Alexander, 2007: 197) becomes one of the earliest English novelists in 1719 with a story about an Englishman in a foreign and difficult land who, amongst his many other troubles, has difficulty with 'the natives'. There can be no question that when a novelist looks for a problem to solve, then the *otherness* of Defoe's solution is a first rate place to start<sup>21</sup>. He had travelled widely, if only in Europe, so knew a thing or two about being 'abroad', and through his journalism it must be the case that he had come to read travelogues such as Bernier's before he chose to respond to Alexander Selkirk's story with his fictional account of the shipwrecked Robinson Crusoe.

On the face of it, this early novel may well have arisen from the same sort of source material used a hundred years later by Owenson, herself certainly a 'voyage writer', and there looks then to be enough of a potential connection to suggest that there may be a generic link between the Anglo-Indian novel and *Robinson Crusoe* – but if there is, it is only a matter of intertextuality. The fundamental difference between Owenson's hero and Defoe's is that the former travels to India as an appointed *nuncio*, charged with the task of making better the lives of 'inferior' peoples, whereas Crusoe is exposed to Friday through no desire of his own. That he leads Friday into the ways of the west reflects not so much the ambition of Crusoe, nor his interest in a larger politico-social cause, rather that he

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<sup>21</sup> Aphra Behn had utilised the otherness of foreign lands similarly in *Oroonoko* in 1688.

is lonely, in need of a companion, demonstrating at the dawn of the English novel that interracial relations didn't necessarily have to end badly. That said, we are left in no doubt as to the European superiority which Crusoe takes for granted, when he instructs Friday that his name (not title) is 'Master' (Defoe, 1994: 203).

Owenson, when she created Hilarion and sent him off on his mission, was using the otherness of India in an altogether different way. She is aware that India is a land in which a great imperial tradition already exists, and Amerindian 'savages' do not<sup>22</sup>. She creates a land which is intended to charm and excite her readership, with its luxuriance of everything, a land so desirable that a man, even after suffering the unbearable loss of his true love, and the catastrophic loss of his position and vocation, desires to remain in it to his end, living alone and in a cave. By contrast, Defoe's hero can't wait to quit his island dwelling and get home. Unlike Crusoe, who has to teach Friday to speak English so they can communicate, one of Hilarion's first tasks is to become fluent in Hindustani, in which language we are invited to believe the action of most of the story takes place: an interesting inversion of what might be expected, that he who seeks to improve the lot of others learns their language, whereas he who seeks a companion requires him to learn English.

Hilarion's willingness to remain in India, and his embracing of the local language and customs (even religion, we finally learn) might be seen to reflect the orientalism of Owenson's period. Unlike *Robinson Crusoe*, there is barely a mention in *The Missionary* of skin colour, or race, and those practices which will later give rise to assertions of savagery – banishment from faith and burning alive, for example – are practised equally by both races.

In her writing, then, there is every sense in which Owenson echoes the seventeenth century writers in that she uses tropes which can seem to prepare India for colonial intervention. This, as I have argued, establishes the early aesthetics of Nayar's *monstrous* and *marvellous* modes as essential elements in the Anglo-Indian genre from the very first. She avoids the barrenness of the Nayar's *negative sublime* of her own period, but taps into the contemporary

<sup>22</sup> There is a primary example of the early understanding of Asia as a developed place in Ipswich, Suffolk, where there stands The Ancient House, a fifteenth-century building with Early Modern parquetry which depicts in panels the four known continents. America and Africa are described by unclothed men with wild animals in an environment without buildings, whereas Europe and Asia show people in fine clothes riding a horse and a camel, respectively, with large built structures in the background. Europe contains as well a cornucopia.

orientalist tradition instead, establishing hybridity as an element of this genre from the outset.

I have demonstrated that Kipling retains all of the elements of the seventeenth century aesthetics, the wondrous landscapes, the monstrous crowds, the need for interventionist government, but now the intervention is complete, the colony secure and a new element enters his aesthetic, in which the white man is innately superior to the native. There is a strong sense of ownership of the land, rather than mere travel within a foreign place owned, if at all, by a despotic emperor. Despite this, the otherness of India is retained and, on the whole, exalted. And Kim, for all his return to Englishness, nonetheless decides to remain an orientalist 'native' – not for him a passage home through the Suez Canal.

In Ceylon, the story Woolf tells remains one of difference, but here the native population in general is seen to have become identified with the colonial presence, so that all the court officials, for example, speak English and wear western clothes. The colonial project is complete. Instead, the cultural clash is between this 'civilised', westernised population and the aboriginal peoples of the jungle, who have failed to assimilate and are, as a result, doomed to extinction. Monsters from the seventeenth century still inhabit the story, and the luxuriant jungle persists, undiminished in importance, although now it assumes a negative form. There is a religious festival where there are fakirs, serving a vast crowd (*infra*). The sense of white supremacy is consistent, and the judge has learned Sinhala, whilst he hunts freely within the jungle, which for him poses no threat, rather establishing him as a man of position and leisure, the servant of a well-rooted empire.

That the aesthetic in these novels changes over time is quite clear, but there is a sense in which the aesthetics of earlier ages aren't so much abandoned as added to, that there is an evolutionary process at work. Each of them appears to have embraced the accumulating answers to the question described by John Frow, 'what's going on here?' (Frow 2005: 101), suggesting that the answer – the aesthetic – changes slowly, evolves, becomes more complex, rather than suddenly, radically taking a different turn. But if aesthetic is linked to genre, as I have suggested, then it could not be expected that the changes would be sudden so long as the genre remains constant, acting as a buffer. Frow argues that: Genre guides interpretation because it is a restraint on semiosis, the production of

meaning; it specifies which types of meaning are relevant and appropriate in a particular context, and so makes certain senses of an utterance more probable, in the circumstances, than others. (Frow 2005: 101)

The key here being 'in a particular context', which relates to a changing perception of the colonial project as it advances and its circumstances change in the perception of the 'home' readership. It is this sense of *survival of the fittest* amongst society's values which determine that changes of aesthetic are fundamentally evolutionary in their nature.

Can we, then, describe a continuous stream of generic elements running through the work of Owenson, Kipling and Woolf? Can we ask Frow's related question, 'what kind of thing is this?' (Frow 2005: 100) of each of these novels and expect broadly similar answers?

We can begin at my own starting point, and note the absence throughout all three novels of native Christians. Bernier knew they existed, the Portuguese had been torturing and burning natives for not being Christian enough for two and a half centuries when Owenson was writing<sup>23</sup>, by the time of Kipling there would have been many more converts, and I have shown that, at least in Ceylon, some natives turned to Christianity expressly for the sake of advancement to exactly the sort of official positions Woolf describes in his novel. Indeed, there is a strong possibility, I suggest, that an English-speaking Ceylonese court official, clothed in formal western dress in the early twentieth century, would have been Christian, something worthy of mention if verisimilitude had been the aim of his novel. One of the essential features of Anglo-Indian writing, we are reminded, is the politics of otherness, and to allow Christians into the text could only ever detract from it.

The issue of religion and otherness is not limited to the exclusion of Christians, but extends to differentiation between religions of 'the book' and the 'paganism' which is Hinduism and, in Woolf's story, the animism of the doomed jungle dwellers. In general, only the two major religions feature in these stories, and when they do, Muslims tend to be good and upright people, especially as loyal servants of the English, whereas Hindus tend in general towards the devious, unkind or, in Compton-Rickett's word, 'barbaric'.

The politics of the Raj after 1857 might (mistakenly<sup>24</sup>) have been expected

<sup>23</sup>The Goa Inquisition, astonishingly, wasn't abolished until 1812, the year after the publication of *The Missionary*.

<sup>24</sup> Dalrymple is very clear on the matter of the relative involvement of Hindu and Muslim mutineers in *The Last Mughal*. (Dalrymple, 2006)

to have given rise to this bias, but this pattern seems to have emerged as early as Owenson's time, when there would have been so little other than the prejudice of religious orthodoxy to support this view. But Owenson's heroine is a devout Hindu, so on what basis do I make this argument? Luxima is indeed a Hindu, the most devout there is – and her background is truly dreadful. She was married as a child to an old man, who died before consummation of the marriage occurred (hence 'at once a widow and a vestal'), whereupon she was expected to perform *sati* on his pyre. However, since her grandfather is a man of great piety, and she his assistant, she is spared that dreadful end to live instead a chaste life in service of her caste. It is this especial holiness which makes her relationship with Hilarion so utterly unacceptable to her grandfather and his followers, and there is a sense of mutuality, when they shut her out and she abandons them in favour of the Christian. She becomes, in this way, a reformed character, one who has left behind her barbaric, pagan past, in some degree 'saved':

'Oh! I am not a Christian! not *all* a Christian! His god indeed is mine; but Brahma still receives my homage [...]' (Owenson, 1811: 142)

The Pandit, a secondary character and friend to the lovers, is described as a Hindu by way of technicality only, himself despising the religion into which he was born, and above which he has risen through his learning (Owenson, 1811: 25), whereas Luxima's other suitor, Dara's son and an officer in the passing army, the Muslim Prince Solyman, is drawn as a great and proud nobleman. He attends Luxima's sacred grotto where he declares his love and attempts to persuade her to take his hand in marriage. Hilarion, enraged so as to follow his head rather than heart, intervenes. They fight at first, then seek to pull aristocratic rank on each other, but finally, spotting not only that Hilarion loves Luxima, but also that it is an emotion reciprocated, Solyman honourably accepts defeat and withdraws, as only a gentleman can (Owenson, 1811: 135). In all, then, for Owenson Hinduism is redeemed only by partial acceptance of Christianity, or through the liberalism which comes from learning, whereas her Islam is represented by a manly prince who seems to have the natural courtesy of a member of her own genteel circle.

Luxima's partial, tentative leanings towards Christianity are what seal her fate. Undoubtedly, Hilarion gains tolerance of her 'paganism', but there is never any question that their lives together – if together – will be spent in a Christian union. But an ending of 'happy ever after' wouldn't have suited Owenson's



purpose, and so it becomes a plot necessity to bring them sufficiently closely together that the reader cares, and then separate them cruelly. Given the gendered distribution of dominance between he and she, West and East, Hilarion couldn't be the one to convert, certainly not to 'paganism', so it has to be Luxima who begins the journey which will unite the lovers, and which will be cut short by death.

Greenberger argues that the impossibility of successful interracial relationships is underlined by the establishment of a generic precedent in which the native women (and children, if any) of such unions always perish (Greenberger, 1969: 67). However, Greenberger's survey doesn't extend backward in time far enough to record that this fictional precedent is established from the very first, by Owenson, in a time when factual interracial relations between EIC officers and local women were still commonplace.

Generally, Europeans seem to have been more sympathetic towards Buddhism than Hinduism, and Greenberger ascribes to Marco Polo the remark that 'if only Buddhism had come from God it would be the best religion in the world' (Greenberger, 1969: 125). Kipling appears to have felt it impossible to represent to his readership a fully rounded native character, an adequate companion, even master, to Kim. Instead, he creates the Tibetan Buddhist Lama, a device by which he avoids this pitfall, placing fully-developed humanity beyond the geographical borders of the Indian Empire and so, once again, reinforcing the necessity of colonial rule. It is possible that Owenson's framing of her story amongst the in-fighting of seventeenth-century Catholic orders seeks to promote the British colonial project on the same basis.

The native characters in *Kim* support the argument that it is Muslims who attract the greater respect of the English, rather than Hindus, and, as with Owenson's Solyman, that they do so because they are martial in character, the type of man with whom an English imperialist at the frontier can do business. Mahbub Ali is a Pashtun horse dealer who spies for the British, and neither his bravery nor manhood are held in any question:

'When I was fifteen, I had shot my man and begot my man, Sahib' (Kipling, 1994: 230)

Yet, for all his superiority as a spy, and his early exploitation of Kim as a source of information, he still manages to care for the boy:

Kim had had many dealings with Mahbub in his early life [...] who gave him beautiful meals all hot from the cookshop at the head of the serai, and once as much as eight annas in money. (Kipling, 1994: 29)

He compares very favourably with the Hindu intelligence operative, Hurree Chunder Mookherjee, who is Kim's immediate superior, and who has raised himself partially above his station though his learning, in an interesting echo of Owenson's Pandit, which extends to him being ambitious to become a member of the Royal Society through his work in ethnography. This degree of overt westernisation might be seen as typical of Bengali characters such as Hurree, illustrating why Anglo-Indian literature is so seldom set in older centres of colonial establishment.

Hurree is also known as Babu, an interesting term with a complex range of meanings, with which Kipling would have been familiar. It is a word which was used properly to convey respect to an individual, especially when combined with the suffix *ji*, hence *babuji*, which equates to 'sir/my lord/your honour'. However, by the time Kipling was writing, its use had been corrupted by the British, except to some degree in Bengal itself, to imply someone superficially cultivated, possibly effeminate, the class of native clerks who write English (Yule, 1996: 44). Thus, Kipling creates a character who is refined, but only to a degree, and whilst capable of ridiculing native traditions, yet is frightened of Huneefa, who has cured Kim:

'[...] she may have the Evil Eye – that sorceress,' the babu replied. (Kipling, 1994: 243)

There is an indication of the ambivalence of respect shown by Mahbub to Hurree, when he calls him *babuji* (240), implying the original sense of the term and underlining the shared Indianness of these two characters. Within four paragraphs, however, he reverts to *babu* (241), which seems so much less respectful. But there is no ambiguity whatsoever regarding the relative courage these two men possess when Creighton, the British intelligence officer in charge, observes:

'[Kim] can go with the lama, and if Hurree Babu cares to keep an eye on them so much the better. He won't lead the boy into any danger as Mahbub would [...]' (233)

Moreover, Kipling is far from shy about using Hurree to generate comedy,

in a manner which would be inapplicable to Mahbub. Hurree's ambitions to be an FRS are undoubtedly intended to amuse the English reader, especially since Creighton has similar-yet-superior ambitions:

'How am I to fear the absolutely non-existent?', said Hurree Babu [...]. It is an awful thing still to dread the magic that you contemptuously investigate – to collect folklore for the Royal Society with a lively belief in all Powers of Darkness. (241)

And, as with so many Indian characters even up to the present day, Hurree's English is often imperfect in a manner which is intended to be humorous:

'[...] He is highly obsolete, I think, to indulge in such supersteetion [...]' (243)

For Woolf, writing about Ceylon, the indigenous populations are different, of course. In the midst of his story about animistic practices beyond the reach of modernity, he provides a footnote about the difference between the *races* of the Buddhist Sinhalese and Hindu Tamil populations of Ceylon (Woolf, 1913: 106). He makes no mention whatsoever of the sizeable Methodist population amongst Jaffna Tamils. Instead, he creates a tangled relationship between the religions of this island:

'There is a great temple there, and the great Beragama deviyo lives in it. He is a Tamil god, so they say; but Sinhalese kapuralas serve him in the temple. [...] His power is over the jungle and the devils who live in it [...] his anger is terrible. [...]' (88)

The pilgrimage to Beragama, one of the central episodes in *The Village in the Jungle*, provides Woolf with opportunities to exploit one of the early tropes in this genre, with monstrous crowds, fakirs, sadhus:

'He is a sanyasi from beyond the sea, from India, and his hair is ten cubits in length.' (115)

He exoticises the religious practices of the pilgrims:

[...] they saw a man [...] thirty or forty iron hooks had been put through the skin of his back; to every hook was attached a long cord [...] twisted into a rope [...] bearing with his full weight upon it so that the skin of his back was drawn away from his body, [he] danced around in a circle and shouted and sang. (111)

These practices of mortification, clearly intended to be 'barbaric' in Compton-Rickett's terms, are recognisable as the *kavadi* of the Tamil festival of *Thaipusam*, exclusively associated with Hinduism, and since the Tamil population

feature only in this section of the novel, there is little doubt about which is the religion which generates the greatest degree of otherness in Woolf's vision. And, interestingly, it is the organisation of these religious practices into something with the status of a festival, the consciousness of it all, which generates the 'barbarism', unlike the simple, but frankly cruel practices of the animist jungle dwellers elsewhere in the novel.

In *Growing*, Woolf writes at length about the real festival on which he based this part of the novel, the Kataragama Pilgrimage, describing it within an orientalist frame as a 'Ceylon Lourdes' (Woolf, 1961: 228). That the two festivals, fiction and non-fiction, are one and the same event is beyond doubt, so exact are the details given, yet there is one major omission in the fictional account, in which there is no mention whatsoever of the presence of a white, colonial overseer at the festival. Woolf himself spent two weeks as the superintendent of Kataragama, writing half a century later:

The complete self-confidence of the British imperialist in 1910 was really rather strange. Here was I, an Englishman aged 29, who had collected in the middle of the Ceylonese jungle nearly 4,000 men, women and children, gathered together from all over Ceylon and Southern India. [...] But we were so firmly convinced that if one white civil servant was there, nothing could possibly go wrong, that I had no staff and no police. (Woolf, 1961: 230)

Thus it is clear that the Kiplingesque confidence in the aristocratic abilities of the colonial masters extended to the control even of diverse religious groups, at a time of extreme passion (sadly not to be supported in the history which was yet to come). Yet the denial-by-omission of a colonial presence at Beragama once more suggests the abandonment of verisimilitude in the novel for the sake of the acquisition of otherness.

Unable to introduce Indian *sati* as a story device within his Ceylonese novel, Woolf nevertheless allows one of his female characters to show that extreme degree of sensitivity to the loss of a loved one which gives rise to *voluntary* sacrifice. Hinnihami, having been forced into an unwanted sexual contact, rears the issue of that union with no delight whatsoever, and mourns not in the slightest when the infant dies. She is established firmly, then, as an unsentimental woman. However, when the fawn she has suckled at her own breast is stoned to death by the villagers, who fear witchcraft is being practised, her grief is so great that:

She lay in the house, silent, and resigned to die. She had even ceased to think or feel now. Life had no more a hold on her, and in the hour before dawn in deep sleep she allowed it to slip gently from her. (Woolf, 1913: 142)

For the same reason, unable to introduce a Muslim character within the context of his story, Woolf avoids any mention of Islam at all. Denied, therefore, the possibility of having a generic Muslim ally, he does the next best thing, which is to fail to use any of the actual experiences of which he writes in *Growing*. Every incident with the small Muslim population into which he was dragged as an administrator, it appears, involved settling disputes of one sort or another (for example Woolf, 1961: 237), suggesting that, in Ceylon at least, the childlike loyalty of fiction was not the quality most associated with Muslims under British rule.

To further generate otherness, all three writers resort to the frequent use of native vocabulary, generally giving translations either parenthetically or in footnotes, although sometimes without either. Kipling writes, 'He says thou art a *būt* [a spirit]' in just one of many examples (Kipling, 1994: 65), and likewise Woolf tells us that the villagers call Silindhu '*tikak pissu*', meaning 'slightly mad' (Woolf, 1913: 13). Owenson, on the other hand, introduces the Pundit, but sees no need to explain what the word means<sup>25</sup> (Owenson, 1811: 25). A fascinating question is how many words, especially in later writers, have become so assimilated that they are presented as being English, not even accorded the italicisation of the foreign word? I use this device myself in *Hanging On*.

Moreover, Owenson lays open the thoroughness of her research, as if to assert her authority to write about India, by providing footnotes about factual elements in her story, such as that with which she elucidates the conflict between Aurangzeb and Dara (Owenson, 1811: 24). On the other hand, she gets native words wrong too, referring to the boat which will take Hilarion up the Indus as a 'bungalow of twelve oars', and the land through which the river passes as a 'mango-grove' (Owenson, 1811: both 22). Woolf too provides footnoted explanations, whereas Kipling is more loquacious, tending to incorporate into his text all we need to know. The famous opening sentence of *Kim* is a good example: He sat, in defiance of municipal orders, astride the gun Zam-Zammah on her brick platform, opposite the old Ajaib-Gher – the Wonder House, as the natives call the

<sup>25</sup> An example of the use in Europe of the word 'pandit' as early as 1574 is cited in *Hobsob-Jobson*, so it may be the case that it was a term too familiar to require elucidation in Owenson's time. (Yule, 1996: 740)

Lahore Museum. (Kipling, 1994: 7)

It is characteristic of this literature for the narratives to be set in frontier regions, away from the more-obviously westernised colonial settlements. This would be paradoxical if verisimilitude was the point of this fiction, because the greater sense of the English experience would have stemmed from the established centres of population, in particular Calcutta and Madras in India, which had their origins in the earliest of the EIC factories, and Colombo in Ceylon. But these places don't afford the same degree of otherness as the frontier.

Woolf finds his frontier in the jungle, placing his narrative very strongly in a negative version of the frontier which Owenson establishes in her India – which, in her time frame, is effectively *all* frontier. For Kipling, the newly opened Punjab, North-West Frontier Province and the lower reaches of the Himalayas were places he knew, and where

[...] the British were doing that which seemed best to express the ideals of late nineteenth century imperialism [...] (Greenberger 1969)

These areas differed greatly from the rest of India, not only in their frontier quality, but for being predominantly Muslim, with the Sikhs, a pan-Indian minority smaller than the Christians, having a far greater social impact than elsewhere, and the otherwise-dominant Hindus a much reduced presence. Additionally, the type of westernised Indian, such as Kipling's Hurree and native Christians in general, more likely to be found in the older imperial centres, would tend to be absent. The north typically comes to represent all of India in Anglo-Indian Fiction, despite being largely unlike the rest of the subcontinent, and even though Kipling, as already noted, begins to differentiate between the different peoples of the subcontinent, he nevertheless omits those character types which don't serve to support his otherness. And whilst Woolf writes necessarily about Tamils in his story about Ceylon, the Dravidian peoples of the south in general are rarely mentioned in stories about India.

It is apparent, I suggest, that there are already sufficient points of contact between *The Missionary*, *Kim* and *The Village in the Jungle* to support the view that they are interrogating a single genre. But there is one additional element which runs through all three novels, and that is the primary question of the exercise of political power, the issue of who governs this space called India. In

Owenson's early scheme, whilst the Imperial Family marches on itself, the ungoverned land is being fought over and slowly brought under control by different factions of the Church of Rome. In Kipling's novel, control has been gained by the British, who seek to retain it in the face of a perceived threat from another European force. In Woolf's novel, there is no external threat to the British governance of this self-contained land, rather a striking illustration of the fate which await those who remain beyond the reach of the colonial polity.

Moore-Gilbert writes that 'the nineteenth century accepted as a paramount responsibility an examination of the problems of political control over India' (Moore-Gilbert 1986: 68). It appears, however, that this focus continues into the twentieth century, and I am going to argue that it is still the central issue in Scott's end-of-genre writing in the 1960s and 70s.

## 6. The End of a Genre

### *The Jewel in the Crown*

The year in which Forster published *A Passage to India*, 1924, is the year in which the Empire Exhibition was staged at Wembley, a celebration of the greatness of the British colonial project, with pavilions from every continent. The commemorative biscuit tin produced for this event by Huntley & Palmer showed on its lid Britannia with a cornucopia at her feet (echoing the Early Modern trope shown in the Ancient House in Ipswich (footnote 21)), attended by a fair-headed child holding a white dove, and flanked by scenes of unmistakably-British agriculture and shipping<sup>26</sup>.

Around the edge of the tin are the several names of the colonial possessions which form the market to which, the viewer is invited to assume, both the peace and the produce of the United Kingdom are exported. In relation to the products of Huntley & Palmer alone this is a very partial view of the way the economy of the Empire worked, since many of their ingredients were imports *from* the colonies, but given that India would be a net creditor of the United Kingdom within two years, it seems now frankly incredible (Lennard 2008: 33). And yet such were the tropes of Empire which this exhibition sought to bring before the British public.

Forty years later, when Paul Scott embarked on *The Jewel in the Crown*, the first volume of what would be his great work, *The Raj Quartet*, there was no such exhibition under way, and Huntley & Palmer were exporting biscuits to former colonies in tins decorated with photographs of native peoples (for example, *Little Gems to the West Indies* [Reading Museum]). Indian independence had occurred nearly two decades previously, British power had declined abroad and Conservative power at home, the Cold War was now the dominant

<sup>26</sup> Examples of this tin are held by both the V&A in London and Reading Museum, which has a collection of memorabilia of what is a local company. I pick on H&P because of their unique relationship with the colonial project, with regard to the importation of ingredients and export of finished product, which allowed them to become one of the world's first transglobal companies (Corley 1972). Moreover, from the 19thC onwards, images of empire were to be found decorating their tins for the home market – tiger shoots, Mughal scenes, and so on – in an age when the range of images entering the average British household was relatively limited, and so each influential in a manner analogous to fiction. This was a two-way street, and many accounts are given of the unexpected places around the globe in which H&P tins have been found, amongst them that of Lord Redesdale, the British diplomat, who found a matching pair decorating a church altar in Ceylon in 1898. (Redesdale 1916; 740).



international issue, and its worst manifestation, the Vietnam War, had become the preoccupation of much of the Western world's youth. So we might not be surprised when Hilary Spurling notes that India as a subject for fiction was out of fashion, that literature about part of the once-important history of a once-important nation had ceased to be mainstream (Spurling 1990: 206).

In his essay, 'The New Radicalism: the politics of culture in Britain, America and France, 1956-73' Alf Louvre writes about:

[...] the development of a distinctive political ethos during the 1960s, one giving prominence to the politics of culture and the culture of politics, to the nature of our personal and collective implication in established systems and in what might replace them. (Moore-Gilbert and Seed (eds), 1992; 69)

He goes on to assert, moreover, that a common set of radical attitudes and goals developed 'that had an international currency by the late 1960s' (69). But he continues in the next paragraph to make an interesting observation about the development of the manifestos about which specifically he writes, that each 'is aware and responsive to its own native radical traditions' (69). In other words, new radicalisms are born of old ones, they develop rather than arrive *de novo*, they are evolutionary rather than revolutionary. And this point has particular relevance in relation to the aesthetic position which Scott adopts in *The Jewel in the Crown*, which I will argue belongs to just such a set of radical attitudes. It suggests further that Scott, whose writing career had never been driven by populism, was determined to make his apology, regardless of the size of the readership which it might draw.

The old radicalism from which *Jewel* evolves is *A Passage to India*, which Scott knew well (Spurling 1990: 274), and about which he had lectured (Scott 1986: 111ff). So much has been written about Forster's canonical novel that I won't go into detail here, save to suggest that its importance historically was that it was one of the first major novels to describe flawed Englishmen in conflict with upright Indians. Now, there is a certain hermeneutical logic which demands that it was necessary for Forster to establish that not all Englishmen are flawed, not all like Commissioner Turton, in order to retain his own authority as narrator, and in his story the character who performs this function is Cyril Fielding, principal of Chandrapore's Indian college. This is an idea which had emerged within ten years of the publication of *Passage*, when Bhupal Singh writes that it 'is through

Fielding that Mr. Forster speaks' (Singh 1934: 229). Fielding will face ostracism by his own people because of his support of Dr. Aziz, the wronged Indian at the centre of the story, and the last words he speaks to his friend are 'Why can't we be friends now? [...] It's what I want. It's what you want.' (Forster 2005: 306).

There is a similarly trustworthy voice in *Jewel*, but from a dissimilar character under different circumstances.

Scott's relationship with India is curious. Unlike Owenson, he had been there. Unlike Kipling, he'd not been there for very long. Unlike Woolf, he'd been there as a relatively junior army officer, with barely any connection to the civilian population. It's not obvious what it was about his three years training or sitting at a desk dealing with logistical matters in the Burma campaign which led him to the obsession which India became. But he would later write that India was 'the place where I was born a second time [...] After just three years this country was in my bones' (Moore 1990; 21)

Whereas the greatest part of his written work before the war was poetry, he turned first to drama and then to the novel after his return to civilian life, and all of the three plays and six of the eight pre-Quartet novels he produced, between 1952 and 1964, are concerned with the British presence in Asia.

The Raj Quartet consists of *The Jewel in the Crown* (1966), *The Day of the Scorpion* (1968), *The Towers of Silence* (1971) and *A Division of the Spoils* (1975), each a complete and distinct novel in its own right. Collectively, it is a monumental work of more than a million words, the writing of which occupied the ten years from Scott's first return to India in 1964. During this period, Scott's well-being deteriorated in almost every way, from a marked increase in his drinking to the collapse of his marriage, and there can be little question that this project was completed at some personal cost.

The Quartet is immensely complex, with an enormous cast of characters, and a story arc which extends from a rape in 1942 to the horrors of partition in 1947, all linked, told in a non-linear manner by 'the Stranger', who is revisiting events by way of a historical investigation more than twenty years later. Nothing ever resolves fully, everything depends on everything else. Lennard notes that 'Multi-generational complexity sweeping across times and classes recalls the great tradition of the nineteenth-century novel but Scott's narration is Modernist. Sections [...] explicitly admit an author [...] to the pages of his text as an

interviewer of his own characters' (Lennard 2008: 17-18). Commentators everywhere, not least in reviews in *The Sunday Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph*, feel compelled to refer to Scott as a *historian* (Moore 1990: 119).

Much has been written about The Raj Quartet, and there will be more to come, undoubtedly. My task here in this limited space is not to explore the intricacies of its structure, not to develop a detailed criticism of the whole, rather it is solely to demonstrate generic consistency within its first part, *The Jewel in the Crown*, and consider then the aesthetic question of 'what's going on here?'

Demobilised in 1947, Scott returned to India only in 1964 to research his great work, and for the first time found himself exposed to a version of India which, whilst being no more *real* than the entirely-real life of the well-heeled middle classes of Bombay, or the comfortable hotels of Calcutta, certainly exhibited *otherness* from the perspective of his limited experience. Having, indeed, lodged with the middle-classes of Bombay, and rested in Calcutta hotels, he went to stay with an old *havildar* in a Timmapuram, a village in Andhra Pradesh. Spurling describes Scott's horror and discomfort at staying in this place, not the least of it being the requirement to defaecate in the surrounding fields (Spurling 1990: 283ff). Cutting short his stay – essentially, fleeing from the India of Indians – he made for Hyderabad, and the Ritz Palace Hotel:

My relief is indescribable. But already in that relief there was the shadow of something which appalled me – the growing shadow of my ingratitude, my ridiculous irrational fears, my utter dependence upon the amenities of my own kind of civilization. But the sense of relief was enough to keep the shadow at bay, for a while. So there I was, there *he* is, if you will picture him: sitting on a comfortable bed: Enoch Sahib: a slight case of cultural shock. (Scott 1986; 103)

Enoch Powell, famously, had made his 'Rivers of Blood' speech shortly before these lines were written, and it seems extraordinary that Scott, who would account for the British Empire's failings, should have chosen to associate himself with an openly racist individual. The next year he wrote:

In my old Anglo-Indian I'd never of course experienced such a cutting-off from what I must, for this purpose, call my own kind. It simply did not happen. [...] Idleness, illness, primitive conditions, fear of the strange and alien, ready acceptance of tin-god attributes, until I experienced them in one implacable combination, I did not truly understand in my flesh and bones, the rock on which Turtonism is founded, nor the true nature of the stout supporting pillar of their work, the secure nature of the stout encircling wall which they erected to protect

themselves. I think most of them did not understand it either, and still do not. At this level, Turtonism is an instinct, not a faith. To me it is still wrong. The thick layer of Turtonism which I discovered in myself is what appals me. The metaphor [of the *Raj* for my view of life] here is like a stone that has found its real mark (Scott 1970: 130).

This is an important passage, in which the essence of the imperial venture is captured, the necessary separateness of the coloniser from the colonised. Without this separation, then the Raj might have returned to its 17thC origins as a set of arrangements between variously cooperative parties with shared mercantile interests. Because of this separation, and moreover its acknowledgement, the true political nature of the colonial project is laid bare. And so too its literature, at the heart of which lie issues of power and governance to which I have already alluded.

We can see that South Asia has from the outset been a place in which the politics of power has been the major generic feature in fiction, and that the aesthetic as it has evolved has depended upon the nature and identities of the parties vying for power. In the case of Scott's great work, the politics are now disputed between the colonisers and the colonised, which is to say that the native population is, at last, allowed to be political. As Pascale Casanova writes, 'literary relations of power are forms of political relations of power' (Casanova 2004: 81), and it follows that the literature which preceded Scott was analogous to 'history written by the victors', in the famous line (severally attributed), whereas Scott is driven into the new aesthetic of apology because he writes history as the loser.

Scott asserts that 'most of them' don't understand the instinctual separation between the coloniser and the colonised, whereas he does – yet still he is appalled to find 'Turtonism' in himself. Could this be otherwise? Could an Englishman visiting India for a brief period have been anything other than an Englishman abroad, distant from the native population, regardless of his good intentions? Based on Scott's experience and reaction to his truncated stay in Timmapuram, apparently not. And could he write a novel as anything other than an Englishman? When Robin Moore observes that 'The world, to a large extent, learns its history of the Raj from the works of Paul Scott.' (Moore 1990: 6), it is implicit that the world does not learn its history of *India* from Scott, and we must be clear that *British India* is his subject. The importance of the Timmapuram experience was that Scott started from this position of self-knowledge, understanding now the

*limitations* of the 'race-instinct' described by Kipling.

The action of *The Jewel in the Crown* centres upon the town of Mayapore, in the fictional province of Ranpur, which can be placed geographically due to the travel accounts throughout the Quartet as somewhere in what was then the United Provinces and is now Uttar Pradesh. The narrator, the Stranger, is a publisher's reader who has been sent the memoir of one Brigadier Reid<sup>27</sup>, who is conducting in 1964 an investigation into the gang rape of an English girl, Daphne Manners, in 1942, about which he has read in the Brigadier's MS. He learns that Miss Manners was in a relationship with Hari Kumar, the wholly-anglicised public school product who has been returned reluctantly to India under *force majeure*. He learns further that there is the makings of a love triangle between Daphne, Hari and Ronald Merrick, the Deputy Superintendent of Police, who himself comes from a lower middle-class background. Merrick abuses Kumar and others in his investigations into the rape. The events of the rape and its aftermath unfold to a backdrop of the Quit India riots, probably organised by the extremist Hindu, Pandit Baba. And there is an act of sati.

Already it can be seen that the familiar generic elements are emerging; there is an inter-racial love affair, a racially motivated rape, a divided townscape in the north of India, far away from the large metropolitan centres. When there is trouble, Hindus are central, and there are monsters in the form of rioters, the consequence of whose actions is lethal.

But it is all wrong, the tropes have become inverted.

The Quit India movement of 1942 was causing much trouble for the authorities in the north of India, yet the north is here used to signify all of India, that which is normal.

The distraught woman who immolates herself within her so-English garden shed is Miss Crane, an English Christian missionary, who was with her Indian colleague, Mr. Chaudhuri (at last, an important native Christian character) when her car is stopped by a mob on the road from Dibrapur. He is dragged from it and beaten to death, thus making the Christian victim of the monster one of its own. (Scott 2005a: 45)

The inter-racial relationship is between two upper-class English people, who both literally and metaphorically speak the same language, although one of

<sup>27</sup> Scott states in a letter that he is himself 'not quite' the Stranger, who is 'a mechanism for achieving both detachment and involvement.' (quoted in Moore 1990: 171)

them is brown-skinned. Moreover, it is now the male half of the partnership who is the Indian. Their relationship is not terminated by the death of Daphne, but by the brutality of her rape and the continuing brutality metered out to Hari by Merrick, an English policeman. She will die, in due course, but as a result of giving birth to a daughter, Parvati, a new life with mixed blood, who will be welcomed into the household of her very superior, establishment great-aunt, the liberal Lady Manners.

The inversion of generic elements in this degree suggests that the genre itself has reached the point at which it is no longer fit for purpose. If it is a genre which has arisen, from the outset, to contain stories about the exercise of power in a foreign, 'empty' space, then a story about the (successful) challenge to power by the population of a space which is anything but empty will demand that it can no longer serve in an unaltered way. Just as Scott writes that 'the British came to the end of themselves as they were' (Scott 2005b: 3), so too has the Anglo-Indian genre come to the end of itself as it was.

But what of the aesthetic? Is it the answer to 'what's going on here' that Scott, the writer-historian, is taking it upon himself to make an apology?

Scott was often chagrined by comparisons between his work and *A Passage to India*. In 1968, for instance, in a lecture to the Royal Society of Literature entitled 'India: A Post-Forsterian View', he writes, 'When in a mood of childish irritation brought on by yet another critical comparison of the novels I write about India with this one which Forster wrote [...]' (Scott 1970: 113). And he wrote to *The Sunday Times* to complain about John Raymond's review of *Jewel*, in which Daphne was compared to Adela Quested (Raymond later would make the equally improbable comparison with Sarah Layton in *Scorpion*) (Moore 1990: 117-8). At the heart of his annoyance must have lain the difference of aesthetic, the sense that he was doing something more than Forster, as the case must have been given the years and political change which separate their novels.

Scott admired *Passage* for exploring the liberal dilemma of the requirement for force – and separation – in the process of government which was intent on some form of Indian independence. But he knew that he had never in India met anyone who resembled in reality the characters in Forster's novel: [...] another difference between my Turtons and Burtons and Forster's – and I'm not making a literary comparison, but one of attitude arising from a view of life,

more social than philosophical – it is that I attempt to portray them within the context of their *work* first and their prejudices second. In *Passage* the raj strike me as notably *unoccupied* by anything so much except the need to take up a stance or an attitude. As a social novelist rather than a philosophical novelist, I miss in *Passage* references to a concern and belief in occupation which, coupled with the conviction and certainty that the occupation was both created by and in rigid line with the national British ethos, led to the rigidity of attitude. Perhaps in 1913 [when Forster began his novel] one should not look for that, or therefore miss it. But I have, in terms even of the social novel, a doubt. (Scott 1986: 127)

Philip Mason, who was a senior member of the Indian Civil Service during and after WW2, makes a very similar point:

Comment on the British in India has usually concentrated on only one of the two worlds in which I now lived. This is understandable because, to a visitor, the British were usually only visible when they were away from the real business of their lives, which was urgent and sometimes dramatic. By contrast, life in the station, at the Club, seems in memory, as it is usually portrayed, insipid and uninteresting. But to picture only that part of life is to produce something unreal. In Forster's *A Passage to India*, for example, though Aziz is sensitively drawn, the British officials are cardboard figures – surely because they have been wrenched from their context and no attempt made to understand their work. (Mason 1978: 102)

What is it that Scott means by *a concern and belief in occupation [...] created by and in rigid line with the national British ethos*? The occupation is the business of being a colonialist and the rigid line of the British ethos is that being a colonialist is a fine and noble calling. This was expressed not least in the old military concept of माँ बाप (*man-bap*), meaning literally 'mother-father', by which it was understood that British officers would look after in every respect their sepoys, in return for which they would receive undivided loyalty. Mason uses the phrase of himself as a civilian Deputy Commissioner, with no sense of irony whatsoever (Mason 1978: 199), in which context it becomes undoubtedly an expression of aloof-but-kindly separation, not just the ability to exercise power, but also the need, as parent to helpless child.

But it had become clear to Scott, as to the thousands of new British officers in India during the war, that the old values of the Raj were breaking down, not just between the British and the Indians, but also between the old India-hands and the new. Scott considers the origins of this divide in an essay entitled 'The Raj' which he wrote whilst still working on *The Quartet*.

After the 1914-18 war the divergence of opinion between the people at home and the members of the Raj about what Indians were capable of became so wide that

the two lines of belief never met again. At home the idea of what an Englishman was had begun to undergo radical changes. There in your Bloomsbury bed-sitter you sat round a popping gas-fire toasting crumpets and observed that the old world was dead and the Old England with it and that it was quite wrong to go on exploiting countries that were capable of exploiting themselves. But in Collector Sahib's bungalow things looked very different, because Collector Sahib sat on his verandah and gazed at his darkening garden, sniffed the ancient smell of cow-dung fires in the ancient villages, thought of his 4,430 square miles of territory and the souls entrusted to him and observed that *his* world hadn't changed at all. (Moore 1990: 161)

This view combines with his continuing frustration over being compared absurdly with Forster when, in 1975, he writes to Dorothy Ganapathy, the dedicatee of *Jewel*, of the 'awful English literary academic fixation on Kipling and Forster. For heaven's sake! Did nothing happen between 1924 and 1945?' (Moore 1990: 121)

So Scott writes in a political atmosphere utterly different to Forster's (although neither of them were old India-hands as such), and his focus is the occupation of his characters, the business of colonial administration. Examined in this way, the idea of British colonial rule being implicitly justifiable collapses, to be replaced by the idea of it being justified only if it is successful. Scott is objectifying the Raj during its last years, and insofar as he finds it wanting, his exposition becomes apologetic. And he finds it wanting because, almost without exception, his colonisers are bad colonists.

Miss Crane, for instance, as the crisis grows on the road to Dibrapur, is advised by both Mr. Chaudhuri and the police not to attempt the journey to Mayapore, because it is feared, with good reason, that they will run into a mob. Miss Crane instructs Mr. Chaudhuri to bring the car:

And in my voice, she said to herself, there – always there – the note of authority, the special note of *us* talking to *them*, which perhaps passes unnoticed when what we talk about is the small change of everyday routine but at times of stress always sounds like taking charge. But then, she thought, we are, we are in charge. Because we have an obligation and a responsibility. (Scott 2005a: 48)

It is clear that Miss Crane cannot remove the sense of separateness she feels for her educated, Christian colleague. Mr. Chaudhuri reluctantly agrees to accompany her, pleading 'All I ask is that if we see a crowd of people on the road, you put your foot hard on the accelerator.' (54). But despite her Kiplingesque sense of *obligation and responsibility* she cannot obey the instructions of her



brown-skinned companion, cannot respond to her own sense of duty to him as his protector. And because she has failed to repair the faulty door lock, a fundamental requirement in caring for her passenger, he is dragged out of the car.

'Go!' shrieked Mr Chaudhuri, from outside the car, kicking the door shut, his arms held by four men, 'or do you only take orders from white men? Do you only keep promises you made to your own kind?' (57)

These are not the helpless cries of the child in the *man-baq* relationship imagined by Miss Crane, not even the stropy cries of a teenager. This is the angry response to betrayal by an adult 'Mr D.R. Chaudhuri, BA, BSc – qualifications which not only astonished [Miss Crane] but made her suspicious' (41).

The outcome of the violence is the death of Mr. Chaudhuri, beaten with sticks, the burning of the car, an assault on Miss Crane. At first walking away, she says 'Nothing I can do, Nothing. Nothing.' (59).

Within the context of the whole novel, this is an episode involving relatively minor characters which arises early in the story. Nonetheless, Miss Crane's loss of control, her ineptitude, is vitally important to the whole, and Michael Gorra hits the right note:

Miss Crane cannot protect her subordinate because her very presence is what makes him vulnerable in the first place. The imperial mission cancels itself out, dies of its own contradictions. For the Raj cannot now pretend that it rules India for India's sake. Not only can the British no longer preserve the order that they take as justification for their rule; they are themselves responsible for its destruction. (Gorra 1997: 18)

Finally, Miss Crane returns to Mr. Chaudhuri's corpse in the road, takes his hand in hers, and speaks the novel's first apology.

'It's taken me a long time,' she said, meaning not only Mr. Chaudhuri, 'I'm sorry it was too late.' (Scott 2005a: 59)

Thus is set the tone of the novel, in which all those matters with which the British become involved go wrong or fail. Daphne Manners, newly arrived in India, is advised against her relationship with Hari Kumar, but goes ahead anyway. Hari Kumar appears to be, in terms of post-colonial theory, the perfect 'mimic man', but he's nothing of the sort since he's a real Englishman, despite the assumptions made about him in India because of the colour of his skin, who has been known as Harry Coomer (see footnote 17) and who, because of his history

(inseparable from that of the Raj) has been transported to a place he does not know, with food he does not like, and a language he does not speak. He will live out his life in exile, separated by death from his lover, calling to mind Owenson's Hilarion.

Representing within the story the power of the British military, Brigadier Reid is exposed in extracts from his memoir to have acted in relation to the riots injudiciously, incompetently, and he begins to sound like a humbug:

When I looked out on the *maidan* from the window of my room in the old artillery mess in Mayapore, or drove round the cantonment, I could not help but feel proud of the years of British rule. [...] One had only to cross the river into the native town to see that in our cantonments and civil lines we had set an example for others to follow and laid down a design for civilised life that the Indians would one day inherit. It seemed odd to think that in the battle that lay ahead to stop all this from falling into the hands of the Japanese the Indians were not on our side. (Scott 2005a: 278)

The character most easily associated with the orthodoxy of the Raj is Ronald Merrick, the Deputy Superintendent of Police in Mayapore. He is usually seen as the villain of the piece, and his appalling mistreatment of Kumar has consequences which reverberate throughout the complete set of the Quartet, resulting ultimately in his own murder whilst dressed in Pathan clothing (Scott 2005d: 548). He is profoundly racist, and self-aware of his inferior social status, both qualities evident when he attempts to steer Daphne away from Kumar, whom he perceives as his rival:

'That's the oldest trick in the game, to say colour doesn't matter. It does matter. It's basic. It matters like hell. [...] I've put it badly. But I can't help it. The whole idea revolts me.'

(Scott 2005a: 402)

Lennard makes a spirited defence of Merrick as protagonist:

Of course he has racist feelings and beliefs—how else could he represent any element of the Raj with such power?—but the point is that he is aware of them, confronts them in his own mind, and calls them by name; what so many characters (and for that matter readers) loathe in him is his function as their mirror, made possible by the degree to which he was Scott's.

(Lennard 2008: 58)

The reference to Merrick as Scott's mirror relates not only to his acceptance of his racist feelings, but also to his lower middle-class origins and to

his dual sexuality. Lennard continues:

Try instead to imagine him neutrally, observantly, as a young man, a London shopkeeper's orphan sponsored by his grammar school to the Indian Police Service; a good scholar and hard worker determined to excel and make a life, rising through the ranks and therefore, this being the British Empire, acquiring a higher social class not so much for himself as for his future children. Imagine as you will his sexuality and probable virginity, but be sure to add the sleepy Mayapore (literally 'Illusiontown') to which he was posted in 1938, aged about 22 – how conservative its few Anglo-Indians, how complex its dense Indian layers – and his professional and personal attempts to understand its politics. Remember also the treatment other Britons 'not from the top drawer' [...] are shown to have received in the Raj partly for their déclassé manners but also because they believed, and showed their belief, in the effigy all supposedly worshipped. Merrick's real offence, in one sense, was simply to have been a practising imperialist [...] (59)

What Lennard seeks to establish is that whilst Merrick might appear to act throughout with something approaching evil intent, his actions were reasonable within the mores of the day, the expectations of his service, the prejudices lingering from 1857, and the circumstances of the Quit India riots. His failure arises from his unstinting belief in the rightness of the colonial project at a time when everybody else becomes cynical, recognising implicitly that the Empire is drawing to its end. And that the image of him as a character emerges from the prejudicial remarks and descriptions of him provided by the other characters, of whom he is the only one who runs through the complete set of the Quartet, and to whom solely the opportunity to speak in the first person is denied by Scott.

That is to say, Merrick is the only imperialist who's doing the job properly, the only representative amongst Scott's list of characters for whom his role within Anglo-India is *urgent and sometimes dramatic*, to use Mason's phrase. And yet he is an appalling individual with despicable politics. There can hardly be a more damning reflection on the true nature of the colonial project and Scott, because we can associate him with Merrick, acquires the authority to take an apologetic position through him. Merrick, in this respect, comes somewhat to resemble Fielding in *Passage*, albeit in a negative form, as with so many of the familiar generic elements. But he is not the final authority for Scott's apology.

Merrick's given name is Ronald, about which Guy Perron, a sergeant/academic character who appears later in the set, comments, 'Ronald means the same as Rex or Reginald. It means someone with power who rules.' (Scott 2005d: 503). This, Moore argues, links Merrick explicitly with Reginald

Dyer, the British colonel responsible for the massacre at Jallianwala Bagh, Amritsar in 1919 (Moore 1990: 65).<sup>28</sup> Likewise Brigadier Reid's name is an inversion of Dyer.

Scott sprinkles historical, meta references such as these throughout his text: Brigadier Reid writes of the road *to* Dibrapur, bringing to mind the road to Damascus, when the incident with Miss Crane happened on the road *from* Dibrapur; the Bibighar Gardens, the site of Hari and Daphne's love tryst, and the rape which followed, refers directly to the site of the Kanpur murders during the 1857 uprising; the Chalianwallah Bagh where Kumar's bicycle is found after the rape relates to the Jallianwala Bagh, as does the dream character, Gillian Waller, who appears later in the set, and so too Chillingborough, the smart school attended by a disproportionate number of the story's upper-class characters, including Kumar himself. These reminders of a tragic imperial history, resonant to the last, serve to demonstrate the continuity from which the end of empire has evolved, rather than been arrived at *de novo*.

In his investigation into Daphne's rape, the Stranger corresponds with the man who was Deputy Commissioner at the time. Philip Mason held this rank in the Indian Civil Service in reality when he referred to his duty as *mother-father*, and we can consider his background to be representative (including the First from Balliol which was more-or-less a requirement for entry into the ICS – Woolf was unsuccessful, and had to settle for the Ceylon Civil Service!). We can assume that Scott's fictional Deputy Commissioner, as a member of the 'Heaven Born', is a man of intellect and education, and certainly Hilary Spurling considers him civilised and reflective (Spurling 1990: 289). Therefore, we could conclude that this is a man whose experience amounted to something. We might be inclined to take seriously his views both of what happened in 1942, and more generally with regard to the colonial project. And his views, amounting to an admission of his own failures and, ultimately, the immorality of the British presence in India include:

We did nothing to integrate communities, except by building railways between one and the other to carry their wealth more quickly into our own pockets. (Scott 2005a: 328)

<sup>28</sup> This was a variably criticised military action in which live ammunition was fired at a large, unarmed crowd, causing the deaths of a great many, and which would certainly have been remembered in 1942 (not to mention 1964).

And:

But I didn't have the nerve to stand up in the open and rehearse in public the pros and cons of doing what I was instructed to do. (329)

And:

Doubts and all I locked up X Y and Z. And I think I was wrong. (329)

And:

What in hell was the good of declaring Dominion status as our aim for India in 1917 and not much more than a year later instituting trial without jury for political crimes and powers of detention at provincial level under the Defence of India Rules [...] What kind of a 'dominion' was that? Well, you remember the result: riots, and then General Dyer at Amritsar and a return to distrust and fear and suspicion, and Gandhi emerging as the Mahatma, the one man who might provide an answer – but now it was going to be an Indian answer, not a British one. I'm sorry. I still get hot under the collar when I think about 1919. And I'm still deeply ashamed, after all these years. (330)

And:

If we had not banned the Congress committees and imprisoned their leaders at the centre and in most of the provinces, I'm convinced that there would have been no rebellion of the kind that occurred. (330)

And:

But then I expect my objections to your conclusions are really based on my inner unwillingness to accept the unsupported evidence of Merrick's behaviour – or to admit my own failure to suspect it at the time. (339)

And:

It was then a question of the greater morality outlasting and outweighing the lesser. Which was why, of course, in the end the Indians won. (341)

And so on.

The fulsome admission of personal incompetence and imperial immorality is unequivocal. Scott elsewhere stated equally plainly that he had used the DC as 'something of a mouthpiece for my own political and historical ideas' (Scott 1986: 66). Given that I have noted that Scott liked to play with names, lend them the weight of meaning, it is important to register the surname which he gave to his DC, his most lucid critic of the Empire, his Fielding.

It is White. Robin White.

Scott is not alone in writing from within this aesthetic. It is, as I have suggested, an apology evolved from earlier manifestations, including *Passage*. The evolutionary tree throws out a number of branches, including, for instance, Philip Mason's novel, *The Wild Sweet Witch* (1947). Mason is one of those writers who is an old India-hand, as noted above, and his histories (published under the pseudonym, Philip Woodruff), notably *The Men Who Ruled India* (Woodruff 1954), were highly regarded.

It is perhaps unsurprising that a writer with Mason's background should choose to extend the period of his novel backwards from the preceding decade or two, into the history of the colonial project. He writes in three periods, 1875, 1923 and his 'historical present' 1938, the events of the earlier periods having a direct bearing on the tragedy of the third. Given that Mason had taken home leave to write this novel in 1946, knowing that Independence loomed but not exactly when or how, it is also unsurprising that he addresses the issue directly.

Garhwal is a real district, where Mason had served, and the Deputy Commissioner in the fictional 1938, Christopher Tregard, is autobiographically close to Mason, according to Saros Cowasjee in his introduction to the novel:

[...] in his love of Garhwal, in his exercise of personal rule, and in facing candidly that the time to leave India had come. He is an example of the best of the ICS, of whom there were as many in India as Forster's arrogant Turtons [...] (P. Mason 1988: unpaginated introduction)

To Tregard Mason gives the following speech:

'[...] it seems to me wrong for us, the English, as a people, to take refuge behind the peasant and say we must stay because he wants us. Every people must express itself through its vocal classes [...] and the vocal classes of India want us to go. It's true they're out of touch with the peasant, but that is just because we are here. It's a thing which can't right itself as long as we are.' (P. Mason 1988: 199)

His wife replies:

[...] I see what you mean about the vocal classes, but it's hard to believe they want us to go. It's so easy to forget the rest of the world when one sees only these nice people who come to you for everything and live almost exactly the same life as they did in [1875].' (199-200)

We can detect here the clear acknowledgement of the certainty of Independence, and the political reasons for it, but not the moral, and there is not yet anything by way of an apology, reflecting very accurately Greenberger's era of *melancholy*. This is a DC – Mason's Fielding – and his wife whose beliefs are still

rooted in a sense of colonial responsibility, the doctrine of *man-bap*.

Of the few novelists writing about the end of the Raj, most are now largely forgotten, Mason amongst them. John Masters, who enjoyed huge successes with his novels<sup>29</sup>, is also largely disregarded, although his name arises now and then in connection with the 1956 film adaptation of his novel, *Bhowani Junction* (1954). But his is an extraordinary story, and his fiction worthy of a study of its own.

Born in Calcutta in 1914, he is described by John Clay, his biographer, as being the last of five family generations to have made lives in India, the first of whom arrived in 1804. In fact, since his great-great-great grandmother was Singhi Kaum, a Delhi Muslim (Clay 1992: 5), within the context of this essay it would be more correct, less Anglocentric, to state that he was actually the last of countless generations. So Indian was Masters that after Independence he settled not in England, which was not his home, but in the US.

Of his novels, seven are about successive generations of the English Savage family, tracing their history back to the arrival of Jason Savage in the seventeenth century, referred to above. The last two in historical terms (although not in order of writing) are *Bhowani Junction* (1954) and *To the Coral Strand* (1962), which feature the same family member, the army officer Rodney Savage. They are respectively about the exit of the British and Partition, and Savage's attempts to find a role for himself after Independence.

Masters was often described as the writer who best understood India and Indians. But given that there are as many Indias and Indians as there are people who take a view of the subcontinent, I don't consider this a particularly useful notion, especially since *his* India was experienced almost entirely through the eyes of a Sandhurst-trained army officer. However, reading him it is plain that whatever he did or did not *understand*, he certainly *knew* a lot about India, and his descriptive writing amounts to a remarkable historical source. His bodice-ripping, gung-ho adventure-story style seems old-fashioned now – but not more old-fashioned than *The Missionary* or *Kim* – and it remains writing of high quality.

Masters wrote *To the Coral Strand* in 1961, three years before Scott returned to India for the purposes of research, and in it we find plain evidence of an apologetic aesthetic. Rodney Savage is failing in his attempt to maintain a

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<sup>29</sup> Masters' first novel, *Nightrunners of Bengal* (1951) was a best-seller, selling over 300,000 copies within six months. (Clay 1992: 190)

meaningful place for himself within the recently independent India, although his whole life has been there.

There was no denying that the creation of [this modern India] was the object, acknowledged or not, of my ancestors – but the wheel had turned full circle, the clock again reached twelve. They were forcing me back to the coral strand where old Jason Savage must have landed, if he ever existed – but where were the magnificent kings who had then walked the sands of Coromandel under golden umbrellas? Where were the Rajput knights who had put on their wedding silks [...] and ridden out to die in hopeless battle against such as my ancestors? Where were the wives, who lit the pyres and leaped in, children in their arms? Where were the Madrassi sepoy who gave Clive the rice at Arcot and took only water themselves, and yet had no knowledge of inferiority? Where now did I hear a man say, “I have eaten your salt”? Where was the Rani of Kishnapur, splendid in steel armour, hating England and loving my great-grandfather? And the men in the stands of the sugar cane along the bank of the Ravi, who gave you *gur* and milk to drink, and sat talking with you in dignity and pride and poverty at the corner of the house, in the shade? Where were the gentle lovers of Khajuraho and Pattan, and proud women who walked unveiled? Where was the splendour of India's soul, that met Jason Savage on that shore three centuries ago?

*What had I done?*

God damn them all. God damn them all. (Masters 1962: 110)

This extraordinary, romantic rant, made by a character with the authority of a family history in India, was written by a man with the same authority, and as such Savage becomes Masters' Fielding. It is an expression of regret over the entirety of the colonial project, which raises the question as to what part of it Scott is apologising for. Just the last five years of the Raj featured in the Quartet? Perhaps an answer is given later in this novel when, speaking to his mistress, the rani of a princely state, Savage states more calmly:

'[...] For all the time we English have been here, certainly for the past fifty years, we seem to have been heading in the wrong way. [...]' (Masters 1962: 157)

Fifty years? That's the twentieth century up to Independence, back to the time when Kipling published *Kim*. It seems probable that Scott's DC White, Mason's DC Tregard and Masters' Colonel Savage, were they to meet fictionally, would be broadly in agreement about the collapse of the colonial project in South Asia, the decline from its pinnacle at the turn of the century. Now, we can ask whether the decline was because there's only one way to go once you're at the peak, or that the peak was defined by the point at which decline set in. Either way, the image of disintegration of a society because of its failure to recognise its place within the wider world, which Woolf creates in his isolated village of Beddagama,



seems to foreshadow ironically, in fiction at least, the decline of Anglo-India for the same reason.

Within the context of this period, with apologetic texts evolving to suit and define the new radicalism of the age, was it then inevitable that all novels would have to adopt this aesthetic? Gerald Hanley's novel, *The Journey Homeward* (1961) doesn't.

Scott knew Hanley well, having been his agent, and his endorsement of this novel appears on the front page of the paperback edition (even though it appeared seven years after his death). It seems most notable now for the character of Bella Bullen, an English missionary who might have had found resonance with Scott when he created Sister Ludmilla in *Jewel* and Barbie Bachelor in *Scorpion* and *Towers*.

Skirting the imperial genre, it is about a thoroughly westernised young maharajah and his rani returning from England to assume rule in his impoverished state post-Independence, before it is subsumed into the Republic of India. The interracial relationship becomes metaphorical, in that the Indian royal couple want to remain English in England, but have returned from a sense of duty following the death of the old maharajah. Power and the new politics are undoubtedly central to the story, and there are other generic elements present, but in general the aesthetic is best summed up by Bella Buller, on her knees in prayer:

What is going on? You sent people of my race all over the world to bring your message and to build and do and give law and order and justice, and we laboured in the fiercest heat and bitterest cold. And yet what do we see today? After all our great work in India, Africa, Burma, everywhere we're toiled, you let us be driven out [...]' (Hanley 1984: 166)

If it was possible to write and be published in this vein in 1961, then it follows that it was not inevitable that Masters and Scott would separately adopt an aesthetic of apology. That two such different men, on different continents, writing such different novels, should have done so speaks of the evolutionary power of the new radicalisms of the sixties, of which this aesthetic appears to be one.

The rise of the aesthetic of apology coincides with the Said's writing of *Orientalism*, the publication of which in 1978 signals the start of a critical climate in which postcolonialism replaces the study of Commonwealth literatures. This change of critical climate is implicit in the proposition described by Shirley Chew

when she writes:

For a paradox sits at the heart of the Commonwealth: described as a free association of equal and mutually cooperating nations, it is nevertheless drawn together by a shared history of colonial exploitation, dependence, and interchange. (Benjamin 1995)

Said is clear from the outset that his is a discourse concerned with literature, as he makes clear when he writes of 'the determining imprint of individual writers upon the otherwise anonymous collective body of texts constituting a discursive formation like Orientalism' ((Said 1995, 23). His focus triggers the abandonment of the critique of homogeneity within Commonwealth literature, to be replaced by one in which the darker issues of exploitation and dependence are brought to the fore, issues such as that taken up by Spivak, for instance, in her focus on *sati* in her essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak' (Spivak 1988).

I posit that the admission of guilt for what had become perceived as the wrongs of the colonial project, which attends explicitly the aesthetic of apology, feeds into this change in the critical climate. When Moore-Gilbert writes 'It is certainly not for me as a white, male, middle-class, erstwhile colonial child to decide what is and is not a 'properly' postcolonial conception of identity or positioning [...]' (Moore-Gilbert 1997: 202), this scholar of postcolonial theory appears to seek apologetically to isolate himself from the very context of his specialism.

But evolution doesn't rest. Less than twenty years after writing those words, Moore-Gilbert is in India for the first time, on the trail of his father's history as a member of the Indian Police, perhaps fearful that he was a real-life Merrick. Throughout *The Setting Sun*, his account of this personal journey, there arises the sense that it has become possible now to take a more balanced view of the colonial project and its outcome, of the complexity of this history as, for example, reflected in the lives of my late parents-in-law. Of his father, he writes that he '[...] understood better why he sometimes behaved as he did, even if it was wrong affronting all my postcolonial principals' (Moore-Gilbert 2014: 274). Thus a mode of critical commentary equates to an apologetic set of principals.

There is a telling, cathartic exchange between Moore-Gilbert and the people of the village of Chafal, where his father is remembered for an episode of

heavy-handed policing:

My tears come, sudden and violent, but silently. The man looks alarmed and steps towards me. I take a deep breath. The sound of my voice takes me by surprise.

'Tell the village that I'm sorry for what my father did. But I suppose he thought he was doing his duty.'

As the man translates, Phule puts a hand on my shoulder. 'You're right. He was doing his duty.'

The villagers murmur excitedly as the man beckons me onto the stone platform. When I stumble up, he turns to me so we're side-on to the audience, and takes my hands between his in a gesture of *namaste*.

'There's no reason for you to be upset,' he soothes. 'You are not your father. It was a long time ago. It's good you have come.'

The villagers start clapping, as if the show's over. (Moore-Gilbert 2014: 209)

I agree, Moore-Gilbert is not his father. It was a long time ago, even if not as long ago as when *sati* was current practise. The show is indeed over, and it appears Moore-Gilbert ushers in what we might consider the age of the post-postcolonial critique, in which *principles* no longer inflect scholarship. Ironically, Said himself addressed this matter when he wrote:

Nevertheless, the determining impingement on most knowledge produced in the contemporary West [...] is that it be nonpolitical, that is, scholarly, academic, impartial, above partisan or small-minded doctrinal belief. (Said 1995, 9-10)

*But it's good you have come? We never stopped going.*

## 7. The Commonwealth Genre

### *Staying On*

In his review of *Division*, David Pryce-Jones presaged Spurling's remarks about India being out of literary fashion.

Lead reviews and critical essays and the newest jack-in-the-box professors turn a blind eye to Paul Scott. Partly, I think, because his subject is India, a country which has dropped out of our national view as if it had never been in it. (Pryce-Jones 1975)

It's not clear why this is a view which could be held in 1975. John Masters' sales alone don't support it, and Scott sold steadily throughout his career, if never becoming a best-seller himself in his lifetime. Extraordinarily, the list of winners of the Booker Prize either side of Scott's early death include *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973) by JG Farrell, *Heat and Dust* (1975) by Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Scott's own last novel, *Staying On* (1977) and *Midnight's Children* (1980) by Salman Rushdie. After fifteen years of labour, Scott's friend M.M. Kaye published *The Far Pavilions* in 1978, which went on to become an international best-seller. And throughout the period, HRF Keating<sup>30</sup> successfully published detective novels about Inspector Ganesh Ghote of Bombay.

In *Jewel*, Scott writes a section in which the Stranger visits the old Gymkhana Club in Mayapore, in which he finds a new type of Englishman, there in the developing India of 1964 as 'Experts' under contract to commercial enterprises, including the old British-Indian Electrical factory and those in the new industrial development near the airport alike, or 'teaching something abstruse at the Mayapore Technical College' (Scott 2005a: 167). That the 'new race of sahibs and memsahibs from Stevenage and Luton' (173) are as segregated as the old type, or worse, or that they come to the Club wearing shorts, with legs bare to the ankles (172) is not the point. What matters is that they're there at all, as it would be quite erroneous to assume that the Anglo-Indian affair ended precipitously in August 1947.

The function of this passage is to give the Stranger access to a sense of the vanished world he is investigating, but it also allows him to observe at first hand

<sup>30</sup> Scott wrote to Keating to thank him for his review of *Division* in *Country Life*, in 1975, as from one writer who knew India to another (Moore 1990: 118). In fact Keating, who published twenty-six novels featuring his Bombay detective, had never been to India when he started the series (Guardian Obituary 2011).

that the present is formed in the past, which is never fully eradicated. It is another example of evolution at work. The British had a continuing relationship with the subcontinent after independence, not only from the 'Experts' who went out there, or from the growing number of tourists as the age of jet flight came into being, but also because of the many old India-hands who stayed on. As Lennard writes:

Kumar was not the only living relict the Anglo-Indians left behind in 1947. How many Anglo-Indians chose to stay on is uncertain, but certainly some thousands for some years. There were compelling financial reasons to stay: Britain not only made no effort whatever to deal with the problems of return, but in many ways offered only embarrassed denial and did its best to consign an entire imperial generation to a scrapheap of early and very impoverished retirement; while in India, for all the terrible sectarian violence, very few Britons were harmed or even threatened during Partition. India was also, of course, in many cases all that they knew. (Lennard 2008: 76-7)

Scott, having abandoned Kumar fictionally in 1947, and met those who had stayed on in reality (Spurling 1990: 380-1), responded to this newly-developing history with the novel which would be his last, *Staying On* (1977). The Booker Prize and greatly enhanced earnings would follow, tragically too late.

What sort of novel would this be, as the old Anglo-Indian genre couldn't accommodate a story set in independent India? Most of the key generic elements I have been discussing, crucially the struggle to govern the ungoverned, are now irrelevant. Interracial relationships might have been an issue still in the 60s, but my personal experience shows that they weren't necessarily in the 70s, and the empty, fecund landscape is already being filled with new industrial developments such as the one Scott places near the airport in *Jewel*. To continue to write novels in the Anglo-Indian genre would be to produce mere pastiche, the equivalent of composing faux Mozart symphonies.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala responded to this technical issue by creating a novel with historical flashbacks, an inter-generational tale bridging Independence which relied on elements of both the historical and romantic novel. MM Kaye also combined those two genres. JG Farrell's siege tale, for all its success and the admiration it attracts, is a curiously a-generic novel, in which India is present only in so far as it happens to be where the action is set – it could be a story told of a mediaeval castle in Scotland or a student sit-in at one of the Robbins universities in the 70s (when the comedic element might be considered to be less out of place than it is in relation to the two-sided bloodbath which was 1857).

Scott was no romantic novelist, to be sure, and he considered that 'a historical novel is a novel concerning a period during which the author did not live', refusing, ironically, to be classified as a 'historical novelist' (Moore 1990: 172-3). He focussed once again on the fundamental source of conflict which drives stories about India, the crossing of cultures, but not now in terms of power and politics, rather in relation to the domestic, the quotidian, and so created a comedy about an elderly couple caught in the wrong place without a right place to run to. India remains central to the story, but it is only the modern India which is the wrong place. The old India was the right place, which is why the old India-hands stayed on at all.

There is no question of the continuity between the *Quartet* and *Staying On*. Its central characters, Lucy and Tusker Smalley, appear frequently in minor roles throughout the last three novels, generally portrayed as minor players in the military life of Pankot:

Socially they were thought dull but it was always just as well to have some obvious dullness around. (Scott 2005b: 51)

In my mind, I have often compared Tusker to the less-able English lawyer whom my father-in-law had beaten in court. The name is another example of Scott adding extra meaning, in that Lucy and Tusker are small in presence and, at least in Lucy's case, physique:

'Oh, that's all right,' little Mrs Smalley said, sitting down and, small as she was, promptly disappearing. People smiled. (Scott 2005b: 50)

Sarah Layton, a major character from the last three novels of *The Quartet*, is in correspondence with Lucy, and Minnie has grown from being the young *ayah* of Merrick's stepson to working for the Smalley's landlady. (Scott 2005e: 79) But there are generic links between *Staying on* and *The Quartet* as well, and thus the Anglo-Indian genre historically; landscape, for example, and the sense of a fecund wilderness:

She closed her eyes and bent her head. Some distance away the tonga wallah hawked and spat. Crows protested her occupation of the gateway. A wind sprang up, chilled by its journey from a source in the distant mountains, and then was gone, leaving a profound silence, interrupted (she realized) by the rhythmic sound of the coppersmith bird beating out its endless saucepans in the smithy of the great pine-clad hills in which Pankot rested two thousand feet or more above sea level. *Snick-snick* (Scott 2005e: 113)

However, the gateway Lucy Smalley occupies is no Mughal arch lofty enough to allow the passage of an elephant and howdah, rather it is the lychgate of a small Victorian gothic parish church. And she remembers clearly and movingly, when silence fell as the Union Jack was lowered during the ceremony to mark independence, that the only thing which could be heard were 'the jackals hunting in the hills', shortly after the Indian military band had played 'traditional martial British music' and Indian pipers 'The Flowers of the Forest' (Scott 2005e: 169). In 1972, when this story is set, as in 1964 when the Stranger spent an evening at the Club, the history of British India remains for all to see, and Baucom's comments about 'an epistemology of empire in which the colonies were troped as England's outlying counties' (Baucom 1999: 44) seems still to pertain in this post-independence novel.

The separation of the two cultures has been greatly diminished now, as might be expected since there's no longer any issue as to which holds power. Whilst Tusker and Lucy try to hold on to their own ways at home, they are happy to join the Holi party thrown by the current commanding officer of The Rifles, Colonel 'Tiny' Menektara and his wife, Coocoo, in the garden of the bungalow once occupied by the Smalleys themselves when Tusker had the command. Here, after Tusker has flirted with Coocoo, he makes 'an exhibition of himself' by joining the children in the more characteristically exuberant celebrations of Holi: [...] presently they showered him in blue, purple and crimson powder and he returned to the adults covered from head to foot, his clothes caked, his eyes and teeth gleaming through the mask of coloured dust like a miner coming up from a pit where the devil's rainbow had its source. And in this state he had threatened to embrace first Coocoo and then Mrs. Mitra. (174)

It is unimaginable that Colonel Layton, Tusker's predecessor in The Quartet, would have entered into that sort of relationship, not only with the native population, but with Hindus in pursuit of a 'monstrous' practice, even after the festival has now been turned into a drinks party and located within a rose garden.

The story of this short novel is relatively simple, albeit told in a complex, non-linear fashion. Tusker is found dead at the novel's start, and the weeks leading up to this eventuality are drawn in flashback (thus demonstrating that not all analepsis has to reach back to pre-independent India, not only as in *Heat and Dust* but again, for example, in Tom Stoppard's play, *Indian Ink* (1995)), before the final, moving scene in which Lucy contemplates her life alone in this foreign

place. Lennard writes:

And while everything seems to partake of Tusker's imminent ending as final eclipse, the last agony of the novel is not a death but a survival, Lucy's, and the last prose note is of her desolation. Tusker was 71 when he died, and Lucy only 67, so one should not imagine (as many readers seem to) that she must inevitably soon have followed Tusker to the grave. She could equally have faced a quarter-century of widowhood, still stuck in a modernising Pankot and having to make her own way at last into India, as Tusker was shown doing in his 'unseemly' play with the town-children at Holi [...] (Lennard 2008: 77)

Just as this observation places Lucy in the same state of widowed exile as Hilarion, so too it reminds us that she is a lady who could well have lived to see the new millennium, that the history she represents is recent, that she and my father-in-law would have been near contemporaries.

Scott died just four months after the presentation of his Booker Prize in November 1977, which he was already too ill to attend. Had he lived longer, especially since he had begun to move in academic circles later in his life, he might have been in a position to argue that *Staying On* was more than merely a light postscript to the tragic arc of the Quartet, which is how it's frequently described. Whatever his initial intention in writing this novel, it is apparent that he found the next stage of evolution for the Anglo-Indian genre.

Consequently, the aesthetic of apology, of which he was so much a part, no longer applies meaningfully in any literary sense, although it has left its legacy, its set of *postcolonial principles*. It is with no certainty that we can read sympathetically now Philip Mason's dedication to his second volume of *The Men Who Ruled India* (1954) (as Philip Woodruff):

*To the Peoples of India and Pakistan  
whose tranquillity was our care  
whose division our failure  
and whose continuance  
in the family of nations to which we belong  
is our Memorial* (Woodruff 1954: 11)

But because of the hope for the future which this dedication contains, and the willing acceptance that there are two cultures which will always have common ground – not least in more than two centuries of literature – I am emboldened to suggest that Scott's replacement for the Anglo-Indian genre might be considered



to be the Commonwealth genre.

In doing so, I am explicitly not seeking to revive the discourse of *commonwealth literatures*, not seeking to homogenise the diversity of experiences of the subjects of once-colonised lands. But in the same spirit, neither am I seeking to perpetuate the postcolonial discourse, in which differences are so heavily drawn upon. Rather, I am seeking to democratise the criticism of the literature of all former colonies, not solely South Asia, in which variations in theme and language are accepted for what they are, and taken on a case by case basis, on a Crocean basis. No-one now reads the English literature of the United States as if it was the literature of a former colony, and whilst the history of which I have been writing is more recent, it does not now seem so recent that it should command any special consideration. There is now, furthermore, a tranche of writers such as Ondaatje, Ghosh, Kureishi, Kunzru, whose hybrid identities demand not that we read their work according to a set of *principles*, rather that we read it solely as literature.

So what, then, *does* it mean when I compare my novel so audaciously to Scott's?

Pankot, being a small, military hill station, has no industry, we gather, such as might attract the presence of 'Experts' from Britain. That does not mean there was no British presence, however:

'Seen our English Hippie?' Tusker had asked Lucy shortly before his illness.

'I've seen a hippie.'

'That's what I asked.'

'He can't be English.'

'He is. I spoke to him.'

'Spoke to him?'

'Why not? Tipped him a rupee too. He gave me a lovely smile. The sort that says, Sucker! Comes from Liverpool. He's into what he calls mudditoyshun.' (Scott 2005e: 51)

This clear reference to The Beatles, also from Liverpool, whose spiritual journey into India did a great deal to bring the subcontinent to the awareness of a younger generation, is necessarily also a reference to a new class of traveller to the subcontinent, the type who knew nothing of the Raj (except, perhaps, what they had learned from The Raj Quartet!), and who can bear no responsibility, therefore, for its excesses and failures.

Tusker and the hippie, both of whom have ended up in India, have nothing in common whatsoever and nothing, therefore, to divide them, *except* for their respective places on the evolving history of the Anglo-Indian relationship. Being myself one of the class of contemporary Englishmen for whom South Asia holds much interest and attraction, and that I choose to make it the subject of my literature, I am able to identify with Paul Scott's hippie, the English traveller who has no agency in an imperial history of conquest and occupation. And it follows that, without agency, I can only learn from and reflect on a past (which is itself but one of many), a meaningful apology for which is beyond my historical remit.

It is in this respect that I claim a relationship between *Hanging On* and *Staying On*.

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# **Hanging On**

**a novel**

When Arnold Balasingham's heart failed at approximately 9.30 a.m. on the second Thursday in February 2002, his wife, Angelina, was out and about in her fading Peugeot.

Angelina had taken to the mobile phone only partially and so carried hers switched off. She had become elderly in the flash of time between the first burgeoning of cellular technology and now, and was content that ownership in itself indicated sufficient appreciation of a mobile's usefulness. Had she felt otherwise then she might have been contactable, wouldn't have continued with her mission, would have been at her dead husband's side much sooner. But dead he would have remained.

Sitting beside Angelina, who was seventy-eight, was Podi Kelle, who had no clear idea of her age, except that these women had been each other's constant companion since they were both young, and must have been each about as elderly as the other. Whatever age she was, Podi Kelle felt it these days. She hadn't sought to own a mobile until recently, as she had thought it inappropriate for a maid to demonstrate such ostentation. But her needs had changed, and she carried her gleaming new Nokia with a certain inner pride.

Arnold's daughter, Nishanthi, wasn't on hand either, since she was at work on the second floor, always an early starter and never willingly distracted.

So it was left to Timmy, son-in-law of the recently deceased and the newly widowed, to discover the crooked body, slumped weirdly in front of the altar in Arnold's side chapel downstairs. Anyone not of the family, anyone not familiar with Arnold's practice of daily prayer, anyone to whom the eccentricity of the scene couldn't be connected with the personal habits of the man in life, might have concluded that he'd stumbled across the remains of a bizarre satanic ritual. But this was merely – if merely wasn't a ridiculous word in the context – merely the way in which Arnold was bound to be found dead.

The morning had been typical, with the nanny, Tasha, discharging her duties: getting the twins up, breakfasted and delivered to the private prep. Nishanthi disturbed Timmy at six, the hour when she usually started work, and he briefly thought his luck was in before he realised it was definitely out. He rolled over for another hour or so, and enjoyed the warm, sultry smell of his grumpy

wife he found still there. Despite the ghostly temptation of her absent, fleshy form, he had drifted quickly back off to sleep until, fully three hours later, a conversation below brought him to the surface. There was traffic in the hallway, which he recognised as his mother-in-law and Podi Kelle going out, as Ruth, the secretary, was coming in.

Given his recently changed status within the firm, he found himself not caring to start work too early this morning, and the shouting he'd heard the night before came to mind, so he went to investigate.

One of the few compromises which had been made in the conversion of Holly House to its present function was in keeping the big kitchen on the ground floor, and not installing another elsewhere. As a result, this was the meeting place for all three generations, where communal rules applied. It was to this room which Timmy went first, with the intention of making a pot of coffee. Arnold liked his coffee weak, Timmy strong, so a shared pot of coffee became a metaphor for the weaving of their lives as they flowed in and out of this room. That the coffee was always a compromise of mediumness, not greatly enjoyed by either, wasn't important. It was something to be shared by two men, finding common ground in a common room belonging to neither of them.

Timmy boiled, scooped, poured, plunged, reflecting on the conversation he'd had with Arnold in this same room just two days earlier. In the presence of Tiger, the cat of the house, Arnold had been banging on about something the Archbishop of Wales had said about, well, Timmy had no idea what about, as he hadn't really been listening. Not to the detail, at least, although he had been critical about the older man's reactionary attitudes. This had led to a bit of a falling out between them, something which had never before occurred. Timmy enjoyed the sound of Arnold's voice, the obvious Sri Lankan-ness of it that turned coats into courts, vicars into wickers and a commonplace oh of surprise into an oar of propulsion. Tiger's presence had been brought into the conversation because his name suggested he was more than he was, subcontinent rather than suburb, and the Archbishop's grand title similarly lent his views more weight than, in Arnold's lay opinion, was warranted by the modest intellect which cowered beneath.

Arnold had a high opinion of his own intellect, one which had been arrived at in youth and carefully, lovingly preserved as the body it belonged to had

passed through middle age and into decrepitude and sickness. But he was not a doer, not an active man; in fact he was a lazy man who could justify his lack of achievement because his intellect was so superior that he had no real need to specialize, no need actually to do anything. So, despite being riveted not solely by god but also Anglicanism, he had remained a layman, and buzzing with big ideas on theology, he had remained unpublished because he'd never written anything. For Timmy he was an eccentric whose bark was very much greater than his bite, and who was partly a chum but more an object of curiosity, an anachronism, a postcard from a time and place which the younger man was too young to have known in person. It was time to patch up the minor falling out.

Timmy approached the old folks' sitting room, and gently pushed the door open with the edge of the tray. Finding the room empty, he continued to the door which opened off the far-left side of the room, which led to Arnold and Angelina's bedroom, and knocked gently. Given what he knew of Arnold's illness, the thought crossed his mind that there might be a problem, since there was no answer, not a sound to be heard. But the worst never really happens, does it, he reasoned, and tentatively he nudged door, which hadn't been fully closed anyway. This room too was empty, the bed unmade, the air stale. He knew that Arnold wasn't out in the cloakroom, because that door had been ajar when he'd crossed the hallway, so Arnold had to be in the den, the small room off the bedroom which served as both his study and chapel, which meant he was probably at prayer and so should not be disturbed.

Timmy was in the hallway once more, returning to the kitchen and a solitary cup of coffee, before he hesitated. He realised that Arnold's oxygen supply had lain on the bed, without which he couldn't get far. What if something was really wrong, if it wasn't just in his imagination, that Arnold was in need of urgent help? Under no ordinary circumstances would he have interrupted the old man's private prayer, but so what if he got it wrong this one time, so what if Arnold was deep in meditation and he disturbed him? It wasn't as if he'd made a habit of it over the years, and the possibility of a bit of Christian forgiveness for any offence committed encouraged him to turn back.

This time he moved through the living room and bedroom as noisily as he could. He stopped at the den door, which was fully closed, and rapped loudly

on it. Nothing. Timmy's heart had begun to beat loudly in his ears. He knocked once more but did not wait. Arnold's body fell under his gaze immediately, causing him to freeze and thus, he would later reflect, not drop the tray. He was astonished that, even though he'd begun to fear the worst, he still hadn't been prepared for the shock of finding Arnold's naked, shrunken body. And nor had he been prepared for his own reaction. Asked in the abstract what he might have expected himself to do upon finding the corpse of a family member, he would have replied that he would first have gasped, caught his breath, been unable to breathe again whilst the involuntary spasm persisted; this would have led to a greater increase in heart rate, a pounding in the temples, a shortage of oxygen which would have precipitated panic. Being unprepared to deal with panic under these circumstances, he would finally have released his chest, gasped deeply once, twice, thrice, become dizzy, cried out pitifully, dropped the tray and fled from the room with a scream trailing closely behind.

In fact, he stood calmly for a moment to take in the scene, placed the glass cafetière on its tray carefully down where it had been destined anyway, muttered an affectionate rebuke – look what you've done now, Arnold – and took some deep, partially-understood comfort that today it was Arnold who had died, and not himself.

And he tried to resist that which was unbidden, the thought that he could have made the coffee significantly stronger.

Then, what now?

As far as he knew, only Nishanthi and Ruth were in the house, and neither of them was likely to descend from on high, so there was no need to hurry. Should he move the body? Yes, that would be the decent thing. But what about the police? Ridiculous, too many movies, this was a natural death. How should he move the body? He could easily carry the mortal remains of Arnold, but didn't fancy it, mainly because he was naked and a little piss had come out. He could wrap the body in something, then carry it. Carry it where? Would Angelina thank him for laying a corpse on her bed? He couldn't leave it where it was, so it had to be carried somewhere. What about Podi's room? – no, absurd. Onto the sofa? – why not straighten it out where it was, in that case. The kitchen? – what, on the table?

He sat down beside the corpse, on the thin rug. The parquet beneath felt hard and cold, and he wondered what sort of noise a dead body would make as it crashed down onto it. Arnold's spectacles were still on his face, magnifying slightly the open eyes beneath, but the gaze wasn't directed at Timmy.

When this house had been converted for the use of two families, some of the rooms could no longer maintain the function for which they'd been equipped, and Arnold's den was one such, as it had originally been a bar and games room. Arnold had fallen backwards against the bar, which he used as his altar, and lay slightly sideways against the brass foot rail, propped up against it, one arm out as if stretched along the back of a sofa, the head extended backwards with the mouth gaping open, dribbling. The loose skin on his chest hung like an ill-laid table cloth, not only following the ridges of the ribs beneath but with secondary folds all of its own. It was thinly covered by wispy, white hair. The abdomen, distended in death, showed the stretched marks of decades of insulin self-injections, old scars, new scars and recent punctures all the same. The penis was flaccid, unremarkable, wet, the legs spindly and twisted. Timmy had never seen his father-in-law naked before, and wondered whether a shared pot of coffee had ever been enough compared to what might have been had the two been able to swim or play squash together.

Arnold was well known at the GP surgery, not just as the diabetic of old, but now also as a failing heart, and Timmy recalled the number for Dr. Aziz on his mobile, fully aware of the battle with the receptionist which would follow.

'I'm sitting looking into the eyes of one of your patients, honey, and he's dead!'

After this, the winning formula, he was connected to the doctor in person, who promised to come as soon as she could ditch her morning list.

'Hey, Nish...' he began his next conversation.

'What? What! Are you bothering with work today?' had been the response.

'I think you'd better come downstairs.'

'You must be joking – I'm not in the mood – sort yourself out.'



'No, I don't mean to our floor – I need you in the old folks' home. In the chapel.'

She knew, somehow, what he meant, and the scream which resulted was as audible from the top of the house as it was on the mobile. Thunderous footsteps followed as the great descent was begun. This forced the question about what to do with the body, and Timmy took Arnold's dressing gown, which lay on the bedroom floor just outside the den, and draped it modestly over the corpse because, he thought, it was not something his wife should see.

Nishanthi wailed as she burst into the room, and continued to wail for several minutes thereafter. Timmy was struck by the extent of her grief, astonished that a daughter who could shout at her father so much could be this upset by his demise. Perhaps it was the presence of the body here in her house, the mess, the inconvenience? No, he decided she was beside herself in genuine, intemperate grief. He didn't know what to say to comfort her, so took her into his arms whilst she sobbed on his shoulder, and felt the movement of her breasts against his chest as they heaved up and down.

Dr. Aziz was very prompt. She arrived, confirmed Arnold as dead, issued a certificate and told Nishanthi she could ask a funeral director to collect the body. Nishanthi disagreed, insisting that the coroner needed to be informed, that a post mortem examination would be required because the death was unexpected. In general, she was a good lawyer, not given to making mistakes, and in a sense hadn't in this instance. She'd just failed to realise how ill Arnold had been. Dr. Aziz explained that Arnold's death was entirely expected, and that she had seen him only six days earlier anyway, well within the statutory fourteen-day period prior to the death. At this, Nishanthi fell silent, shocked to learn that her father, the cause of so much fury to her the night before, had been on the very edge of life even as she poured abuse down on him. She turned to Timmy, who saw her lip begin to quiver and eyes well up.

'We'd best phone your mother,' he said calmly.

'She won't have her mobile on,' Nishanthi replied in a thin, quavering moan.

'No, I don't suppose so.'

Dr. Aziz seized the moment to absent herself, expressing her deep regret at the loss, said she'd call in the week to see Angelina, and that she was always available should she be needed before then. Timmy was impressed that a doctor in the new, money-driven NHS could show such concern.

'Coming here in her hijab, like that,' Nishanthi sneered as she left.

'Your dad rather liked her – teased her about being an Islamic fundamentalist – she called him an infidel!'

Timmy poured a mug of the now cold coffee, raised it in salute to the corpse at his feet, and ignored his wife.

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Arnold's health had taken a notable downturn just over five weeks earlier, on January 8th, the same day that Timmy had flown to Bulgaria on business, and the day on which the Archbishop of Canterbury announced his retirement. Arnold had been a diabetic for the best part of seventy years, longer than the Archbishop had been alive, and those decades had been spent in the slow decline typical of those so afflicted. His assiduous self-care had undoubtedly helped to slow the rate of his decline, and to preserve him beyond the point where many succumb to the disease. He'd never been threatened with amputation due to gangrenous foot lesions, never suffered any loss of vision beyond that which the doctors considered to be within limits, certainly never slipped into a hypoglycaemic coma. His kidneys, however, were damaged and he periodically contracted painful infections in them which laid him low. But, without showing any marked signs of doing so, his heart had been weakening as well.

Nearly eighty, Arnold had long ago stopped taking vigorous exercise, and rarely stepped out to the Post Office or similar. He was always driven to church, by one of Angelina, Timmy or Nishanthi, the former (with Podi Kelle) to stay with him, either of the latter two to pick him up at a pre-arranged time. He never mounted the stairs at Holly House, always requiring others to come to him, or being content to bump into them in the kitchen. As a result, he generally appeared to be fit and active, in the way that an animated speaker in an armchair always does.

Sitting at his computer in the old folks' sitting room, with a BBC web

page on the screen reporting the Archbishop's decision, Arnold had suddenly been overcome by a tremendous shortness of breath and uncontrollable coughing spasms. Podi Kelle, sitting on the sofa nearby, had rushed to his side but, finding him incapable of speech, failed to understand what was the problem and what, therefore, to do about it. She saw in his face fear, and through her own anxiety caught flashes of an idea, that here was a man whose faith was at last going to be challenged, for she became quickly convinced he was about to die.

The twins had been with Angelina in the kitchen, making some fairy cakes, having fun, and came running in to show Parta what they'd done, Parti following with a little less bounce in her step. They stood with mouths gaping open at the sight of the old man gasping for air, his brown skin quite blue, theirs increasingly white. Angelina pushed ahead of them, knowing that at least she could hold him, press him to her bosom, that if he was going to die he would be in the arms of his wife.

'Go, children – go back to the cakes – Parta will be fine in a minute,' she instructed, believing not a word of it.

The twins hadn't needed telling twice and turned on their heels to run. Podi Kelle adopted a position of supplication, praying, holding in her arms his legs at the knees, the other woman in his life giving him such comfort as she could.

'There there there there there there,' repeated Angelina, stroking his head, as he squirmed beneath her.

Podi Kelle cried out ritualistically, 'ay-ah, ay-ah', conjuring an ancient emotion she didn't know she had in her.

Breath by breath, the wet, bubbling coughing reduced, the spasms ceased and, panting, Arnold slumped back into his chair.

'My goodness – my – goodness – what a – what a business!' he prised out of himself.

'Be still now, Arnold, don't you move a bit – I'm going to call for an ambulance.'

'No – no...' he couldn't immediately summon the words, 'I don't – want –

want to go to hospital – ring Dr. Aziz – no emergency, just when she can – help me to bed.'

Angelina saw his look of helplessness, recognised that he was more frightened of loss of control than of the prognosis which a trip to the hospital might produce.

Nishanthi burst through the door, spitting indignation. 'What the bloody hell, Amma – what the blood... making cakes – you've scared the twins to death – what's going on – what the...'

Catching sight of her father propped up in the arms of two old women, by far the frailest of the three, caused her to falter. Her father was an irritating old fool, but he represented an ideal, an archetype which she adored, so that the greater quality of him as father diminished the annoying reality of him as *her* father. Of him she would hear no evil spoken, in him she would admit of no badness, and from his life she could see that nothing but the essence of genius had flowed (in the reflected glow of which she had imagined herself basking since childhood). And, as a consequence of bursting in on this scene of his mortality, as if she'd banged her nose on a plate-glass door, she staggered, grasped at the lamp standard beside her and battled the dizziness which momentarily overcame her.

'Appa – Appa, what's wrong?'

'Nothing, Putha – I'm fine and dandy – I'm just going to have a lie down – see you later,' he smiled weakly as he was led out.

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It had been on Podi Kelle's mind to take down the Christmas decorations before Arnold had become ill. They were two days late, and no-one else was going to bother to do it in this lazy household. It was to be expected, she reasoned, that Angelina would behave as if she had a servant running round after her, because that's what she'd always had. And so, up to a point, had Arnold. But one of the conditions of the three generations moving into this house was that it marked the beginning of retirement for Podi Kelle, who was to be considered a servant no more, under any circumstances. Yet not only had the oldest generation failed to heed their own rules, so too had Nishanthi. The children, of course, were still too young to know better, but how were they ever going to learn how to keep

a tidy house if, in their eyes, there was always an old lady on hand to clean up after them?

Nishanthi made matters worse by insisting that Podi Kelle didn't come onto the first floor to clean and tidy, those rooms being the domain of her family alone. But she couldn't bear the tip which she always found up there, and found it impossible to believe that Nishanthi wasn't just double bluffing, trying to pretend she didn't want the place tidied. As a result, she often found herself being shouted at by a fat, bossy woman who, as a thin and lovely baby, had had countless Harrington nappies changed by the same hands which now simply wanted to tidy up the grand-children's toys.

She had been in need of things to do for a long time now, nothing in her background having prepared her for a life of idle retirement in a modernised, grand house in Luton. And the Christmas decorations would do just nicely for the present, especially since Arnold was now in bed, awaiting the visit of the doctor after his attack. It wasn't so much that it was inappropriate for the house to be decorated whilst its master was ill, although that thought had crossed her mind, it was more that the doctor who was coming was a Muslim, and Podi Kelle didn't want the house to be strewn with symbols of a Christian festival, especially since it was over, for fear of giving offence or, worse, causing the doctor to give bad service.

If she'd felt it appropriate, Podi Kelle would have removed the crucifix over Arnold's bed for the same reason, but she didn't think it would be acceptable to the patient beneath.

She herself had not been born a Christian. Podi Kelle's animist forebears had come out of a village in the jungle to work on the Red House estate at Ambuluwewa, when it had been cleared fifty years or so before she was born. Well, that was the line the Abeywickremas took, Angelina's father insisting that her grandfather had found the local people amenable and eager to be removed from a life of subsistence, dependent on unreliable rainfall and skill with a bow and arrow. Podi Kelle's own father, on the other hand, took the view that the estate came to the jungle, not the other way round, and that his father had had no choice other than to sign up for the Abeywickremas when their village had been overrun by modernity. And as for unreliable rainfall, Podi Kelle remembered her father

guffawing during the monsoons, when the reason for developing the estate in that place became apparent, in the form of two large tanks, themselves extensions of the bunds constructed by the Vedda people over the centuries, each overbrimming with as much fresh water as a mixed estate could ever want.

Her childhood memories, so vivid, included her own toy bow and arrow, with which she and her brother had hunted pretend tapirs and leopards. When not shikaring, there had been a bridge over a small ravine built with vines in the old way, possibly by the old people, from which, legs dangling, all the children watched as estate workers, their parents and grandparents, went about the day's business. Following them would be Angelina's grandfather on horseback, dressed like an Englishman in khakis and a topi, gripping a ridiculous monocle in one eye, through which he would peer up and proclaim that there was no finer bridge this side of London. And so London Bridge was what the children called it.

The workers lived in a row of modern huts on the estate, with none of the modern facilities of the Red House nearby, no better than the village from which they'd come for all practical purposes except, with corrugated tin roofs, a great deal noisier during the monsoon. They were free people, paid for their labours, and at liberty to leave the estate if they chose. Many of the women left to marry into other estate communities nearby, in what came to be seen as a standard two-way exchange as others came in for the same reason. However, some of the families in the early days removed themselves entirely and returned to the jungle.

It was hardly a surprise when Podi Kelle was informed that a good husband had been found for her on a neighbouring property. He was an estate worker, like her, but people thought him more closely in touch with the old ways than most, and she was excited by this, so that she left willingly to live with him, with an eye to a future and a sense of adventure. She struggled now to remember how old she was at the time, and decided she probably hadn't known, although hardly more than a girl she was sure.

She had left with all her belongings in a cloth bundle, and under her arm a biscuit tin in which she kept reminders of the old ways, things she'd collected from her grandparents and others, objects from out of the jungle which had survived the change. She was hopeful that her new husband would share her enjoyment in them, that between them they could reconstruct a memory neither of

them was old enough to own.

She climbed halfway up the stairs and began to remove the drawing pins from the underside of the teak bannister, allowing the kids' paper chains to fall to the floor like great, ungainly pepper vines, the other ends supported still from the picture rails on the walls around. She collected the step ladder from the unheated utility room beyond the kitchen, its metal almost too cold for her frail, thin-skinned hands to hold, and slowly set about clearing the hall of all its bright hangings.

She should never have been a domestic servant. She was a field worker. It was her husband's fault she was here in Luton, his alone. The clashes began as soon as she moved into his hut, fighting over her ways of doing things, when only his would do. He was interested in the old ways, it was true, but not in the same way as she was, not for the sake of knowing where he was from, of memory. He was working at becoming a vedarala, his interest being the possession of power over the people taking the land off the Vedda. Podi Kelle decided very quickly that he was a pissa, wasting his time and energy, and told him so. Neither the Sinhalese nor the British believed in magic, so weren't susceptible to it, she informed him. He in turn accused her of not believing in the old ways enough, and when he saw her using bleach to clean the rudimentary cooking area in their hut, he beat her soundly and threw her out, telling her to get back to her English ways.

Rather than face the humiliation of having to go home, she found a quiet spot on the road between her old and new homes, sunk into the jungle by the roadside and there drank the remainder of the bleach. The pain was extraordinary, as it burned her mouth and throat, and what little she was able to swallow she vomited right back up again, as caustic mucus which now trickled down her wind pipe. She coughed and coughed, desperate to breathe just one more time, but heard behind her in the jungle the sound of a large animal, maybe a leopard, which terrified her so much that she ran out onto the road a few yards away, and there collapsed, clasping tightly in her tiny hand the biscuit tin which, with the bleach, was all her husband had allowed her to take away.

She had been discovered, alive but hurt, and returned to Ambuluwewa, where Angelina had taken her into the Red House and, with the exception of her now permanently-damaged larynx, nursed her back to health and Christianity.

The Christmas decorations were kept in the small storage space in the roof, access to which was through a low, small wooden door in the side wall of the office, beneath the sloping eaves. Podi Kelle was sure that Nishanthi would have returned to work, now that Arnold was settled in bed, especially since Timmy had left for Bulgaria and she was having to cope alone. Having no stomach for the telling off she'd receive if she went to put them away now, she gathered them neatly together and took them to her own room. It was a temporary measure, but nonetheless clutter she didn't want in the smallest bedroom in the house. With nothing else to do in the short term, she sat on her narrow, single bed, and picked up her the now-ancient biscuit tin which lay always beside it. Inside were her oldest memories, those things which had belonged to her before she had belonged to a family, and today, having looked into the eyes of a dying man, they seemed more important than ever, all that would continue of her after she, too, had died, in the wrong time and the wrong place.

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Dr. Aziz came that afternoon, expecting to find Arnold a little under the weather, since the call had been channelled through the receptionist in the ordinary way. She found instead a very sick old man with a failing heart. He had suffered an acute episode of congestion, and his prospects, she was sure, were very poor indeed. Podi Kelle had stayed in the room during the examination alongside Angelina, this man belonging to both women.

'You're very sick, Arnold,' she told him, rather as if this might have eluded him, 'it's your heart – it's not working very well, I'm afraid.'

'But he couldn't breathe, doctor,' Angelina interrupted, 'not his heart.'

'When the heart begins to fail it loses its efficiency, and it can't always pump as well on one side as it can on the other,' Dr. Aziz explained, 'so you can get a backlog of blood – if the right side's working ok, pumping blood to the lungs, but the left side's not pumping blood to the rest of the body so well, you can get a build up of fluid in the lungs, and it leaks out.'

'Drowning, eh!' Arnold grunted.

No-one responded, the silence of those who hope it will go away.

'Not heart attack, ah?' Podi Kelle broke in.

'No, this is the heart not working properly – it's not the same as a heart attack.'

'What do?' she asked again.

'Well, we need to see a specialist...'

'What point?' Arnold interrupted.

'There are drugs which can help, things which can be done, you can be looked after.'

'When you say looked after you're... this is all a bit sudden... you mean palliative care, don't you?'

Dr. Aziz hesitated in her response, thereby giving a complete answer.

'You're a woman of the book, Doctor Aziz – a little misguided, to be sure – but a woman of the book.'

Dr. Aziz cast her eyes down.

'You'll understand that I want to be left alone, that my palliative care can be provided by my family, and by my priest – you know that, don't you, doctor?'

'I'm afraid I don't know anything at all on the basis of my examination today. There are any number of tests which need to be carried out...'

'I don't want to go to hospital...'

'But... but that's just not practical!'

'Arnold, listen to Dr. Aziz, will you – she does know what she's talking about!' insisted Angelina.

'It's not practical for me to go to hospital.'

'WHY?' chorused all three women.

'Because I need all my things around me. I need to be able to organise myself. I need my books. I need to be here.'

'Yes, yes, but I'd like you to see a specialist... you need to see a specialist!'

'Just accept my trust with good grace,' Arnold smiled, 'prescribe the drugs and keep an eye on me.'

'This diabetes, ah?' Podi Kelle asked.

Dr. Aziz nodded, taking out her prescription pad. 'Almost certainly, I'm afraid. For someone who's been diabetic as long you, Arnold, you've done very well...'

'...thus far,' Arnold completed her sentence, 'but now it's all over.'

Angelina looked Dr. Aziz right in the eye, 'How long?'

'I don't know,' she replied without blinking.

Angelina didn't shift her gaze.

'It's impossible to say. I'll be writing to a consultant, who'll be able to tell you more.'

Arnold was confined to bed, without being allowed to walk even to the bathroom unaided, on the orders of Angelina rather than Dr. Aziz. The contemplation of his demise occupied him fully, particularly since just the few weeks more of life which he now anticipated didn't seem long enough even to draw a deep, full breath, or round off a single thought. For one of his age, when even a year had become reduced to a relatively small proportion of life's total, weeks amounted to no time at all. The passage of each lot of seven days, each packaged part of his remainder, would be marked with a finely balanced mixture of joy at having survived thus far, and abject misery that another of the remaining septets had been spent. Spent, furthermore, idly in bed. He was aware that it may well have been idleness which had maintained him over so many years, but mindful that a life in this condition might not be worth maintaining.

For a dying Anglican, he mused, there is a singularly complex set of emotions to be dealt with, much more so than for a Roman, or even a Muslim such as Dr. Aziz. The great strength of Arnold's Anglicanism was that it was a construct, something man-made, and so whilst it sought to address the infinite, it tended to do so in terms of the finite, the earthly, the edifice. This had been a tremendous joy to Arnold throughout his years of imagination, when the issues of church politics had fired him with passion, be it the appointment of a new warden

or the debate about homosexuality within the greater church, and theology seemed to be about the adaptation of orthodoxy to suit the moment. Within this infinitely flexible framework, which he and the powers-that-be took delight in terming the 'broad church', there had been the comfort of knowing that Arnold belonged to a group, all of the other members of which were able to recognise one another.

Yet this was a group which could argue about whether to call the central act of worship the Lord's supper, Holy Communion or Mass. It was a group which both believed in the Bible as an account, yet accepted it as a gesture. It was a group whose priests stood behind, or in front or even to the side of the altar, depending on which of the two standard service books was in use, and differing, often arcane traditions relating thereto. It was a group, in short, to which it was so easy to belong that Arnold was coming to see no merit in it at all whilst it continued to ignore the central theme of religion, god.

This was not entirely out of the blue, as the issue had been on his mind for a little while, and certainly it had become a major obsession now that he believed his life was drawing to its end. But it hadn't been helped by the predictions in the press that the new Archbishop might be a liberal. Indeed, although he hadn't confessed it to anyone, his first attack had been precipitated by his mounting anger at reading that BBC website, when he had found himself muttering vehemently that they were all fools, dolts and nincompoops if they thought that enthroning a woolly-haired, pansy liberal from Wales would bring the Church to its senses.

Being a man of some intelligence, he had concluded that it would be a bad idea in his present condition to keep up to date with all the gossip about Lambeth, and that he would be better served by using the time as a period of reflection and prayer, to become a monk of sorts, and to prepare himself for that which he was neither welcoming nor had foreseen. And his principal observation, again not disclosed to others, was that god, in his wisdom, had seen fit to answer Arnold's prayers in a most singular and unwelcome manner. Silence.

But to be fair, whilst he sought prayerful solitude, he seemed to have company almost continuously, drawn from all three generations of Holly House and occasional outsiders, such as his friends, the Jenkinses.

Mr. & Mrs. Jenkins were parishioners and retired professional people, who had spent some time in post-Independence India (a long time ago) and who felt, therefore, a connection with the Balasinghams which wasn't entirely mutual. For them, the sub-continent consisted of a great many more-or-less brown people who had adopted more-or-less English ways in a one-size-fits-all sort of way. For Arnold, the connection between himself and a stevedore in the docks of Bombay, for instance, was considerably less than between him and an English civil engineer, which was his circular way of justifying a friendship with Phil Jenkins regardless of the misconception which underlay its source.

'Want a snifter?' Phil had asked, offering his hip flask to Arnold.

'Have you ever known me drink, Phil?' Arnold reposted, irritated more by the visit than the offer.

'Oh, Phil,' Gillian twittered, 'how silly, of course Arnold doesn't drink, do you Arnold!'

'Rarely. How nice of you both to drop in.'

'So, old chap, how're you feeling, eh?' Phil would have slapped him on his back had he not been lying on it.

'Oh, you know.'

'Well, no, not really – y'mem wouldn't say what's the matter!'

'Wouldn't she?'

'We noted your absence for the second Sunday running,' Gillian explained, 'so I took her aside for a quiet word – see if anything was wrong.'

'I see – well, nothing much – been feeling under the weather, taking it easy.'

'Right as my leg in a day or two, I dare say!'

'Maybe – maybe. What did Father Thomas preach on this Sunday?'

The Jenkinsons looked utterly blank, each hoping vainly the other would know.

'Lord, Arnold, you do ask 'em, don't you! Bloody hell, never listen to the priest – do you?'

'Well, I try to...', sighed Arnold.

'I think what Phil means is that sometimes our lives are a bit busy and we can't always keep track of things.'

'Nonsense, old girl, I never listen – bores the pants off me – good whatsits, you're not saying you do as well, are you?'

'Well, yes, Phil, I do.'

'What d'you know, Arnold, there's still something to learn about the mem after, after... all these years!'

'Forty-six, Phil...'

'And I never knew you listened to what old father thingy bangs on about in those interminable bloody sermons of his!'

Mr. Jenkins was both Arnold's ideal Anglican of old, and yet his greatest nightmare now. It was a marvel that god would allow an institution to exist which could accommodate the spiritual vacuity of Phil, and the quaint little social liar, Gillian. And yet it simply wasn't clear what the point of the institution was, beyond providing the Jenkinsees with an excuse to wear smart clothes once a week, and drink disgusting instant at the back of a cold and never-full nave whilst chatting with their own type. Was it perhaps a tribal issue? If the middle classes of Luton, Arnold wondered, were left to fend for themselves in Sundon Hills, dressed in loin cloths and armed with bows and arrows, would they be any different to any other primitive tribe by the time the BBC got round to making a programme about them?

Nevertheless, Arnold remained as good humoured as he could. The Jenkinsees were genuine friends, who had been consistent in their acceptance of Arnold and his household since their first arrival in the town, when many others, some of whom now claimed friendship too, had been dismayed. Because of their Indian period, the Jenkinsees knew that the people of Sri Lanka were not Pakis (even if they didn't quite know they were not Indian either), which was not the case with many, who had abused them as such all those years before.

Nishanthi was returning from the school run, annoyed by the nanny apparently having a migraine that day, as the Jenkinsees were leaving.

'Hello, Nishanthi! How's that good-looking, clever husband of yours?'

Gillian was negotiating the social awkwardness of crossing in the hallway with an attempt at some slight but obviously well-meaning remark. She could hardly have got it more wrong, and the barely-contained fury which accompanied Nishanthi's reply rendered all around speechless.

'My husband is looking good in Bulgaria, being clever with someone else.'

The extraordinarily icy sound of their mother hissing at the Jenkinsons caused the twins briefly to freeze and pull a better-get-out-of-here face at each other, before scurrying away with heads lowered in an attempt at invisibility. Podi Kelle, at the back of the group, simply took one disappearing step backwards into the old folks' sitting room, whence the party had come. Nishanthi had lingered long enough to stare abrasively at Mrs. Jenkins before steaming past and mounting the stairs, leaving Angelina with the unhappy task of breaking the silence.

'Timmy's in Bulgaria on a work trip, Gillian – sorry, but Nishanthi gets really stressed when she's left to cope on her own – work, children, you know...'

Gillian had wanted to huff and puff at the slight she felt she'd suffered, but didn't quite have the confidence. 'Oh, I see – I quite understand. Of course.'

'Well, I don't know,' Phil was less timid, 'if it takes her like that then either she should get some help in or he shouldn't go! Not fair sharing her load with the rest of us, is it.'

'Yes, you're probably right, Phil,' agreed Angelina. 'They never stop being a worry, do they.'

Nishanthi, having stomped up the first flight of stairs, had stopped to catch her breath before ascending the second, and heard her mother's whimpering apology below. Her growl was audible throughout the house, as she thundered on up the stairs to the office.

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It was fifteen years since Nishanthi had married Timmy Nitka, when they were both twenty-five. He was white, English (but Polish parents) and his degree

in politics had been a good one, from a good university. He had wanted to pursue a career in investigative journalism, and had already made a start with speculative pieces for grown-up journals when they met. However, Nishanthi, already a lawyer, had been tolerant of his freelance ways for only a disrespectfully brief matrimonial hiatus, and had almost immediately started dropping big hints about her desire for him to re-train for a proper career, one in which he could better stoke her glowering ambition. Her big hints had been supported by the overt withholding of physical affection, of which previously there had been much, of a luscious, exotic nature and which, Timmy would come to realise, had lain at the heart of his attraction to his wife in the first place.

So whilst he supported himself writing small pieces of journalism, he took to his books and studied to become a half-hearted lawyer. He admitted to himself a lack of ambition, beyond the pursuit of comfortable material circumstances and a decent sex life, and recognised that he didn't care enough to overcome his middle-class cowardice. If he had focussed on being a freelance writer, how well might he have done, since he appeared to be reasonably successful without trying too hard? He simply accepted that the Sri Lankan pursuit of professional qualifications for all, even those sucked in by marriage, was genetically programmed and irresistible.

Nishanthi was the same age as her husband and her ambition, once he had qualified, was to start their own legal firm and become wealthy. She had no thought of finding exciting, even dangerous cases to fight, or impoverished, threatened underdogs to represent. She thought nothing of the academic world of law from which she had emerged, like a wasp from its cocoon, qualified to charge large sums, and she thought not in the least about the relationship between the law and society. For her, form and function followed each other very precisely, and the function of her professional status was to form big fat bank balances.

Balasingham, Nitka & Co. had prospered, it was plain. They had, at one point, employed a large staff (in terms of the wage bill, at least), and leased a significant suite of offices in the centre of Luton (ditto the rent), but circumstances

change, and an assessment of their financial position revealed not that they should take on a third partner, or more, but instead cut back their operation, purchase a large domestic property and work from home. It would be a less prestigious practice, no doubt, but translated into cash in the coffers of Mr. Nitka and Ms. Balasingham, and given the banal nature of the work they undertook, the change made very good sense indeed.

Once the partners had left their accountant's office, and Timmy had felt the warmth of the sun on his face, he found himself liking the idea of downsizing very much. First amongst his thoughts was the possibility that a life of both work and leisure spent in a great pile of a place, presumably Victorian, would greatly facilitate the raising of issue, an issue which had been looming as they were now into their thirties. Nishanthi's thoughts were also turning to family and the advantage that a large house would bring, but she was looking in the opposite direction. For her it was that the aged Ps could move in with them (bringing the maid too, usefully), thus freeing up a significant chunk of cash from the sale of their three-bed semi which could go into the pot (with the added possibility of removing the tax liability on their death). The freshly minted coin which resulted from the joining of these opposite sides compensated for the upheaval, the loss of status and the cost (to Timmy) of selling out to provincialism once and for all, and a suitable house was found.

Since Holly House had been purchased, seven years ago, Timmy had wondered almost every day about what could have possessed a Victorian gentleman to produce a family so large that he required a monstrous pile like this. Holly House stood three floors high and amounted to ten bedrooms, three living rooms, an enormous kitchen and a suite of basement rooms (including a wine cellar), yet only one bathroom. There was a building at the end of the garden which could have been converted into a useful annex should space have become short, improbable though that might be, and the garden itself was certainly large enough that Timmy could justify that of which other men dream, a ride-on mower.

And it had been cheap, too, ridiculously so. This was because no-one wanted this much accommodation, not without intending to house the business, the parents, the children and the staff all under one roof. With the money from the sales of the posh penthouse and the parents' house, and a moderate mortgage,



there had been ample funds to purchase, modernise and occupy so that, when Pickfords left the extended family to their privacy, Holly House had a suite of rooms on the ground floor for Arnold, Angelina and Podi Kelle, a floor for Timmy and Nishanthi, and a top floor office suite from where, henceforth, Balasingham, Nitka & Co. would ply its trade. Bathrooms had been installed where previously there had been large cupboards, children's rooms were readied where previously there had been, well, children, and there was a room made ready for a nanny, as and when.

The arrangement was ideal, and small niggles were easily dealt with. Nishanthi's brother had impatiently raised the matter of his inheritance disappearing into her household. This was resolved quite simply by offering him the opportunity to take care of the aged Ps himself, a prospect which, given his particular circumstances, held no attraction whatsoever. Moreover, when he learned that the total value of the aged Ps' estate was significantly less than his typical annual bonus, he haughtily allowed the matter to drop.

Arnold and Angelina, who persisted for a lengthy period in the belief that they'd been invited to live at Holly House out of Nishanthi's self-avowed sense of Asian family duty, had felt it necessary to make clear the relationship of Podi Kelle to the family. She was now of an age when, under any circumstances (including those in Sri Lanka), she would ordinarily have retired, and it was inappropriate to expect her to behave as a servant for Nishanthi and Timmy. Whatever the relationship between the old folks, they were all three of them to be regarded as nothing more than that, and to be left to their own ways.

Not long after the removal to Holly House, the fairy tale was made complete by the arrival of the twins, Indrani Maria and Nihal Andrew Balasingham-Nitka, together with the first of many apparently-unreliable nannies.

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It was a couple of days later, almost certainly prompted by the Jenkinses, when Father Thomas made his first visit to Arnold's sickbed, on a Wednesday afternoon. He had called ahead whilst Angelina was out. From experience, Podi Kelle knew that her spoken English was poor enough that everyday conversations were difficult for those who didn't know her, and she hated answering the phone

more than almost anything else. Nonetheless, with Angelina at Waitrose, and with no phone beside Arnold's bed, it was a duty which fell to her.

'Mmmmmmm ello!' she shouted.

There was a pause, then an intake of breath. 'Is this Podi Kelle?'

'Yes ah.'

'Oh, right-oh!' Father Thomas continued, speaking VERY SLOWLY, 'hello, my de-ar, this is Fa-ther Tho-mas call-ing. How are you, my child?'

It was the priest's burden, as Father Thomas saw it, to be a spiritual parent to his parishioners, so he never shied away from addressing them in this out-dated mode. And that out-dated mode infuriated Podi Kelle to the point that she felt compelled, always, to become insubordinate in response. 'Children both ok, thank you.'

'Ah, uhm, ex – cel – lent,' Father Thomas slowed down even more, since she was plainly struggling to understand him. 'I – am – cal – ling – to – ask – if – I – may – come – to – visit – your – mas – ter?'

He just didn't get it, thought Podi Kelle. 'Yes ah. Ok. When you come?'

'I'll – pop – over – in – ab – out – an – hour – if – that's – not – in – con – ven – ient.'

It was inconvenient, thought Podi Kelle, since Arnold had not yet had his daily wash and tidy, and Angelina wasn't on hand to do it. However, Father Thomas hadn't been asking for the go-ahead, so much as announcing his imminent arrival, and she would just have to deal with it.

She started with Arnold's bed bath, somewhat to Arnold's surprise. The fact of Podi Kelle addressing his intimate needs wasn't so exceptional, not considering that she'd been his wife's maid for nearly sixty years, and the intimacy of the mistress sooner or later becomes the intimacy of the maid. More to the point, however, there had been occasions, principally but not exclusively during Angelina's periods of hospitalisation during treatment for breast cancer twenty years earlier, when Arnold and Podi Kelle had been overtly intimate with each other. Penetration had never occurred, having been ruled out by mutual consent and by mutual masturbation, which protected the vows both of the

religious husband and the celibate servant.

So it was that, as Podi Kelle gently sponged Arnold down that morning, and he rather unexpectedly began to stiffen (a sight not seen by Podi Kelle for some years), he had rather impatiently declared the sensation a nuisance and required her to do something about it.

'Pull it, for god's sake, woman – don't just stand there staring at it – pull it!'

And as she dutifully, rhythmically pulled his erect penis with her tiny, wrinkled hand, she smiled the smile of a servant and whispered in her harsh, crooked-toothed English, 'You like, ah – you like?'

He whined thinly, the orgasm of the old man, yet ejaculated way up his chest, fulsomely, and was about to be embarrassed by this spasm of excess when he became overwhelmed by a coughing fit similar to that which had led to his confinement. Podi Kelle, who had been preparing to congratulate herself on a job well done, and who was even wondering whether her slight sensation of arousal might induce her to request a return of the favour, realised she had to take immediate action. She snatched an item of dirty clothing from the laundry bin and wiped his chest down smartly, aware that if it was bad that Arnold had suffered another attack whilst in her care, it was a thousand times worse that he should have done so because she'd just brought him to climax.

She bundled Arnold back into his pyjama bottoms, and pulled the duvet back over his naked upper body, reddened through vigorous rubbing. Arnold continued to convulse throughout, but was similarly aware of the need for discretion, even in extremis, and cooperated.

Hearing the unmistakable sound of her husband drowning as she opened the front door, Angelina rushed straight in to the bedroom just as the duvet was tucked under Arnold's chin, and once more the two women tendered compassion as, terrified, he heaved and spluttered until the attack subsided, precisely as the door bell rang.

So Arnold was a shaken man when Father Thomas entered the sick room – shaken by another episode of near-drowning, shaken by the guilt attendant on Podi Kelle's holistic approach to his welfare, shaken by the new-found insecurity

of his faith, by god's silence. And shaken when Angelina, shocked and embarrassed in front of the priest, bent to snatch up from the floor her dirty nightie which, somehow, had made its own way out of the linen basket, and found it had sticky, wet patches on it. She glared at Arnold, sure of half the truth.

'Father Thomas,' Arnold cut across the silent moment in desperation, 'I'm very glad to see you.'

'Arnold!' Father Thomas, beaming as only a holy man can, extended his hand, not expecting Arnold to keep his firmly beneath the duvet, for fear of revealing his partial nakedness beneath.

'I'll leave you to it,' Angelina stared darkly at Arnold and took her leave, with Podi Kelle following meekly behind.

'Oh, god,' muttered Arnold after her.

'Ah, prayer – it brings us great strength, doesn't it.'

'You think so, Father? You really think so?'

'I do, my child – I really do.'

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Nishanthi and her brother had always been close, especially having travelled to England when they were so young, Yogam twelve and she ten, together trying to find their way in the strange new house they lived in, the strange new schools they attended, the strange fare of school dinners. The move had come at a critical moment in Yogam's life in particular, just as he passed through puberty. His homosexuality, of which through childhood he had been aware but not acknowledged, now became understood by him and, with his waspish, camp manner, anyone else who knew him. Given the unusual nature of his name, by the standards of the day, it was perhaps to be expected that he would quickly acquire the nickname 'Yoghurt' by which his closest friends still called him, but not entirely welcome when his peer group added a prefix, and the beginning of the end for the relationship with his father when he was heard in the playground to respond to the name 'Fruit Yoghurt'.

Nishanthi had often wondered if her brother would have come out so soon and so willingly had the family stayed in Sri Lanka. Her father would

certainly have preferred him to have lived a lie, but he could never have been as happy or as fulfilled.

In England he prospered, excelled academically. He went off to Oxford to study chemistry, the other great offence to his father, since he could have gone up to Oxford to read medicine. He'd made matters worse by going straight into the City, a servant of Mammon, never returning to live at home again, preferring a high life of which his father could only imagine.

Nishanthi studied law to compensate for her brother's failings, a fact she'd never openly acknowledged but which she knew to be the case and inwardly resented. She felt a powerful cultural sense of the daughter having to be available to care for the parents in old age, although rendered bizarre by the parents being in old age in the wrong place. Sri Lankan children, she knew from her own experience as a mother, were made in Sri Lanka, not by Sri Lankan parents.

She phoned her brother the evening of Father Thomas's visit, to update him on their father's condition.

'Hi...'

'Hey! Y'ok, darling?'

'Oh, I'm tired – as usual.'

'You work too hard, Nish. You're making stacks of money – slow down a bit.'

'Not as much as you!'

'That's because I'm cleverer than you, darling!'

'You're not cleverer, fuck off! You've just got posher mates.'

'Ah,' here Yogam imitated his father's Sri Lankan pronunciation, 'not a prohfess'n'l, like you, daahleeng...'

'You could have been. You could have been.'

'I move money around from one to box to another, nothing more useful, my hair's bleached white, I wear expensive jewellery because I can afford it, and I'm a...'

'...I'm a poof. Yes, you keep saying.'

'Aiyo! What more do you want me to say? I could never have pleased him even a little bit.'

'Nothing.'

'How's Amma?'

'She's great, given the circumstances, having fun with the kids – you know.'

'Tell her to turn her mobile on occasionally so I can talk to her. She's useless!'

'I know!'

'How's Timmy? Still away?'

'Yes. Listen, dad had another of those attacks today.'

'And the twins?'

'Yes, fine. I said dad had another attack today.'

'Did he.'

'Yes,' Nishanthi hesitated briefly, 'it's not looking too good, to be honest. I don't think so, anyway.'

'I'm sorry to hear it.'

'I think maybe you ought to come and see him.'

Yogam paused. Nishanthi could imagine him biting his lip, casting his eyes upwards.

'I'm afraid that if you don't come and see him – soon – he'll, he'll not be there for you to see.'

'That bad, huh?'

'Yes, I think it might be. So when do you think you can come?'

Yogam paused again. This time it was different, longer.

'Yoghurt? What's the matter?'

'Oh, you know – I've not seen him for so long...'

'No, it's not that, there's something the matter.'

'Well, I suppose – since you ask – I've been meaning to talk to you about something.'

She laughed, 'oh, dumped again by some feckless-but-pretty young barrow boy – you want to cry on baby sister's shoulder!'

Yogam, now forty-two, had become used to being dumped by the sort of boy he liked – who, these days, was usually young enough to be his son. He often wondered, idly, what it would be like to be a father, especially to a boy who would have sex with a viperous City queer. No, it wasn't his love life he wanted to discuss with Nishanthi, although he often had in the past. It was an altogether different matter, involving financial irregularities and the possibility that he – or someone in his team, shall we say, he said – had become involved in insider dealing.

Nishanthi was annoyed. 'What are you telling me this for now? Could you have picked a worse fucking time? Appa's ill, really ill...'

'Nish – Nish, cool it, ok! I'm talking about it now because it's only just happened.'

'And it couldn't wait?'

'Well, no, not really! And in any case, what would I be waiting for? For the old man to die? You going to be in a better frame of mind then? I need your help, Nish!'

'You selfish bastard, Yogam – it's always fucking been about you, hasn't it.'

Nishanthi slammed the phone down, angry. Then sad. The breakdown of relations between her father and her brother, two decades old now, had always been an obstacle to the sort of extended family she felt she needed. And now that she feared for her father's future in even the short term, when it seemed to matter even more that they should all get along, she was dismayed that Yogam had failed to rise to the moment, not recognised the appropriateness of putting the past behind him, where it belonged.

She turned back to her computer and woke the screen up, darkness to light at the flick of a finger. Dammit. Of course, Yogam was right, he shouldn't

have to wait for their father's death to carry on as normal with his sister and mother – that would be when it would become inappropriate. And if his problem had only just arisen, then when else could he possibly have raised it with her? If she wanted a happy and fulfilled life within an extended family, she should be celebrating her brother's need to seek her professional advice. She'd got it very wrong, she realised, and picked up her mobile to try to make it a little better.

*Srry, Yog, bit emotional re Appa. Bad rspnse fr me. Will call tmrrw. Nx*

One more letter to write, then she'd call it a night, one more invoice.

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At Arnold's diagnosis as a diabetic, whilst a schoolboy, the doctors had declared he might pass into a diabetic coma at any moment. So from the time they were married in 1945, Angelina had been the only driver in the family, and she'd never really minded that in fifty seven years of being everybody's taxi, he'd not once blacked out, not once given any sign that he was anything other than fit to drive. Fortunately, she liked driving, not least because it had enabled her always to have a greater say in where and when the family did things, be it swimming lessons for the children then, or her Wednesday evening bridge club now.

The reason why Arnold had never suffered one of the expected blackouts was because he'd adopted diabetes as a lifestyle from the very start, and become extraordinarily disciplined in taking care of himself. He was precise about what he could eat, and could not, exact about the timing of his injections, and sure in his confidence that the world around him would accommodate his disability. His dedication to the diabetes was so encompassing that it became the second greatest part of his life's work, after Anglicanism.

They'd met just as Arnold was leaving St. Thomas's College, Colombo, a highly regarded private school with Anglican roots, with a place to read history at Trinity College, Cambridge. This made him a heck of a prospect, a real catch, and his sister, who boarded with Angelina at Ladies' College, made no attempt to hide the fact. A student at St. Thomas's had to have money and be Christian, so two points scored, and a boy who'd got a place at Cambridge in England had to have brains too, so a full house. Angelina's elder brother, also a St. Thomas boy, had been set the task of finding out more about him, and had reported that it was a

sound family, not exactly wealthy but comfortable, the father a head teacher in the hills, respectable all round.

He, having learned of her interest in him, was sure that she was better than a real catch; she was an absolute corker, the woman of everybody's dreams. Not only was she strikingly beautiful, fabulously pale-skinned, but her family was ancient and aristocratic, with a rumour about some European blood mixed in along the way. She was an Abeywickrema, a member of a Mudliyar family which had converted to Christianity a century earlier for the sake of preferment under English rule. She was an absolute belter.

Except that he was Tamil and she Sinhala. Relations between the two races were so poor that relationships between individuals from each were unheard of, and scandal was the only possible outcome.

Arnold's grin, his clear delight at the prospect of causing trouble of this sort, was what had won Angelina over when they first met. He was so bright, so determined to forge his own way, so unbound by the rules that she found him, at five foot four, already balding, bespectacled and diabetic, frankly dashing. A couple of years younger than Arnold anyway, she had promised to wait for him until he returned from Cambridge, and they each vowed they would marry then, regardless (which was youngsters' word for *because*) of the consequences.

The turnout for the wedding had been spectacularly poor, with great swathes from both families refusing to attend such a disgraceful event. Arnold's father came, but not his mother, whereas both her parents came, but none of the grandparents. His sister came, of course, but neither of his brothers (both were in England studying, to be fair), her brother should have come and, she was sure, would have, except that he'd been captured by the Japanese sometime during the previous Lent. The aunties and uncles upon which Ceylonese family and social life revolved, on both sides, almost all spurned the ceremony. Few events in the history of the island had done so much to bring the Tamil and Sinhala populations to hold a common position as this mixed marriage, with neither side finding it acceptable.

Arnold had returned with a modest degree in history and his self-confidence so boosted that he stood in danger often of being thought bossy and

opinionated. He continued to think the wedding strife a wheeze, something to teach them all a lesson, but Angelina knew, somewhere inside, this wasn't really the way she wanted to conduct herself through life. What had seemed like a joyfully youthful act of rebellion nearly four years earlier, now felt like a betrayal of her ancient and noble family. The only thing she could have done to make it worse was not go ahead with it, or worse again, desert the marriage later on. Still, she wasn't the first Asian woman to have made a less than ideal match, she reasoned, and whilst she was dismayed to have made this realisation even as she stood at the altar of the Church of St. Paul (the superior one on Kynsey Road), she was pleased it had come early, and not turned up as a horrid surprise some way down the line.

The childless years which followed had upset her, especially since her brother had not survived in Burma, and she was now the sole heir to the family's name and fortune. Taking a sideways look at herself, she thought it ironic that notions such as these still lingered in her noble mind, since the name would now die with her father and the fortune, actually, barely qualified as such any more. There was a good house of eight bedrooms into which she and Arnold moved with her parents. The grounds were ample, there was the estate, staff accommodation and so on, not far south of the ancient kingdom of Kandy. But the estate profits were dwindling, the land unmodernised, and the gem mines had closed a generation earlier.

Arnold settled into what he called his family business, teaching, whilst she carried on doing good works and socialising, waiting to take over the running of the estate, which would have been her brother's role. The nation became independent, and she harboured some hope that her husband, a clever man with a degree from Cambridge, might have developed some political ambition, but he didn't, any more than he showed signs of wanting to be an independent Sri Lankan rather than a dark-skinned Englishman. The tide of life went out, taking her father with it, and back in again, bringing Yogam on the crest of a wave.

The arrival of their first child came as a complete surprise to everyone, not just the happy couple (which is what they certainly were at this point). They'd never made any attempt at birth control, largely to satisfy Arnold's desire to outdo Rome, so the years without a pregnancy had merged to become the start of a

lifetime without children. It wasn't as if they'd stepped up their conjugal activity at all, although she wouldn't have objected if he'd chosen more often to further his worship through what Arnold termed the sacramental aspect of marriage. Nor had she resorted to the witch doctors recommended to her variously, not least by Podi Kelle, who had become broody for a child to look after. She just became pregnant, in the way that makes those so predisposed be grateful to god for his beneficence. For Angelina, however, the question was why had she not been so blessed earlier.

Not so long passed before she became pregnant again, this time with Nishanthi, a baby girl, exactly what Angelina and Podi Kelle wanted. Then Arnold dropped his bombshell. He wanted them to emigrate to England.

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Since confining Arnold to bed, two weeks earlier, Angelina had stayed in on Wednesday evenings, when customarily she would have been out playing bridge. As everyone adjusted to the new situation at home, she had felt it best to be around and about in Holly House as much as possible, and had gone out only for essentials, mainly shopping. (Generally, she would have taken Podi Kelle with her on such trips, but now was sure to leave her behind, to act as her matriarchal deputy, paradoxically.) She had no sense of anything specific she could achieve by being around Arnold, and wasn't at all eager to soak up the emotionally charged atmosphere as their long marriage slipped to its end. In fact, the atmosphere was nothing of the kind, and she wanted to be around Arnold in case he needed her, but not necessarily with him.

But so irritated had she been by the discovery earlier of her nightie with, she had no doubt, Arnold's semen on it, that she felt the need to get out that night, to be somewhere else. If he was well enough to masturbate, he was well enough to be left for an evening. In any case, he hadn't shown any interest in sex for as long as she could remember, so what was he playing at now, especially since it can't have been long before Podi Kelle had gone in to clean him up for the priest's visit that he'd done it. How extraordinarily embarrassing! What was he trying to do, have a final fling with his male member? What did it matter to him? Why now, as a sick old man, had he wanted to assure himself of his sexual prowess when, frankly, he'd hardly bothered as a younger, fitter man? She was furious.

Podi Kelle had made string hoppors and sambal for the old folks' dinner, which Angelina and she ate together at Arnold's bedside. The conversation had been very limited, with the thoughts of all three dwelling on the laundry basket in the corner of the room, even though Arnold had made a diversionary show of fussing over pricking his finger, and testing for glucose before injecting himself in the folds of his stomach in the perfectly ordinary way of things. Nothing to fuss about at all.

'Why are you eating with your fingers?' he complained. 'Do you have to do that?'

The two women said nothing, just carried on with their dinners.

'Can't you use a knife and fork? You're not in Ceylon now, you know!'

'Yes we are,' replied Angelina dryly, 'we're eating string hoppors. String hoppors have to be eaten with the fingers, as you perfectly-well know.'

'Ceylon gone,' added Podi Kelle as an aside, 'Sri Lanka now. You not hungry, ah?'

Arnold was not, he said. He pretended to drift off to sleep, allowing his bottom jaw to fall open, as he remembered seeing elderly relatives of earlier generations do. He supposed this would be how he would be found dead, so thought the three of them had better get used to it.

Angelina continued to pick at her meal, but started to chew with her mouth open, noisily, also in the manner of elderly relatives, as she recalled. Momentarily, Podi Kelle had become concerned at Arnold's apparent loss of consciousness, but quickly came to understand the game being played and, for fear of it getting out of hand, took her plate through to the kitchen, declaring she'd had enough.

Nishanthi was in the kitchen, preparing fish fingers for herself and the twins.

'You've been cooking again, Podi.'

The statement was uncomplicated, and entirely true of course, but it contained the seed of a complaint which Podi Kelle recognised only too well, after seven years in this shared kitchen. The preparation of food in the Red House at

Ambuluwewa had, naturally, been the servants' task, and since she'd become the principal domestic servant in due course, it had fallen to her to do most of the cooking. The kitchen there, however, was an open space, partially outdoors, with room to squat and grind spices with her miris gala, where everything could be washed down easily with a hose. Here, although the kitchen was a big room with a tiled floor, it was fully enclosed and life was much easier with an electric food processor, which somehow always looked messy during and after its use. So did the many bowls and pans required to prepare idiyappam and sambal, plus the steamer and the press, suckered onto the work surface beside the sink.

'Ah, sorry, clear up.' Podi Kelle stole Nishanthi's thunder.

'I don't know why you have to cook such complicated food all the time, Podi.'

No, you don't, thought Podi Kelle, because you've forgotten what good food is, forgotten how to make the effort for your family. 'Hari. Fish finger so easy, isn't it. Aiyo, maybe I should try. Timmy like Sri Lankan food, though.'

'Indeed, well Timmy's having to put up with Bulgarian food right now, isn't he.'

Podi Kelle felt this was an appropriate point at which to make a second tactical retreat, but was cross that she was so often made to feel that she was on the back foot. She wanted to make a point, so returned to Arnold and Angelina's bedroom with the intention of ostentatiously collecting the laundry for washing.

Access to both the ground-floor bedrooms was off the old folks' sitting room, which was itself empty. Podi Kelle assumed, therefore, that Angelina was still exchanging silences with Arnold, but nonetheless felt emboldened to walk straight into their bedroom without knocking. Arnold was alone, awake, and looking very much like he had nothing to say, his eyes following Podi Kelle as she moved lightly through the room and gathered up the contents of the laundry basket into her skinny arms. She paused at the door and looked back at him, just as he turned on his side, ready for genuine sleep. Their gazes locked for a moment, conveying nothing whatsoever except that they were still able to look each other in the eye. How drawn he looked, she thought.

Podi Kelle wanted Angelina to see that she was doing the washing, so

went looking for her, only to discover quickly that her coat was missing. She glanced outside and saw that the car was gone too.

Angelina had gone to play bridge. She had got up, left her plate on the floor beside the bed, gone to the hall, put her coat on, picked up the car keys and left by the side door, without saying anything to anyone. This was not characteristic behaviour.

The relief she felt at being out of the house, driving the couple of miles to where the club met, was far greater than she'd anticipated. Her plan had been only to make a point, to behave in a stubborn and selfish way so that it might be noticed, but instead she felt liberated, freed from some hitherto unnoticed entrapment, and couldn't understand why she felt this way.

She'd brought up two children more or less by herself, and now spent a substantial amount of time with her grandchildren, so she thought she knew a thing or two about getting to the heart of a problem, analysing what was causing an upset. But it wasn't a crying five-year-old she was trying to calm down now, not a child made more hysterical by a lack of understanding; it was herself, experienced, relatively calm, a seventy-eight-year-old. Would it help if she cried? As she approached Wardown Park, she pulled in to the side of the road, and tried to produce tears. But none came, instead she found her chest felt free: she could breathe lightly, the tightness in her stomach was gone, the only reason she noticed it had been there in the first place. She smiled. Her husband, whom she'd just abandoned, was dying, and she smiled.

It was a rainy evening, cold and windy, so she pulled her coat tight around her as she trotted from the car park to the club house. Her usual partner wasn't expecting her to play this week, so would have made alternative arrangements, which was fine. There would almost certainly be someone looking for a partner – there usually was.

Inside, play was just beginning to get under way, with members already seated. Angelina's friend was dealing at her table, playing with a borrowed partner. She furrowed her brow when she saw Angelina enter, made a gesture to suggest that she would have waited had she known. Angelina smiled and waved her on. There was a newcomer waiting for a partner to turn up, and she was

quickly led over to him and introduced. Edmund was about her age, tall, with a good head of hair and a glass eye (although she didn't imagine she was supposed to have spotted that) – not a bad looking chap.

Edmund's rather smart appearance in a blazer with gold buttons, a collar and striped tie beneath, caused Angelina to reflect on the haste with which she'd left Holly House. She would ordinarily have put on a smarter frock than the house dress she was wearing – it wasn't unknown for her to wear a sari to a club night, in fact – and she would have worn a little lipstick (in her imagination, she rummaged through her bag to see if she'd brought one with her, but she hadn't). Now she thought about it, she wasn't even sure if she hadn't dropped some sambal on her dress at dinner, always a hazard when eating string hoppers with your fingers, but couldn't possibly look down to find out, for fear of drawing Edmund's attention to it if she had. Oh dear, she appeared to have allowed things to slip.

Edmund was a good player, rather than the novice she'd feared he might be. He was a newcomer at the club only because he'd moved into the area recently, to be nearer his daughter, following the loss of his wife. He was an easy companion, and talked freely about his life and marriage over half-time coffee, but without any sense of feeling sorry for himself. He described his wife's death as a release for both of them, so terribly ill had she become towards the end.

His early career had been in the Air Force, and he'd intended to be a pilot in civilian life, he told her, but an accident had brought one career to a close, and prevented the other one taking off. 'No pun intended!'

Angelina was amused.

This, obviously, would have been the ideal moment to introduce the glass eye into the conversation, had she so chosen, assuming it to be the consequence of that accident, but she thought better of it. 'I see,' she responded, cringing inwardly even as she spoke the words. 'Shall I top up your coffee, Edmund?'

'What's your story, Angelina? You widowed too?'

'Uhm, widowed? Oh, it's a long story. Well, a short story, actually. Uhm, that is, my husband's terribly poorly. But, no, I'm not a widow. Not yet.' She felt herself blushing ridiculously.

This was the first time since Arnold had become ill that Angelina had had to speak to an outsider about life without him, the first time that it was her life in focus rather than his death. And as she thought about the future she was aware that the knot in her stomach had returned, that she was afraid.

'Has he got cancer?'

'No, no, it's his heart – he's got heart failure. Apparently it's something to do with his diabetes. Was it cancer with your wife? I had cancer, about twenty years ago, but I was lucky, I got over it.'

'Yes, cancer – pancreatic, as it happens. There was no chance for her at all, of course.'

'No, it's the worst, isn't it.'

'Well, I don't know that one's better or worse than another, really, if the end result's the same!'

Angelina nodded. He was an interesting man, she had decided.

'What sort of cancer was yours, if I may ask?'

'Oh, breast.'

She saw his eyes momentarily flick downwards, checking out her bosom for signs of prosthetic unevenness. The game was up now, for sure, he was bound to see sambal spots on her dress. What an embarrassment.

'Diabetes is common in your people, isn't it?' he asked, looking up at her face once more, showing no sign of revulsion that she'd dripped curry down herself.

'I, I don't know, I'm afraid. My people? Oh, I see, no, my husband isn't Sinhalese...'

'Oh, sorry, I just assumed he was, you know... so he's English, is he?'

'English? No, he's Tamil. I'm Sinhalese, he's Tamil – it's caused many problems in the past!' she laughed.

'Oh, sorry, I don't know about all that stuff! You're all the same to me!' Edmund guffawed, gesturing that it was time to return to the table.



As he turned away from her, Angelina looked down at her chest. She hadn't spilled anything on it at all, she was relieved to see. What a fuss-pot she'd been.

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Podi Kelle started the washing machine, put on her own coat and also went out into the cold night, without a word to anyone.

Just as it had been Angelina's habit to play bridge on Wednesday evenings, so had it become Podi Kelle's to seek out her own social interaction at the same time. She'd not been a member of the local Methodist Bible-reading classes for very long, having been introduced to the chapel only by chance after she'd had a conversation with another elderly lady at a bus stop the previous summer. Wednesday evenings, before Arnold's illness had become manifest, had been dull, with Angelina out and Arnold generally buried in a thick book in his den, so the invitation to attend the classes had been very welcome. The chapel was only a short walk away, and the classes shorter than Angelina's bridge nights, which meant Podi Kelle was able to nip out discreetly without having to tell anyone where she was going or what she was doing.

Although it was many decades since she'd converted to Christianity, Podi Kelle had never felt at ease at the sorts of churches Arnold insisted they attend, never felt that others in the congregation had the time for her difficult accent and slow speech, and thus felt excluded a lot of the time. Her reading was poor as well, and she found the great friendliness of the small group of people who attended the Methodist classes, where she could listen to the Bible being read aloud, with patience should she need to hear a passage again, a very great enhancement of her life, both religious and social.

The majority of those attending were elderly women, none of whom was what Podi Kelle considered posh, so she had fallen quickly into the way of things there. Some of the ladies were also immigrants, although none from Asia, and there were many different types of English to be heard, which curiously united the group rather than dividing it.

Podi Kelle walked as quickly as her old, thin, tropical legs could take her, through the chilled streets of suburban Luton, until she arrived at the hall at the

rear of the chapel. She stood for a moment, took stock of herself, before pushing open the creaking door and stepping over into the glare of the fluorescent tubes. The group was already in its customary circular formation, with Ruby reading this week, and all heads turned to greet the newcomer who'd brought in the draught. Once they could see it was Podi Kelle, all the turned heads smiled and called her over, a friend missed for two weeks. And the face with the broadest smile belonged to the one man who attended regularly.

Ken was an octogenarian who had been widowed for fourteen years, a long-retired policeman who had served in Burma and Ceylon. Amongst the cobwebs and draughts of the decaying hall, as they'd consumed weak tea and plain biscuits over the past few months, Podi Kelle and he had become particular friends on these Wednesday evenings, chatting, as much as possible in Ken's broken Sinhala, as they each remembered their own version of Ceylon. He rose from the circle to greet her, and made his way over to take her arm, limping wildly, as he always did.

'Dilisini,' he beamed at her, 'where've you been? I wanted to get in touch with you, but didn't know how.'

Whenever she took Ken's arm, Podi Kelle felt that it might have been as much about her supporting him, as he swung his bad leg round for each step, each one some small effort for a man whose physique must once have been a marvel. They lurched together to Ken's seat, beside which was a vacant chair, as if he'd laid two out side by side in the hope of her return.

Others rose to their feet, and welcomed Dilisini back into the circle. She smiled broadly, was emotional, so very pleased to discover that she had real friends here, who had missed her.

'Romans twelve two,' declaimed Ruby, 'Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.'

Podi Kelle felt Ken looking at her. She glanced up at him. He smiled. She smiled. For a moment she thought she should lay her free hand on his – so she did, and he smiled more. She felt his strong fingers beneath her own, old, cold and thin-skinned it was true, but masculine and steady.

There was a necessary letting go for a page turn, after which Podi Kelle returned her hand gently to Ken's as nonchalantly as she possibly could. She was too quick, and her hand came to rest on his leg. This would have been dreadful, mortifying, in the ordinary way of things, but the fact that she could feel no warmth in his flesh, no softness beneath the cavalry twill, that she became aware instantly that he limped not because of a bad leg, but because of the absence of any leg at all, made her dizzy with embarrassment.

His artificial leg having no touch sensors, Ken hadn't spotted initially what had happened. He gasped slightly as she snatched her hand away, and gazed at her with a look of dismay on his face. She looked back at him, but he wasn't cross, he was pleading with her, fearful that Podi Kelle's discovery might make a difference to their friendship. She held his eyes in hers, smiled hesitantly at him, pointedly returned her hand to his leg and pointlessly gave it a gentle squeeze. Without regard to the group around them, Ken laid his hand over Podi Kelle's, sighed broadly and returned his attention to his Bible.

'Cling to that which is good,' Ruby continued, 'In love of the brothers be tenderly affectionate one to another; in honour preferring one another.'

Podi Kelle felt dirty, felt that she'd been unfaithful to Ken as he gripped tightly, affectionately, the hand with which she'd serviced Arnold earlier that day.

As the meeting came to a close, Ken wanted Podi Kelle's phone number, but she didn't think she should give out the number at Holly House, it not belonging to her, and she didn't want to talk on the phone anyway. Moreover, her visits to the Methodist chapel were still a secret.

'Haven't got mobile with me,' she lied, 'can't remember number. You write down your number and I text you, ah.'

'Can I walk you home?' he asked, as he wrote down his number on the back of a collection envelope.

She tried not to laugh, but failed spectacularly, giggling like a schoolgirl at the silliness of his suggestion.

'Bit slow on this old tin thing, eh!' he chuckled, 'But promise me you'll contact me. Promise!'

'Yes, Ken, I promise I text. Arnold dying at home, so don't know when, but I promise.'

'Arnold? Who's Arnold?'

'Oh, he not my man. Not my man at all. I text you, hari.'

'Thank you, Dilisini – thank you!' Ken leaned forward, with the care and attention of one who might fall over from leaning too far, and kissed her softly on the cheek.

Podi Kelle was nothing if not giddy as she slipped home, clutching in her hand the vital brown-paper envelope. 'I must confess I still believe dum dum dum give me a sign hit me baby once more time,' she trilled, joyously.

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Arnold was just nodding off when he was brought to consciousness by the thumping sounds of his daughter on the floor above, as she struggled to put the twins to bed single-handedly. He had, over the years, come to accept that Nishanthi, once the apple of his eye, had become elephantine in the way she moved about the house. She was a larger lady, it was true, but other larger ladies appeared to be able to glide effortlessly from space to space without appearing to making the slightest exertion, whereas Nishanthi seemed to slap her feet down petulantly, deliberately, rather as if to make clear her irritation that there was no-one available to do her walking for her.

He had been feeling very gloomy, as he'd started to drift off to sleep. It had been a trying day in every respect. After a fortnight of it, the matter of his dying had become ordinary so that, whilst he certainly wasn't cheerful about the prospect, it wasn't on his mind constantly any more. But this business of his prayers going unanswered troubled him greatly. It was true that he couldn't remember a time when a prayer had been obviously, directly answered as such, but always he'd held the opinion that prayers are probably only answered when the need is real, really real.

Surely his need now was great enough for the good lord to be prepared to receive his intercessions? It wasn't as if he was asking for a cure, having accepted reluctantly that his time had come. He wasn't even asking for anything major –

just health and happiness for his family after he'd gone – Yogam to see the error of his ways – a pain-free end – permission to sit at the right hand of god. What, was he on a waiting list, or something? How long was the list? Would he live long enough to reach the head of the queue? How could the omnipotent have a waiting list anyway? And why?

No, no list. It was nonsense. Arnold wasn't ready to admit it to himself, not about to say it out loud, but somewhere inside, where big ideas germinate, he knew he'd sown the seed of doubt.

Sleep, then, was a respite, and he welcomed it, even as yet another marker of the passage of his remaining days. He didn't feel well. He was scared. He was bored. He was at a loss. The pounding of Nishanthi's footsteps, as she furiously insisted that the twins did as they were told, quietly so as to not wake Parta, brought him to the turbulent surface of his consciousness and, for a moment – just a fleeting moment – he felt nothing, was merely awake. But then the darkness, the recall, the numbness, spread over his body, from his toes to his head, uniformly like a too-thick, too-tight, black wetsuit. He was twisted in bed, writhing, trying to find comfort, aching from lying still too long. The bedside light, never off, shone blindingly in his eyes, so that he couldn't even see his spectacles, let alone fumble to put them on. He lay gasping for air, aware that his lungs these days were never wholly free of fluid, but certain too that here was fear, making him gulp the thick air of the room. His death room.

'Angelina...' he attempted to cry out, his voice cracking and failing.  
'Angelina!' he tried again, this time with more clarity.

Nothing, no answer.

Surely she could only be in the next room?

'Angelina!' his voice, although thin, now sounded out like an altar bell.

'Podi Kelle!'

Still silence.

'Podi Kelle...?'

He leaned up on his elbows, terrified that he'd be overcome by one of the dreaded coughing fits. Where were the women? He needed to wee. He needed

them. He needed.

His eyes had adjusted to the light and he found his spectacles. The room seemed too large for him to cross it, but he had to get to the bathroom. He swung his legs slowly out of the bed, placed his feet on the carpet beneath, and slowly – so, so carefully – lifted himself to the vertical, where he swayed uncertainly. He had needed help these two weeks to get to the toilet, which was beyond this room, beyond the old folks' sitting room, across the corridor, yet he now had nothing to hang on to, not an arm, not a hand-rail, not a stick. He stepped forward a little, and again – yes, he could still walk – a further two steps, then he fell, hard, putting his hand out to break his fall, the force shuddering up to his shoulder, which felt like it might shatter. And there Arnold lay and pissed himself, weeping for the misery which his life had become.

Too embarrassed to be found like this by either of the women, he decided he had to pick himself up and change his pyjamas. He couldn't hide what had happened, couldn't ignore the wet circle spreading out from him on the carpet, but he could avoid having to suffer the indignity of being cleaned up personally. Bad enough that someone else would have to clean the carpet. He'd been cleaned up already that day. What a mistake. All he'd wanted was the touch of a human, the intimate touch of a warm hand whilst there was still time. So, sobbing, he struggled to lift himself up from the scene of his disgrace, and as he strained, he farted, once, twice, then shat himself. He thought it the worst sensation he'd ever experienced and, at that moment, for the first time in his life, was ready for death to take him.

Nishanthi moved above, like a warrior-goddess playing skittles, and he felt there was nothing left to live for.

Through the closed door, he heard Podi Kelle, crooning absurdly as she entered the sitting room, so he prayed – he shut tight his eyes and prayed earnestly – for god to take him right now, as he lay in his disgrace.

And still came there no answer.

'Podi Kelle...'he cried, pitifully.

'Ah, I coming.'

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Angelina and Podi Kelle started the next day with a round of mutual embarrassment, unable to talk to each other as they each busied themselves in the kitchen. It was, as usual, shortly after the time when Tasha had dealt with the children and got them off to school, and long after the time when Nishanthi had taken her single cup of black coffee before ascending to a day's work.

On their minds was the cleaning up of Arnold. Podi Kelle felt that Angelina must now have realised that there was little to spare by way of intimacy between her husband and her servant – less than she'd even realised – since cleaning a man up after that sort of accident requires an ineffably close acquaintance with his private parts. Whilst Podi Kelle thought the task itself hadn't been any worse than cleaning up Yogam and Nishanthi when they were babies, just somewhat bigger, she did worry in case the incident with the nightie might now begin to tell a different story. Whereas for Angelina, the source of embarrassment was that her servant of so very many years had suddenly had to acquire a level of intimacy with her husband which no poor woman should have had to endure, and to do so because she, the wife, had truanted to play bridge with a handsome, one-eyed man whom she'd never before met.

Arnold's thoughts on the matter hadn't entered into the consideration of either woman, who had met in the old folks' living room, both entering from their bedrooms with typical synchronicity, meeting in the middle to turn towards the hall and kitchen as if on some domestic parade ground. Podi Kelle could hear him calling in the background, from his bed, but Angelina was ignoring whatever it was he was trying to say.

The silence in the kitchen had persisted up to the point when the women realised they were both preparing for Arnold the same breakfast, whereupon the twin bowls of All-Bran took on a comic edge which caught them both off-guard, clearing the air.

'I'm really, really sorry about last night. I feel dreadful,' began Angelina.

'Ok. No big deal.'

'No, it is a big deal. It really is too much to expect you to look after him – in that way.'

'No-one else to do it, ah.'

'No, no-one. I'm sorry.'

'Ok.'

'I went to play bridge because...' Angelina felt she shouldn't say that she needed to escape. 'Well, look, I'll take you out to make up for it – let's go shopping!'

'Cannot, ah. Cannot leave him.'

'No, not both of us, I suppose. Well, there's Nishanthi...'

'Nishanthi with poo no good.'

'Well, no, I suppose not. Oh dear.'

'Timmy back home soon, hari?'

'Yes, he is, he's back on Sunday, two days. Maybe he could amuse Arnold whilst we go out.'

'Timmy maybe no good with poo, but maybe no poo.'

Angelina smiled. Podi Kelle grinned, and not entirely because of the light-hearted optimism which her directness seemed to generate. This wasn't the conversation she'd been expecting to have this morning, but it suited her better than any she could have come up with otherwise. She hadn't been sure about how to broach the subject of the mobile phone which now seemed such an urgent requirement, since it involved a discussion about Ken, and the Methodist prayer group, and an admission that she'd been doing things for herself without asking first. She was certainly of an age when she should have been able to make up her own mind about everything in her life, this much she knew as a matter of fact, but she was also still a servant, and servility was a hard habit to kick.

It hadn't even occurred to her that her response to the mishap of the night before, a cause for some concern until now, would be perceived by Angelina as a reason to treat Podi Kelle to an outing to the shops. Since everything Podi Kelle had ever owned had been bought for her by Angelina, she had already realised that the same would have to be true of a mobile phone, so the unexpected debt of gratitude which her mistress now assumed was welcomed as a rather splendid

boon.

'Will we give him your breakfast or mine?' Angelina laughed.

'Oh yours – you wife.' Podi Kelle was eager to be sincere.

Should she mention the mobile phone now, or wait for the day of their shopping trip? Either way she'd have a few days to learn how to use it, and to text Ken, before she was due to see him next. She decided that she'd wait until the day, just in case there was a bad reaction to the request, and in the hope of increasing the size of the debt owed her through exceptionally good service in the meantime.

'Though I carry breakfast through, ah' she said, seizing the tray from Angelina's hands.

As the two women passed through the hall, from the kitchen to the old folks' sitting room, Tasha was returning from the school run and Angelina stopped for a chat, leaving Podi Kelle to carry on to Arnold's bedside with the tray.

Arnold was extremely sullen and uncooperative, refusing to sit up for his breakfast. He pouted as he lay looking up at the ceiling to avoid Podi Kelle's eyes.

'Where's Angelina?' he whispered.

'In hall, talk nanny.'

'Now look, you serviced me twice yesterday,' he whispered hoarsely, 'the first time it was extremely pleasant, although I nearly died as a result, and the second time was exceedingly unpleasant, and I wish I had died as a result. There's one more service you can do me, which is to forget either ever happened. Can you do that?'

He spoke too quickly and quietly, yet still in the kind of structured prose which Podi Kelle found difficult to follow, and it took her a moment to decide exactly what it was Arnold was asking her. It crossed her mind that there might be another debt of gratitude to collect here, but decided that it would have been unfair to take advantage of what Arnold clearly regarded as his shame. It would be un-Christian.

'Forget, ah? Nothing to forget. Forgot what to forget.'

He turned his head to face Podi Kelle, and a single tear fell across his

nose, onto the pillow. He nodded gratefully to her just as they heard Angelina enter the old folks' sitting room, and wiped his eyes on the bedding.

'Come on, Arnold, sit yourself up – time for breakfast,' Angelina marched in, deftly avoiding the still-wet patch on the carpet, 'put your specs on.'

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Nishanthi was compulsive about work, addicted, and she was perfectly happy to work at weekends because work was what she did. Alas, no-one else wanted to join her, neither Ruth, the secretary, nor the husband, when he was available. She understood entirely Timmy's feelings about giving time to the children at weekends, since they worked hard in the week at their high-pressure school, and were in the care of Tasha for much of their time at home, but she had admitted to herself long ago that she wasn't particularly good with them, that there were things she could do better to serve them – such as work more and make more money. Timmy and Tasha seemed to have everything else in hand.

Nonetheless, with Timmy away, she had accepted that she had to give some of her weekends to the children, recognising that a compromise was what was required. Thus she would still be able to nip up to the office now and then, but only to tidy up one or two simple things rather than begin complex new work, and be sufficiently mentally disengaged still to be on hand to be with the kids should she be needed. Tasha helped out too when Timmy was away, even though it was her own time technically, because she recognised Nishanthi's fundamental shortcomings and felt she needed to be on hand on a just-in-case basis.

This Saturday had to be different, however, since Nishanthi and Yogam had spoken once more, arranging to meet in Luton for lunch, at the Phoenix Hotel. The news that mummy was going to be out for lunch hadn't pleased the children at all, and Tasha's reaction was one of quiet, but unsurprised, dismay.

Nishanthi drove herself to the hotel, which she'd chosen because it was the best within walking distance of the station, for the benefit of Yogam, who was coming by train. She was preparing herself, as she drove, for the inevitable slights and cries of provincialism which she would face from her brother when he arrived, sneering disdainfully at the surroundings. The Phoenix was provincial, undoubtedly not as good as any one of the establishments patronised by her high-

living brother, but it was nevertheless still the best hotel available, and she could do no more. If she'd never travelled further afield herself, she would have found no fault with it as a place to meet, with a comfortable lounge and a decent Italian restaurant; but she had, and she understood fully the core of her brother's feelings about the town of their upbringing, even if she couldn't afford to let herself agree with him. Luton was, after all, where she lived.

This meeting was costing her. Not only had she absented herself from the office today, but a sizeable chunk of time, she was confident, would have to be spent swatting up on knowledge which belonged to her training, not her practice. Whatever her brother's *little difficulty*, she already knew she'd forgotten all the relevant law. She could hardly bill him (even though he could certainly afford her provincial rates), since this was all about family values. But she'd make sure he got lunch.

Nishanthi pulled up beside the Phoenix, her Mercedes sitting proudly amongst the other cars, and stomped over to the foyer. Lining the entrance was a wall of mirrors, and she found herself drawn irresistibly to her own reflection. How were her clothes? Was that pencil skirt really a good idea? Was her hair a reasonable length? Had any more of those annoying, single white hairs appeared? How was her figure? Was she still ample, or had she tipped over into being fat? In general, the answers she provided for herself were satisfactory, but only just, and as she approached forty, she saw she was in danger of becoming a frump. Maybe she should go to the gym, get a personal trainer, but how would she make the time? Then, fleetingly, she saw herself a second time, in the corner of her eye, in a distant part of the mirror, a gesture she could have made, a laugh which might have been her own. She focussed on the reflection of her brother, like her and yet so different.

He was sitting on the edge of one of the armchairs, as casual as you like, chatting up one of the young men on the staff, who in turn was laughing and preening himself, tossing his appallingly cut mop around as if in a shampoo commercial, loving the attention of this brown-skinned, white-haired, rather beautiful man. At least, Nishanthi thought he was rather beautiful, older than her but so slender, so slinky, and she was inwardly thrilled that he was still such an operator. She'd never had those skills herself.

'Hey, Yog!'

'Nish!' Yogam rose to his feet, then as an aside to the young man, 'She's my sister.'

The young man, between dismayed and confused, realised that his audience had come to an end and beat a sullen retreat. Brother and sister kissed, and she gave him one of her looks.

'What? What!?' he protested.

'You just can't give it a rest can you,' she laughed, 'you naughty, naughty boy!'

'We-e-e-ll! Take it where you find it, eh, darling!'

Nishanthi felt slightly wounded, a self-inflicted sting, since she had never taken it where she found it, and regretted not doing so whenever she saw her brother. He always seemed to be having such a good time. A shame she didn't see him more often.

'Tarted this place up a bit, haven't they,' Yogam cast his eyes around the lounge.

'Well, you know – Luton – gateway to Milton Keynes!'

'Don't knock it, it's not such a bad place. No finer town west of Colombo!'

'Not that you live here!'

'Well, I can't really, can I?'

'The place is full of people who commute to London.'

'Yep, suppose. Too settled in my little flat now.'

'Little flat, my arse! Barbican fucking penthouse!'

'It's not a penthouse, darling, it's the flat on the top floor! Hey, thanks for coming out to see me.'

'Let's go through to lunch – I'm starving.'

'A little cocktail, perhaps, first? Martini?'

Nishanthi wasn't in the habit of drinking cocktails at lunchtime – not at all, as a matter of fact – and before she'd had time to protest that she had work to do that afternoon, found herself taking a high stool at the bar, inelegantly, cursing the pencil skirt. Mind you, straight-up-with-a-twist, very nice, and she nearly fell off the stool when it came time to dismount. Bloody pencil skirt, it definitely had to go.

There were two items on the agenda as brother and sister sat down for lunch: Yogam's predicament and their father's end. That each item mattered more to one than the other was unsurprising, but what needed to be gauged was the extent of the gap between them.

It was Nishanthi's greatest hope, she had decided, that her brother and father could be reunited before it was too late. She had explored closely her feelings about family recently, largely because of Arnold's illness of course, but also because of her furious reaction to Yogam when she'd called him three days earlier. She had been focussing then solely on her father's death, which in fact meant she'd been focussing on her own feelings about his death, and just as she had long ago recognised her shortcomings as a mother, so she had now come to reflect that her contribution as a family member also might not be up to scratch. How to improve it? She valued family, unsure whether it was an idea which vibrated sympathetically within her personality, or just whether she'd been told from the age of ten, when they'd moved to England, that Asian family values were high. They plainly weren't, that much was apparent, but she might have been indoctrinated at an age early enough that she couldn't now shake off the conviction. Either way, she earnestly sought the means whereby she could bring her father and brother together, in the expectation of a late reconciliation.

Yogam, on the other hand, was no family man. Not only did he live alone, except for his frequently-changing house guests, but he'd been isolated for so long by his father that he'd ceased to think of himself as having a family to belong to. He remained friends with his mother and sister, but that was without the encircling arms of family suffocating him, and got on well with Timmy and the twins, but he couldn't remember when he'd last seen his father, nor even how unpleasant had the encounter been on that occasion. All the harsh words exchanged between them over the last two decades had, in his mind, melded into a

single, vituperative, mud-green assault. So reconciliation was far from Yogam's mind, as he sipped exquisitely at the vintage Veuve Cliquot he'd ordered, and devoured ravenously an insalata panzanella. He was concerned about the possibility of being prosecuted, and wanted to be steered in the right direction by the friendliest lawyer he knew.

Nishanthi had determined that whilst she might indeed usefully help her brother, she could take the opportunity created by these circumstances – by which she meant the leverage – and persuade Yogam to come home. The very fact of their meeting taking place in a hotel indicated how great was the problem, as he had always refused flatly to visit Holly House, a building he'd only ever seen from the outside on the rare occasions when he'd dropped off his mother after an outing. Nishanthi doggedly finished her calzone as she listened to his account of the situation in which he found himself.

She had been entirely correct about having forgotten the law relating to the accusations Yogam might have to answer, but dug as deeply as she dared to reassure him as far as she could.

'Ok, from what you're saying, it sounds to me like you're being accused of something less than insider trading, which is a criminal offence carrying a custodial sentence. This sounds more like a suggestion of market abuse, which is less serious, but also easier to prove, unfortunately. It's a civil matter, so the consequences are less grave.'

'Well aren't you a little angel!' Yogam grinned.

'Hang on, though, I'm very rusty on all this stuff. I need to do some reading up.'

'Sis, you're brilliant.'

'I'll need your help.'

'Sure, of course...'

'I'll need you to come to the office and help me check the references.'

'Woah...'

'No, listen, I haven't time to do it alone, and Timmy's back tomorrow so

he'll have a backlog of stuff to catch up on.'

'I'm not coming to the house, Nish. Come on!'

'I'm not expecting you to sit with Appa. It's a big house, the office is in the loft and he's confined to bed on the ground floor – you can easily come and go without him even knowing you're there. But I will need your help.'

Nishanthi's knew that she needed Yogam to be prepared at least to enter Holly House if she was to have any chance whatsoever of bringing him to their father's bedside. She had no confidence at all that her plan would be successful, in fact it hardly amounted to a plan, but his presence in the house would take her just that one small step closer to her goal than she was at this very moment.

'I'll explain to Amma and Podi...'

'God! I'd forgotten about Podi. How is she?'

'Old, cheeky and messy. Everyone will understand the reason why you've come...'

'No no no, I don't want Amma to know anything about this!'

'Ok, fine – ok – come on Wednesday evening. She'll be out at bridge. You can text me when you've arrived, and I'll let you in by the side door.'

Yogam looked suspiciously at her.

'What, you've got something better to do on a Wednesday evening in January than sit with your sister checking legal references, you naughty boy?'

He sighed, gestured for the bill, handed over his American Express card without even looking at the total.

'Ok, if I must, I'll come next Wednesday evening. But, seriously...'

'I promise, no tricks.'

'How is the old bastard, by the way?'

'Dying.'

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During the three weeks of his confinement, Arnold had felt keenly the absence of Timmy. The invalid had been deprived largely of the company of a

post-pubescent male, not the least significance of which was that the pre-pubescent man of the house never brought coffee, never wished to share his tiredness of life and always brought his sister. And both children were noisy and bouncing, generally with a view to drawing Arnold's attention to the fact that they missed their father rather more than he did.

The chaos which commonly erupted during their visits to Parta either did or did not cheer Arnold, according to his mood. Sometimes he felt joy at the certainty of the continuation of his line through these two imps; sometimes he despised them for their youth, their vigour, their trampolining, and wished to be an infant himself once more. Invariably, the raucous shouts led to Arnold's rescue as one of the Holly House women came to drag the kids away. If it happened to be his wife, or the maid, so much the better. If it was the children's nanny, Arnold felt embarrassed to be so laid-low in the presence of such a young and powerfully nubile young lady. But if it was his daughter, then he knew that the aura of gloom surrounding her would infect the children and him alike, and that all three would seek the recovery of spirit which only a quiet period of withdrawal can generate.

Nishanthi was miserable whenever Timmy went away. It had been part of the business plan of the contracting Balasingham, Nitka & Co. to move into the international conveyancing market, one of the hottest regions for which was Eastern Europe. Here, with care and thought, Timmy had developed good relationships with a number of local lawyers, developers and estate agents, and these he serviced periodically by flying off for two or three weeks to schmooze and network. This hadn't been a problem for Nishanthi, not in the slightest, since it was a strategy which worked in a measurable, income-generating way. Not a problem, that is, until Ivett had made a reciprocal visit the previous year, accepting the offer of a bed in Holly House for her stay.

In Nishanthi's opinion, Ivett was a beauty, the kind of long-legged, drawling, lippy, foreign girl-in-white-boots that every man finds attractive. Moreover, she knew it – didn't she just – so that there had been hardly a moment during her visit when she hadn't been making eyes at Timmy, laughing with him in secret, artfully embarrassed as Nishanthi entered the room. She was supposed to be here, as a fellow lawyer, to learn how the English conveyancing system worked. But it seemed to Nishanthi that the only searches she made were deep and

longing, blue-eyed examinations of her husband's consciousness, and the only exchange of contract was to invite Timmy to stay with her whenever he was over on business.

Eastern Europe had become Timmy's speciality, so much so that Nishanthi wasn't well placed to take on the burden of making journeys to Bulgaria, rather than he. She knew she couldn't insist he didn't go, as to do so would be counter-productive for the business, so she knew she had to accept him going. But she didn't do so with anything resembling good grace, and made no attempt to disguise her fury that she had been rendered jealous by such a slight, pale shadow of herself.

Timmy, naturally, knew of his wife's distress, and did what he could to contain it within limits, but no more. He thought it was probably quite a good idea to keep Nishanthi in a state of insecurity over at least one thing in her too-well-ordered existence. And besides, he supposed, the lusciousness of his wife's body could be more easily enjoyed if she felt there was something greater at stake than the mere inconvenience of allowing herself to be aroused.

So Timmy's return was welcomed in some degree by all interested parties. He hugged his twins, smelt his wife's cheek, and went straight to Arnold's bedside, as instructed.

'Hey, old man, what're you doing all tucked up here?'

Arnold emerged from his distant boredom, 'Oh, Timmy, you're back – thank goodness, thank goodness – I've been going mad here – women and children everywhere!'

'I gather you've not been well?' Timmy, in fact, knew the whole truth.

'Ah, it's all relative. I'm getting up today.'

'Are you? Are you sure?'

'Since my getting up is a future event, no, not sure – but since it is my intention to make it an event of the near future, the probability is that I shall.'

'Yes, I see you've been deprived of conversation, then,' Timmy nodded.

'Where's your mother-in-law?'

'Having her hair done, I gather. She was going out with Podi just as I arrived.'

'Right, that's it then, give me a hand up.'

'But shouldn't you wait for Angelina?'

'It's precisely because she's out that we should do this now – seriously, I can't stand lying down any longer, it'll kill me before my heart does.'

Arnold had been as bored as anyone might, confined to bed for three weeks, but what he had come to miss the most, the element of his pottering which had most wholly occupied him prior to his engagement to death, was the internet. It had dawned on Angelina that his first attack happened to coincide with him reading the BBC's web page about the Archbishop's retirement, and she had declared that he should have no access to the web at all until he was well enough to be up and about. And Arnold now decided that he was exactly that well.

With Timmy's assistance, he pulled his dressing gown on and, leaning on Timmy's arm, walked hesitantly through to the old folks' living room, there to go online.

'I told her we should have a laptop like yours – I made it clear that the benefit would be enormous,' he muttered as they went.

'They're expensive!'

'That depends on how you look at it. If you allow me, say, four weeks to live, then a thousand pounds might seem a lot – two hundred and fifty a week – ridiculous, of course. But, on the other hand, if the only source of information about the world I can have is a laptop which can go to bed with me, and I can occupy myself for – what – four hours a day – four times seven times four gives ninety six hours, so a little more than ten pounds an hour to keep a dying man happy – it's cheap.'

'Ah, well, yes...'

'And the longer I live, the cheaper it becomes – and it's more likely than not to keep me alive longer, don't you think – but if I die sooner, then you could probably take it back and say it didn't do the job it was bought for and get a refund.'

'Yes, I follow.'

'Anyway, that's what I've been telling your mother-in-law, but do you think she'll listen to reason? No, of course not. It's infuriating.'

Arnold stopped suddenly. 'She's not having her hair done – that's a euphemism – what's she doing? She's taken Podi Kelle?'

'I don't know. They'd been waiting for me to arrive before they left, so I didn't get much chance to talk to them. Angelina told me to come and chat to you, that's all.'

Arnold sat in front of the cold, dark monitor, pressed the on button and, waiting for the boot sequence to complete, silently, carefully wiped the dust from the screen with his dressing gown sleeve.

Leaving Arnold at the computer, Timmy began the winding journey to the top floor, where he supposed he would find his wife back at work. Lugging his suitcase up one step at a time, he recalled the less than satisfactory seeing off he'd received three weeks earlier as he'd carried it in the opposite direction, down to the waiting cab.

Nishanthi's grumpiness at his departure had gone without explanation, none being required as it was merely a function of her resentment of Ivett for the usual, unchanging reason. There had been words, of course, the night before, warnings about what things she'd do to him if anything *untoward* were to happen – things so elaborate, so extreme, that Timmy had felt able to disregard them for what he felt they were, the misplaced rantings of a woman who was losing touch with the world beyond her money-making, top-floor kingdom.

The good parts of their personal life had been sliding for a long time, Timmy knew, more or less in an inverse relationship to the success of their business. Nishanthi seemed to believe that partnership was a constant quantity, which could consist of elements from both marriage and business in any proportion, although the business side would do well to be the greater. He would have liked to have believed that this wasn't the woman he married, but he knew that she was exactly the woman he married and that, in every likelihood, he might have made a mistake. He could still be happy with her, he was sure, but he appeared to be incapable of causing her to be happy with him.

He remembered the day, whilst still at Durham, when he'd laid the seeds for this marriage, the day when pissed-undergraduate insouciance drew him to announce to his best chum that he rather fancied a foreign wife, an exotic bird, something a little different. That he'd had in mind a girl from Amsterdam was neither here nor there because the idea, once spoken, grew on him, despite his chum telling him not to be such an arse. So firmly had the casual observation become part of his quotidian way of thought that when he met Nishanthi, soon after graduating, he was almost disappointed that her foreignness had been diluted by the majority of her years having been spent in Luton. But she was so brown, so sexy, so irresistible – even to the point of him being prepared to change his career for her.

But that was back then. She was still exotic and sexy at forty, he thought – a little rounder in the body, a lot more set in the ways of her love-making – but the first flush was long gone, and they were thoroughly into the happy-ever-after. Yet she wasn't, so he wasn't. She exuded grumpiness. It infected the kids, her parents, the house, even Tiger's rattling purr would cease if she stepped too close. She wasn't depressed, not in any way he'd ever heard of, and Timmy didn't know why her basic humour was so low compared to everyone else's. She functioned socially in her fashion, slept well, drank hardly at all, ate a little too enthusiastically, worked effectively and could demonstrate measurable success as a result of her professional endeavours. She was just grumpy and that, surely, meant she must simply be unhappy, all of the time, without even realising it.

He'd mentioned this to her now and then, even timidly suggesting on one occasion that she should seek counselling, which evoked a reaction so explosive that he'd shrewdly eschewed that thought ever after. As a consequence, he had entered into a state of mind which allowed him to let all things disagreeable in his marriage wash over him. He didn't enjoy his work very much, but it paid well and life-threatening hazards were hardly an issue; he enjoyed the kids, and life at Holly House suited him just fine, so he contented himself with the good things he had, and was prepared to be happy with Nishanthi again as and when she allowed happiness back into her life.

So how ridiculous it was to have sent him off three weeks ago with warnings ringing in his ears about what would happen if something *untoward*

were to happen with Ivett? Why would Timmy, of all the sane people in the world, want to jeopardise that which was good in his life?

The trouble was that two rather important things had happened to him whilst he'd been away this time, either of which could pose a threat to the status quo at Holly House, and the first of those was that something untoward had indeed occurred.

Taking advantage of their reciprocal arrangement, which made good business sense of course, Timmy had been staying with Ivett. Nishanthi knew this; there was no suggestion that it would be otherwise, and no reason for Timmy to have his guard up. He regarded his wife's assertion that Ivett was a slut-on-the-make as absurd, groundless, choosing to believe instead that she was just an ambitious lawyer emerging from the communist world in which she'd trained, with an eye on any opportunity to make up for what she considered to have been a period of lost opportunities. Her behaviour seemed odd in the context of Western Europe because, and only because, she was from Eastern Europe.

Still under the influence of the diazepam and whisky, his flying cocktail of choice, Timmy had been comfortably drowsy as he'd settled down in Ivett's living room after dinner that first night. Her English was very good, and conversation on a wide range of topics was what he'd been expecting. Instead, she had excused herself, disappeared for a minute or two and reappeared wearing nothing at all but the white leather boots which Nishanthi so distrusted, almost as if in mockery. The sex which had followed had been, according to the sexometer which lingered in Timmy's imagination from Durham days, well into the fabulous spectrum, and for a man on the edge of tranquilliser-induced sleep, he had performed, he would later reflect, pretty damn well.

Sex under those hazy circumstances didn't at the time cause Timmy to think at all deeply on the matter. Unsurprisingly, it was only when he awoke in the morning, lying beside her on the floor with the skin of an unidentified furry animal pulled over their naked bodies, that he found a queue of questions lined up, waiting for answers. Why now, as opposed to his last visit? Why had he not said no? Why hadn't he recognised the slut in Ivett, even though he'd been forewarned? Where did this now leave him? In short, what the fuck!?

And Timmy could imagine the set of circumstances in which he, a loyal, married man, would have accepted that something had gone wrong the night before, that it wouldn't happen again, that he'd move out and that they'd both pretend the embarrassment of an intoxicated one-night-stand had never arisen. However, the circumstances of Timmy's imagination didn't match the circumstances in which he found himself, and none of these things did happen.

Despite the inconvenience of their business dealings during the day, Timmy and Ivett had repaired to her cosy nest and spent most of every following night having sex. The possibly-forgivable accident of one night's abandon became the premeditated betrayal of three weeks of repeated, energetic, dirty shagging. Between moments of high passion and great vulgarity, when he wasn't drinking honey-flavoured rakia from her vagina or allowing her to sodomise him with a vibrator, she explained that this had all started because he had been so miserable about his joyless marriage that she wanted to bring some happiness into his life again, because she liked him as a friend.

'As a friend?'

The reply was incoherent, as she had his penis (throbbing and now a little sore) in her mouth at the time. He thought she spluttered something about a girlfriend, and became concerned that she was looking for something permanent, but she was actually speaking about her own girlfriend, whom he met the following night when she came along too, to make up a threesome.

Ivett's sole, selfless intention, then, had been to bring joy into Timmy's life, and in this she was wholly successful. He had the best three weeks of his life, meeting physical demands which he might have thought beyond him, if only for lack of practice, and laughing almost constantly. Three weeks with a bi-sexual, nymphomaniac Slav had brought him more joy than he could remember in years with his wife, and the thing which bugged him most was that they had at least this much in common, that they were both foreign and both lawyers.

But, no, that didn't make them similar, as Timmy realised, when he succumbed to a vision of the two side by side, naked, waiting together for him in the office above, the one rounded, dark, luscious, and the other thin, bony and pale, with a whisper of blonde pubic hair as transparent as the other's was

fulsome. His mind lingered on this image too long, so that he was still transported by it when he unconsciously stepped into the top-floor office. There sat Nishanthi, fully clothed, at her computer, consuming the last morsel of a Mars bar.

'Well,' she barked, 'what have you got to tell me?'

Timmy had practised an answer or two during the flight, but his lingering vision had left him wrong-footed, and he was again in the thrall of all-subduing diazepam, so he stuttered incoherently. This was nothing she'd ever seen him do before, and with a quick-wittedness which pushed him even further off balance, she declared unequivocally that something had obviously happened whilst he'd been away.

She rose to her feet and approached him, gazing deeply into his eyes like a Victorian detective seeking the imprint of a murderer's face in the victim's retina.

'What? What happened? You're different.' she swept a lingering speck of chocolate from the corner of her mouth.

Timmy had wondered during the flight whether the best thing would be to come clean with Nishanthi, and tell her about his 'accident' as soon as he arrived home, thinking that the humble, cringing confession was one possible way out of his predicament. But now, as he peered into the looming face of his wife, who seemed momentarily to have taken on the aspect of a sumo wrestler, he realised that the extent of his predicament was no greater than a generous touch of guilty self-loathing, and that that would pass in time. On the other hand, the damage which might accrue to him physically, and to his marriage, might never be repaired if now, here in this attic, he confessed to his low doings with the much-loathed Ivett. And her girlfriend.

Fortunately, the second big event of the trip came to his rescue.. It was sufficiently important that it, too, was far enough forward in his consciousness to be readily available in this moment of crisis.

'I, er, I had a bit of luck whilst I was in Vidin,' he whispered, hoarsely.

'Did you indeed! What sort of luck? The sort that comes in white boots?'

Nishanthi's clairvoyance came as a complete surprise to Timmy, but he clung tenaciously to the line of defence he'd begun.

'No – no, don't be, er, silly. I was visiting a new agent and happened to bump into a bloke from the *Telegraph* property pages who was out there doing a piece on the boom. We had lunch together and he asked me if I'd do a piece for the Saturday paper on the legal side of buying in Bulgaria. So I did.'

'What d'you mean, you did?'

'I did it. I wrote a thousand words, emailed it to him, and they published it the next Saturday – it's in last week's paper, if you're interested.'

'Ridiculous! How did you find the time?'

This was a better question by far than she realised.

'Well, it was only a thousand words – pretty straightforward stuff – oh, and they're paying of course.'

'Hmm, in that case fine,' hissed Nishanthi, still entirely sure that this wasn't really the issue.

'There's more, though – that's not all.'

'Yep, I knew it – you bastard.'

'Nish, hang on – hang on, love – it's just that I got an email from a publisher who saw the article and – he liked it – and he wants me to write a book about buying abroad. A proper book, about buying abroad in general.'

'Well you can't, can you.'

'Er, why can't I?'

'Because you don't know anything about any other markets than Bulgaria, and because you're half of a bloody legal firm here. That's why.'

'No, but you see, that's just it, I'd have to research the other markets – travel to meet people – it'd involve spending a bit of time away, but, really, it's an extraordinary opportunity.'

'Oh really, is it indeed! And who pays for the 'research', the gallivanting round Europe, huh?'

'Well, he does – he's offered me an expenses-paid commission.'

'This is ridiculous – no, absolutely no – you're a solicitor in Luton, just

accept it and get on with doing your job. I thought I'd beaten all that journalism crap out of you years ago. No, and that's final.'

Timmy, relieved to have diverted her attention away from those chilling powers of ESP, thought this was as good a point to withdraw as any. He certainly wasn't going to give up this opportunity lightly – indeed, this was the other threat to his life at Holly House – but knew it could wait for another, better moment.

'Look I can't argue this now – too drugged from the flight – I'll go and start to unpack. See you later, love.'

He shrugged and turned to leave, suddenly no longer sure that this was a marriage which should be saved. Ivett wasn't available to him as a partner, that much had been made clear, but he wondered if there were any other women with whom he might waste his life, aimlessly pursuing the Bacchanalian orgy. It would be a great deal more fun.

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Arnold waited impatiently for the burrrrrrr of the modem to catch whatever it caught and bring him anew into contact with the wider world. This was the second time round since, just as he was connecting first time, someone had picked up a phone somewhere and everything had gone back to the start. No-one had any idea, he mused, of the number and various ways in which a dying man can be so irritated that what little is left of the heart might be consumed too quickly, and a short life expectancy come to seem to have been exaggerated. Picking the phone up whilst he was trying to get online could be, at best, manslaughter.

He reasoned that he didn't have long at the computer, because Angelina would certainly take him away from it as soon as she returned, so he went straight to the BBC web pages. There he sought to find out what was happening about the new Archbishop of Canterbury, only to learn that he could have logged on as easily to William Hills. The BBC, the British Broadcasting Corporation, the one organisation which made England great, other than the Church itself, was giving odds as to which of three bishops was likely to get the job. Odds! His fury was made the worse by the odds themselves, which put Anglo-Catholic Bishop Chartres of London, his personal favourite, in third place at 9-2, evangelical

Michael Nazir-Ali in second at 7-2 and, by far the worse for his heretical liberalism, Rowan Williams first at 5-2. This didn't look like the hand of god at work, not at all, rather it looked like electioneering, with quotes from supporters like A.N. Wilson and the Bishop of Hull, describing Williams' 'good poetry' and his 'depth and vision'.

Arnold was furious. Rising from his chair, shaking, he began to feel that sensation which preceded the detestable attacks. He realised he had been wrong to get out of bed; it had been too much for him to have gone online, and he was distraught as the hopeless realisation descended on him once again that when his life came shortly to its end, it would be this present life which would cease to be, this frail body which would function no longer. As the spasms of coughing and wheezing followed, and he fell over onto the study floor, writhing in the desperate throes of pain and dread together, he understood that he had reached the point in his life when nothing pleasing or enjoyable might ever happen again.

Thundering footsteps shortly followed, as Nishanthi ran down from the office, alerted by the too familiar sound of her father in distress, knowing that the older women were out and that Timmy was probably sleeping off the diazepam. She fell at her father's side, breathless and scared, and cradled his head on her lap.

'There there, Appa, there there – it'll soon pass – it'll soon go away.'

The frightened faces of the children appeared round the door, terrified by what they might see, yet unable not to look.

'Hi, guys!' beamed their mother, 'Parta's just having another coughing fit, but it'll be ok soon. Don't worry about it.'

Tasha appeared at the doorway to take the twins away, apologizing that she'd been in the bathroom when they'd decided to come to investigate.

'It's fine, don't worry,' smiled Nishanthi, her calmness so unexpectedly complete that it began to distract Arnold, even through his anguish. 'You two run along with Tasha now.'

Arnold's heaving and spluttering subsided as the children disappeared, but for a moment it seemed instead that Nishanthi was holding her breath, ready for further action should it be required. And as soon as it became clear that the

worst was over, that the only action now required was to help Arnold back to his bed, she began to sob, silently, her tears falling on her father's bald head.

He looked up at her and laughed, feebly, as the drops splashed now on his glasses.

'With respect, Putha,' he whispered thinly, 'even the tears from my little angel won't help me now.'

'I know, Appa, I know – that's why I'm crying. I so badly don't want you to die.'

'But just now, I understood that I definitely, absolutely will. And soon.'

Nishanthi sobbed harder, letting go an empty howl of despair, strangled so as to spare the children.

'Help me back to bed, my darling girl, before your mother finds me here and I get into REAL trouble!'

Nishanthi hadn't any idea what to do to help him, as she'd always left his care to the older women. She made a dreadful mess of trying to pick him up, even though he now weighed less than she did. Despite himself, he laughed once again.

'Just as well you went into the law, and not nursing!' he teased.

'Please don't laugh at me, Appa – please, not you.'

'I wasn't laughing at you, darling – I'm too proud of you.' He smiled and held out his hands so that she could help pull him to his feet.

Leaning on each other, they went back to the place of Arnold's confinement, narrowly avoiding knocking over the bucket placed conveniently close to Arnold's bedside, hopefully to avoid a repeat of the accident of three days earlier. Nishanthi tucked him in, and made to leave.

'No, please don't go yet, Putha. I never see you these days. Stay and chat a little while.'

'But, Appa, I've got work...' she gazed with disgust at the half-inch of urine in the bucket by her feet.

'Pah, you've always got work!'

This was true, she realised, and within the context of spending time with her moribund father, it suddenly didn't seem as urgent as all that. So she sat beside him, let her shoulders fall, turned her head to look at him smiling up at her, kicked her shoes off and lay down beside him.

'Why don't I ever see you, Putha?'

If anyone else had asked her this so bluntly, she would have barked back angrily that the allegation was wholly untrue. But now she lay still, looking up at the ceiling high above their heads, and thought carefully before answering, 'I don't know, Appa – I don't know.'

'Are you hiding away for some reason?'

Again she paused. 'I thought I had it all until you became ill – and now I won't have you for much longer, which should make me hurt with unhappiness – but at the moment it just feels like an insignificant addition to the emptiness I feel for everything else. That's wrong. It should count for something.'

'If it helps, I'm also unhappy about dying – but I would be, wouldn't I, since it's me who's doing it, me to whom it's being done!'

'Are you happy about everything else in your life?'

'No, of course I'm not, and I think this might be part of your trouble, that you've inherited my malcontent's gene. Your mother's always cheerful, but you're too much like me.'

'Yogam's like Amma, you always used to say.'

Arnold fell silent at the mention of his son's name. Nishanthi turned her face towards her father, and saw him lying quite still, gazing upwards, unwilling to discuss him. This was a disappointment rather than a surprise, so she changed the subject.

'Why did you get up today?'

'Bored – bored to tears.'

'Why today?'

'Timmy's back – he came to see me so I made him help me up.'

'God, typical! He's back for a few moments and...'

'No, Nishanthi, no – you're getting angry with him about nothing. I made him help me up – he didn't want to – I made him. Do you understand?'

'Well, he should have known better...'

'Shush, Putha, shush – how could he have known better? I didn't fall ill until after he'd left. He's not seen me during an attack. No, he could not have known better, so stop being cross with him.'

Nishanthi breathed deeply. 'Why was it so important to get online? I hope it jolly-well was important.'

'I told you, bored. And I wanted to see what was happening at Lambeth.'

'Oh, that important, huh! Well, look, why don't you borrow Timmy's laptop – now he's back he won't need it for a while – then you can go online to your heart's content without having to leave the safety of your bed!'

Arnold gasped with delight. 'I don't know if your mother'll allow it.'

'I'll talk to her. And don't forget we've got the new broadband upstairs now, with a wireless network, so you'll be able to get online much quicker. It'll be good for you to have something to do.'

'I'd love it if I could,' Arnold confessed.

'Right, don't go anywhere...'

'Ha ha ha!'

She smiled at him, rolled off the bed and went to the first floor where, as she'd imagined, Timmy had fallen asleep, fully clothed, on the bed. Confident that he'd have no objection to lending his laptop to her father – they were mates, after all – she crept as silently as she was able over to his opened luggage to take the laptop. On the dressing table, beside it, was a bottle of honeyed rakia with a label hanging from the neck on which was written her name – what sort of a ridiculous present was that! She paused to look at him, corpse-like in his slack-jawed stillness, until he grunted and she moved on for fear of waking him.

By the time she'd returned to her father, he too was asleep, and his impression of death seemed just too convincing. She laid the laptop down on the bed beside him before tiptoeing heavily out in distress, carrying her shoes, eager

to return to her place of safety in the office.

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The shops were closing by the time Angelina and Podi Kelle had had enough of shopping. From the outset, it was implicit that this was going to be a serious day abroad, with uncountable elderly footsteps taken through the streets of Luton, and many, many more items sought, perused, felt, pinched and not purchased than the useful things that were.

It was clear, but unspoken, that the two women had reached the point at which they needed relief from the mixed, pervasive atmosphere at Holly House, which ranged from gloomy pretence to stoic acceptance of Arnold's desperate condition, with his mood the principal determinant. They were so eager to get out that they were standing at the door in their coats and hats, like impatient children waiting for a birthday party, when Timmy's cab brought him back from the airport.

That they'd not thought through their plan, had failed to consider the likelihood of Timmy being neither in a fit state nor willing to look after Arnold, was only partially the case. The expectation of allowing themselves out had grown over the last couple of days, to the extent that they would probably have gone even if Timmy hadn't been coming home that day, and the cursory instruction to him to keep an eye on Arnold whilst they went to the hairdresser's, even as he bundled himself and his luggage into the house, was followed by an unseemly dash to the Peugeot in the drive and, by the standards of two old ladies, a reckless getaway.

Why such a hurry, Timmy had started to wonder, if there was only a hairdo at stake, but then he discovered that the diazepam prevented him caring anyway.

It was in the car that Podi Kelle first broached the subject of Ken.

'I need phone,' she declared precipitously, 'mobile for text.'

'You need a mobile?'

'Hari.'

'But you can use Nishanthi's old one, if you want – I hardly ever use it!'

'No, cannot – need to text my boyfriend.'

'Your boyfriend? Podi, what are you talking about?'

'He Methodist – wife dead – him my boyfriend.'

Angelina had to pull in quickly and stop, to deal with this unexpected moment in a manner which didn't compromise their safety. Some years had passed since, objectively, she could have been considered a better-than-competent driver, and news of this magnitude was not something, she knew, which should be driven through.

'A Methodist?'

'Hari, Methodist.'

'But how?'

'Prayer group, Wednesday.'

'But Wednesday's when I play bridge.'

'Hari.'

Podi Kelle revealed what had been the true nature of Wednesday evenings for the past several months, when they'd both been out, and Arnold hadn't noticed being left alone. There was nothing wrong in this that Angelina could think of, nothing to object to as one elderly woman to another, but it was curious, slightly hurtful, she felt, that Podi Kelle had had to behave in what amounted to a deceitful way. And she herself surely wouldn't have gone to play bridge last Wednesday, had she known that Arnold would be left alone. That's what she tried to tell herself, but she knew that, regardless of the existence of a Methodist prayer group round the corner, it was still Podi Kelle who was there to clean up her husband and not her.

'I want text him like kids people do,' Podi Kelle returned to the matter of the phone.

'I think that's lovely,' said the mistress, like a sulky mother.

'Thank you, ah. Very happy. Nokia.'

Under the glare of the fluorescent lighting of the phone shop where they'd arrived, a pale-grey wave washed over Angelina, knowing that Podi Kelle

was very happy. She directed no ill thoughts at her servant, for whom kindly thoughts usually came naturally; rather she was envious of the possibilities which a new relationship offered at this stage in life. For her, the possibilities arising from the soon-expected end of her own long partnership hadn't yet been fully estimated.

No more was she confident, she thought incidentally, that her daughter's marriage was in a particularly strong state, as she felt Nishanthi's preparations for her husband's return from Bulgaria that morning had been far less enthusiastic than she might have expected. This, however, she recognised was one of the complications of the Holly House communal lifestyle, that it was easy to know something about another generation, but not necessarily easy to know enough to make an informed judgement. And whereas Arnold was happy to make judgements as he saw fit, she was not.

'السلام عليكم ladies,' an Asian boy with a silly, pencil-sharp beard stepped up to greet them.

Angelina and Podi Kelle looked blankly at him.

'මොකක්ද ඵයා කිව්වේ?' whispered Podi Kelle.

'I don't know,' replied Angelina.

'What you speak?' Podi Kelle demanded.

'I'm sorry?' he replied.

'What you say – what you speak?'

'I'm sorry, I spoke to you in Urdu – I thought you...'

'Young man,' Angelina became a little grand, 'I don't know why you think we're Indian, when we are plainly Sri Lankan.'

'Ah, I'm Pakistani – I speak Urdu – I assumed...'

'Well we do not, and don't assume in future.'

'I'm very sorry, madam. Please excuse me. How can I help you?'

Angelina wasn't sure that his apology was quite as genuine as he meant it to appear, and Podi Kelle was convinced she saw a nasty glint in his eye. Neither communicated to the other their misgivings, but both thought it utterly

inappropriate for a Pakistani youth to be so uppity with two Sri Lankan senior citizens.

Angelina described to him Podi Kelle's need, and the youth advised the two old ladies to select the most basic, cheapest possible phone. They thought he might have been taking pity on them, or possibly patronising them, but either way, they listened intently to what he had to say, understood little of it, but left the shop with a boxed 3310 in a plastic bag.

'He say 'pay and go', ah?'

'Yes, I believe he did!'

'Hmm, rude young man him.'

Angelina was bothered by the amount of money she'd had to spend on Podi Kelle's phone, nearly a hundred and thirty pounds. Not only was it the case that she never used hers, it was also true that she'd not had to pay anything for it since it was a hand-me-down, and she'd just not known how much these things cost. Truthfully, had she known, she wouldn't have promised to buy one for Podi Kelle in the car, but would have insisted that she take Nishanthi's old one, exactly as she had suggested. It would surely do for the amount of use it was going to get. Texting indeed, at her age. And to a boyfriend, moreover. Still, the need to show gratitude for Podi Kelle's exceptional care of Arnold the previous Wednesday had been at the core of this outing, and no-one could argue that the gift of a Nokia didn't amount at least to that.

'Podi...'

'Ha.'

'Best not mention this phone to Arnold – in fact to anybody, really. Just between you and me, eh?'

'Ha. Because Ken Methodist. I know.'

Angelina had become notably subdued, in sharp contrast to Podi Kelle's gleeful enjoyment of the shopping trip thus far. They each knew the other well enough that there was no hiding the difference in mood between them, so Podi Kelle switched into a gentle musing about the changes they'd seen, from their life as girls in the forests of Ambuluwewa to their unlikely presence as old ladies

buying a mobile phone here in the Luton Arndale. They took each other's arm and walked on, remembering, reminiscing, as they peered into the windows passing by.

They each had multiple bags to carry by the time they'd finished, through the attrition of the shopping mall and surrounding streets. Nothing very grand had been bought, other than the phone, just the stuff of the everyday. Both women had a great need for warm clothing, neither having ever really acclimatised to life in the English winter, so thermal vests and a jumper each, sturdy white knickers, slippers and, after the phone, the only other expensive item, a new coat for Angelina, black, woollen with gold buttons.

Angelina decided to take Podi Kelle out for an early dinner before they returned home, because they could chat further about Podi Kelle's new friend, because the weight of the past three weeks had been lifted, because it was a nice thing to do. The old established relationship between the two women was all that stood in the way of them being like sisters, so long had they spent in each other's company. However, that the relationship was now technically defunct, and Podi Kelle retired within the family, didn't eradicate the gap which separated them, which had been generated not so much by the decades they'd shared, but by the generations through which their forebears had lived, each in their own way, off the back of the other.

They settled into the cosy nook of the Taj Mahal, a Bangladeshi restaurant on Wellington Street. As the waiter drew near, Angelina took decisive action.

'Good evening,' she said, firmly, in her most English English.

'Good e-ven-ing,' echoed Podi Kelle

'What will you have, madam?' he asked Angelina, in the forward accent of Luton.

'And for you, aunty?' he asked Podi Kelle.

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Timmy had awoken whilst the ladies were still out shopping and went, bleary-eyed, to spend time with the twins. From Tasha's reaction, it was plain that

she felt quite enough of her free Sunday had been sacrificed to the whims of these strange parents. She expressed quite plainly her frustration that Nishanthi hadn't been down to spend any time with them at all, and exited with a bad-tempered sigh, leaving Timmy with the sense that at least once today he was doing the correct thing. The twins had eaten, so he sat with them to watch cartoons in the first-floor living room, puzzling over what it was that compelled his wife to spend her time isolated on the floor above, working working working.

As his children watched and giggled at Count Duckula's confusion, a great darkness descended on Timmy, a tremendous fear that his actions over the past three weeks might have put in jeopardy this wonderful relationship. His children had come to represent all in his life that was important, more than his career, more than his marriage. Yet he knew that his relationship with them was contingent on the preservation of his marriage, which became, therefore, something which had to be maintained at all costs. All thoughts of his time with Ivett had to be laid aside.

However, the same wasn't true of his career. He could make a change here without abandoning his marriage, he thought, turning his attention towards writing. At the very least, he could give it a shot, whilst the opportunity was open to him. There was no question that he would face great opposition from Nishanthi, who would do everything in her power to keep him as the solicitor she felt he ought to be. But, similarly, there was no question but that he could square up to her now, in the way that he didn't when he was younger, when he first resigned himself to her persuasive charms.

Sitting on the carpeted floor, a twin on either side, with his arms like protective wings around them, it wasn't long before he was reminded in no uncertain terms that the presents expected after a long trip away hadn't yet been forthcoming. And reminding was what he needed, since it had slipped his mind completely, so drowsy had he been, so overtaken by his grand snooze.

Returning to the bedroom, to fetch his small gifts, he remembered that bloody bottle of rakia. What was it doing there? The label round the neck, the one with Nishanthi's name on it, was written in Ivett's hand. She must have slipped it into his suitcase when he wasn't looking. Goddam that woman, he thought, she likes to live dangerously. But how marvellous, he smiled broadly, she likes to live

dangerously!

Then he spotted that his laptop was gone. He remembered taking it out of his luggage, when he'd partially unpacked earlier, so knew he'd not forgotten it, in which case he supposed it must be with Nishanthi upstairs. Was this a problem, he wondered? Was there anything on it which shouldn't be there? Given the extraordinary nature of his business trip, it was possible that there was, but he didn't know for sure. Nor did he know how to go and check without raising suspicions. This was alarming.

He crept up the stairs to the office, and peeked round the door. Nishanthi was still there, still at work, still shutting out the world behind her. Softly he pushed open the door, and entered, laying his hands on her shoulders whilst she carried on typing.

'What?'

'What what?'

'What do you want?'

'I wondered if you wanted to come down to spend some time with me and the kids? I've got them some prezzies – come down whilst I give them to them...'

'Yeah yeah, just let me finish this.'

'What're you doing?'

'It's just an invoice. Won't take me long.'

'Well, can't it wait a little while? Come down, spend some time with us.'

Nishanthi stopped typing and swivelled round in her chair, a look of fury on her face.

'One of us has to make a living, wouldn't you say? And if you're going to be off gallivanting round Europe chasing a cute little idea, then it has to be me!'

'But, darling, it's Sunday evening...'

'What, and the fucking world stops because it's a weekend?'

Timmy turned silently and withdrew, seeing that there was nothing which

might usefully be said whilst she was in this mood. How much he wished he was back with Ivett!

He stopped at the top of the stairs. 'Where's my laptop, by the way?'

'I lent it my father.'

Timmy hadn't expected this answer, and looked puzzled.

'It was something for him to do. Why, do you object?'

'No, no – it's fine – he mentioned that he wanted one earlier, as it happens.' It was probably as safe with Arnold as anybody, he thought. 'And when's the car back?'

'What are you talking about?'

'The car – I noticed it's not here – what's wrong with it? When's it coming back?'

'There's nothing wrong with it. What d'you mean it's not...'

She stopped abruptly as the memory of her journey home from the Phoenix yesterday, in a cab, returned to her. She had left the Mercedes there since she'd been drinking, at Yogam's insistence rather than her own decision to be a responsible citizen. In fact, the inconvenience which she now faced of having to return to get the car was why she'd wanted to drive it back and had been resistant to taking a cab. Just how much had she drunk to have let all this slip her mind?

She explained to Timmy what she'd done, which he found hilarious, especially on this day of diazepam, when he had been drowsy for what he considered a good reason, the implication being that a liquid lunch with a family member was not.

'You went and got pissed!' he chortled, 'Fantastic, wish I could have seen that!'

This wasn't the ideal approach, since it infuriated Nishanthi, who was never less than keen to avoid being made to look the fool.

'Oh, shut your face,' she shouted, 'you can't abandon us and expect everything to just run smoothly. Piss off!'

'Right, I'll piss off, sure, I'll piss off! I'll piss off back to the children, and

have a good time with them. You can stay here and have a good time with yourself. Abandon you – what a fucking cheek!

'I don't like you, Timmy! You don't treat me nicely.'

Timmy gasped incredulously at an assertion which he considered ridiculous. He turned on his heels and marched stiffly down the stairs, wondering why he'd bothered coming back at all. But the twins were standing, wide-eyed, at the bottom of the stairs, frightened by the raised voices of their parents, and he remembered.

Nishanthi was shaken, not so much by the sharp exchange between her and her idiot, selfish husband, but more by the bald fact that she'd forgotten the car, and left herself open to ridicule.

She waited until she heard her mother and Podi Kelle returning, just a short while later, hurriedly tidied up her computer and the office, and descended to ask a favour.

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Angelina and Podi Kelle had enjoyed their meal. It was Bengali, it was short on coconut milk, it was a bit sloppy, it was coarsely spiced, but it was cooked by someone else and made a very pleasant change. Podi Kelle had tried to explain more about her new relationship, but in so doing discovered there really wasn't that much more to explain, beyond that they'd met a little while ago, come to know each other somewhat, and now wanted to be in more regular contact. The leg, or its lack, wasn't mentioned. The friendship seemed a thoroughly good thing for Podi Kelle, Angelina decided, and entirely innocent.

She had wondered if she should say anything about Edmund but, on reflection, realised there was nothing she could, nor anything she should say about him. He was only a person she'd met at bridge, with whom she'd spent the evening exchanging bids on opposite sides of a table. Had he not been a man, a widower more to the point, it wouldn't even have occurred to her that she might have anything at all to say about him; but since he was, and since Angelina had felt just a tiny bit guilty about spending the evening with him whilst her husband lay dying, the only benefit of mentioning him would have been to seek a response from Podi Kelle which made it seem ok. Not worth raising the issue, on balance.

The two women went straight in to see Arnold when they returned, and found him in a remarkably cheerful mood, sitting up in bed with Timmy's laptop, engaged with the world beyond. He complained that the laptop had taken a little getting used to, but was pleased that he'd mastered it more or less, and found it altogether a marvellous piece of equipment.

'The battery's getting a bit low,' he said expertly, 'do you think you can find an extension cable, Podi, so that I can plug it in?'

Podi Kelle set about her task dutifully without asking further questions. Angelina didn't feel the situation was quite as straightforward as all that, however. Had she known the appalling outcome of the trip earlier this very day to his own computer, then she would have considered any time spent online to be fraught with peril for a man as sick as he, and banned computing outright. As it was, she was unsure about the wisdom of allowing Arnold to continue, but she couldn't avoid noting how much more cheerful – how much better – he seemed, apparently just because he could engage in this activity. Since she'd never gone online herself, it confounded her.

'How do you know the battery's getting low?' she asked.

'Well, look,' he turned the screen towards her, 'see that picture there, that shows how much battery's left. Look, you can click on it...' He was interrupted by a beep from the laptop. 'And it makes a noise sometimes like that, which I think must be a warning. It's great!'

'What have you been looking at?'

Angelina feared it would be news about the appointment of a new archbishop, given that that was what had precipitated Arnold's illness. He knew exactly what was in her mind, and certainly wasn't going to admit that she was correct to be concerned about his excitability when it came to news from Lambeth, even though the evidence suggested she was. More to the point, tacitly accepting that evidence himself, he had avoided as a reasonable precaution anything whatsoever to do with Lambeth.

'I've been looking at pages about other religions. I've been reading about Hinduism – my forebears must have been Hindu.'

'How long have you been reading?'

'Oh, not long, actually – half an hour – I had a huge sleep after, er, after lunch.'

'Oh, good, you ate something.'

'Oh, no, er, actually I didn't now I think about it.'

'Didn't Timmy bring you anything? Or Nishanthi?'

'Well, Timmy came to see me when he came in, but I should think he went for a lie-down – you know what he's like about flying.'

'Didn't Nishanthi come and see you at all?'

This was a bit too close for comfort for Arnold, who absolutely didn't want even a hint of his earlier attack to be discovered, since he would be further confined to bed.

'Yes, she called in to say hello.'

'When?'

'Oh, about lunch time.'

'And she didn't bring you any food?'

'Ah, er, no, I...'

'And she's not been back since?'

'Well, I don't know. I was asleep.'

Angelina glanced at the water jug which stood on the table by Arnold's bedside, and at the pee-bucket on the floor. One was nearly empty, the other a little fuller.

'So you've been ignored all afternoon!' she said, with mounting ire.

The door flew open as Nishanthi rumbled into the room.

'Amma, can you do me a favour, please?'

Angelina stiffened. She didn't want to cause a row in front of Arnold, wanted to maintain a calm, even atmosphere. She would be cool.

'What?'

'I need a lift to the Phoenix to pick up my car. If you wouldn't mind?' The laptop beeped. 'Oh, you're using it, Appa, great.'

Arnold smiled. 'Yes, I've almost run the battery down, so we're going to plug it in. That's what that noise means.'

'I'm sure you will need to plug it in – the battery doesn't last that long on these things. That beep's something different, though, it's an instant message coming in for Timmy.'

'An instant message?' Arnold's face lit up.

'Yes, I'll show you how it works later – but I need to get my car now. If that's ok, Amma?'

'Yes, fine,' Angelina said, very calmly.

Podi Kelle came in with an extension cable, and Nishanthi showed the old folks how to connect the laptop to its power supply.

'Right, let's go, Amma,' she said, finding a tone of voice which lay somewhere between pleading and instructive.

Nishanthi was deposited peremptorily at the car park of the Phoenix by her mother, having been thoroughly told off on the way. Angelina was amazed and disgusted that Nishanthi had spent the entire day in the office, knowing there was no-one else available to sit with Arnold. She still didn't know that it had been Nishanthi who had ministered to Arnold during his most recent attack, and Nishanthi didn't feel she could tell her mother about it, because it would result in more restrictions on her father. This infuriated her, as it was a pretty good defence for her actions of the day, with which she could easily improve her stock with her mother, and she wasn't naturally given to making sacrificial gestures.

But she knew, too, that it was only a partial defence, since for the rest of the day she had ignored him – truthfully, forgotten about him – as she rolled forward in the office, knowing that Timmy was flat out on the floor between them. She was ashamed that she'd forgotten about her dying father.

So it was that the moment she stepped from the Peugeot, her mother sped off in a rage. Nishanthi watched, followed the vanishing red lights, remembering how Angelina used to drop her off as a youth, and wait to see that she'd entered

her friends' houses before driving away.

Someone was standing beside her Mercedes in the darkness, she could see, almost as if in a parody of her situation, and for a moment she hesitated. But it was cold, and she'd had enough, so she stomped over to the car, signalling her imminent arrival by making the indicators flash with the remote control. It was the boy with the dreadful haircut who'd been so captivated by Yogam the day before, busy sticking a ticket on the windscreen of the Mercedes.

'Can I help you?' Nishanthi demanded.

Timidly, the boy summoned the authority which he felt his uniform lent him. 'I've given you a ticket for parking here without paying.'

'Have you indeed?'

'Yes, madam, we charge for parking, I'm afraid.'

'Do you now. And you don't charge enough for your drinks or your food that this is necessary?'

'I don't know,' he hesitated, 'it's just policy.'

'Oh, policy, is it.'

'Yes, madam – your car's been here since yesterday.'

'I know. Yesterday, when we spent a small fortune in your restaurant. You remember?'

The boy, who had failed until now to recognise Nishanthi dressed so informally, cast his eyes down, remembering very clearly.

'So I tell you what, take this ticket and stick it where the sun doesn't shine,' her voice was raised.

'But it's a legal thing, madam,' the boy was startled.

'And so am I – I'm a lawyer, and I'm telling you now you haven't a cat in hell's chance of getting a penny out of me for parking here. Got that?'

She ripped the ticket off the windscreen and threw it at the boy, who was as astonished by her rage as he was unsure what to do about it. She climbed into the car, started the engine and edged forward before stopping and lowering the

window.

'I asked if you'd got that? And one more thing, my glorious brother would eat you alive, Jessica.'

Assuming an air of calm, she drew away, the window sliding silently closed as she went.

As she parked the shiny Mercedes beside her mother's embarrassing Peugeot, she reflected, as she always did, that the one thing Holly House was missing was a double garage, for the protection of not just her car, but also her reputation.

The house was largely in darkness when she entered, silent apart from the sound of snoring coming distantly from different places. She had enjoyed shouting at the cringing youth in the car park, and felt alive, set up to go back to work, but realised it was late enough that she could probably justify stopping now. She ascended the stairs as delicately as she was able, wondering what was on the telly which, assuming Timmy was asleep, she could enjoy alone and undisturbed.

The drive back from the hotel had provided her with the opportunity to think about the past couple of days: her feelings about Timmy's return and his bizarre attempt to revive his career as a writer, her first solo attempt to deal with one of her father's attacks, being stuck in the office trying to make ends meet, her mother's wrath, lunch with her brother and forgetting the car. The only part of it in which she'd had any enjoyment, she realised, had been the lunch, and she wondered whether that had only been because she'd drunk so much. It was a significant moment at which to have this thought, just as she peered round the doorway to her own bedroom to check on Timmy (who was indeed flat out), when the bottle of rakia fell into view. And it had her name on it.

She needed ice, and perhaps some lemon peel just like the martini at the Phoenix, so she crept into the bedroom, crept out with the bottle, and crept down the stairs to the kitchen. The creeping felt very naughty, and she was already beginning to have fun.

Ice, she discovered, is difficult to deal with quietly, especially when cubes fall out of the tray onto the stainless steel sink. They make a noise when they drop into a glass too, but, then, the rakia made a glugging sound as it was

poured in after, and she thought it unlikely, on balance, that any of these sounds were loud enough to disturb the slumbering household. The noise she was making was relative to the quietness around her, which seemed complete in the echo chamber of the tiled kitchen.

As she poured an inch of the pinkish liquor onto the ice in the glass, Nishanthi had assumed correctly that the label round the neck of the bottle had been written by Ivett. And incorrectly that it must therefore be a peace offering and apology for the inappropriate behaviour with Timmy during the previous visit. Fair enough, she thought, it was a decent gesture. And the fact that this was honeyed rakia, as opposed to the ordinary kind, she supposed, suggested that Ivett had been mindful of the sensibilities of another girl, one who generally didn't drink at all. Perhaps, she mused as she attempted to cut the skin of the lemon as she'd seen it done yesterday, she'd misjudged Ivett, who was as straight up as Timmy had insisted. Should she go and wake Timmy to have a drink with him? Drinking alone, she had heard, wasn't a good thing. No, she thought, as she dropped the lemon peel into the glass and sniffed the result, it would be ridiculous to wake him. It smelled pretty good, and this was obviously something she could do alone.

The ascent to the first floor living room was interrupted when Nishanthi stopped half-way up to taste her drink. It slipped down very nicely, all of it, then and there, so she returned to the kitchen and prepared another, bigger, before making it to the top of the stairs and into the living room.

The place was a tip, with all the kids' stuff left where it lay, no effort whatsoever having been made by Tasha. But it probably didn't matter all that much, decided Nishanthi, as she removed her tights and hitched up her skirt prior to flopping down on the sofa. She took another swig, a deep one, and the ice rattled against the sides of the glass, which made her smile at the idea that such a pretty, dainty sound could awaken a household. How could cold ice make her feel so warm inside? She shook the glass rhythmically, as if playing the thalampataa at her much-hated Kandyan dance classes as a girl and, remembering that the sound should be dedicated to some god or another, without the first idea which one, she raised the glass on high, shook it vigorously and declared that the music was for just about anyone who cared to be listening.

Downstairs, listening, was Podi Kelle. She alone of the old folk was still awake, having spent the evening in her room, struggling with the instructions for her new Nokia. By and large, she'd managed to piece together what was required to operate it by following the pictures, resorting with some difficulty to the complicated English instructions only when necessary. She'd managed to insert the SIM card, and had understood the need to charge the phone before using it, spending the time whilst she waited working out what it did.

She was sitting on her slender bed, in her nightie, socks and a cardigan, the heating being inadequate for her old bones. She had open beside her her memories-tin, into which she had placed the hands-free headphones, still tied in the middle – she'd wanted to deposit the entire box in the tin, but it was too big.

She had heard Nishanthi come in, make trips up and down the stairs and do something in the kitchen, although she couldn't think what that might be at this time. And now she was listening to her in the room directly above, shaking what sounded to her like a pantheruwa and talking loudly to someone. That girl really ought to have sorted herself out by now, thought the older woman.

Tired of waiting for the phone to charge, and distracted by the madness of Nishanthi above, Podi Kelle decided it was time to contact Ken, to send her first ever text message. Nervously, she unplugged the Nokia, peered down her tiny nose first at the instructions, then at the screen, trudged through the menu until she found the page from which to write her message.

Painstakingly, concentrating all the while on the keypad, she typed <hello ken>, and was dismayed when she peered into the screen and saw <gdkm jdm>. A second attempt produced <gdjlm leon>, causing her great frustration because, although she knew it was quite wrong, she wasn't sure how to get it right. She briefly contemplated throwing the stupid phone against the wall, but after several restarts, and by abandoning the first word altogether, she managed eventually to produce just <ken>, which she decided would have to do at this late hour. The brown collection envelope with Ken's mobile number on it was lying on top of her tin collection, the number side down so as to protect it from any spills, and gingerly she flipped it over to begin to type the number into the phone.

Her heart raced as her finger hovered over the send button. What was she

thinking of, getting in touch with this old man outside the prayer group where, surely, they only belonged together. It was ridiculous to be sending him a text message, she a servant, an old lady. How could she pursue a relationship with him, despite the braggadocio with which she'd informed Angelina that afternoon about her new boyfriend. How boyfriend? What boyfriend? When boyfriend?

She heard Nishanthi stir above, the rumbling as she rose to her feet, trudge over to the door and out into the landing. She heard some giggling, accompanied by urgent shushing, which seemed to make the giggling more urgent still, and then the descent towards the kitchen once again, sympathetic tinkling in the background each time a foot landed heavily, irregularly, on the carpet strip running down the centre of the staircase.

'Oh, bollocks!' she heard Nishanthi whisper noisily, after a thud which can only have been the sound of a soft body part making contact with a solid bit of teak, followed by more, scantily-contained laughter, and the clear click of the kitchen door closing. Almost as if as a reflex response, the click of the door triggered Podi Kelle's finger to press send, and then it was all too late. It had gone, the message was no longer within her control, and she didn't know what would happen next.

Given that she could barely stand upright, Nishanthi had developed a remarkable skill with knife and lemon peel. She wobbled dangerously back and forth, from toe to heel and back again, foggily now thanking her mother for all that fucking Kandyan dance, which had finally come up trumps in the form of what felt like an unexpectedly enhanced sense of balance under the most challenging of circumstances. And whilst she moved as if on a rough sea, she deftly whipped off an inch-long slice from the unused end of the lemon with a paring knife sharp enough that, should things go wrong, she could cut her finger off.

There was a greater challenge to her dance skills, however, when she dropped the slice of lemon peel and bent down to retrieve it, short sharp blade in hand, so that she nearly stabbed herself in her chin. Spotting the danger, and understanding intuitively that her centre of balance had moved beyond the point where she could sustain it, she let go the knife just as she toppled over head first into the stainless steel waste bin. This was a clatter which could certainly waken

the household, and she lay very still for a moment, as if the mean of a great noise and a moment of silence would result in something approximating to a period of calm.

She'd never seen the kitchen from the floor before, at least, not lying sideways in the corner where ordinarily the bin stood. She looked up at the ceiling and decided it needed a coat of paint, and the roll-down blinds on the windows, which were never rolled down, looked very dated. She decided she had to do something about them. In fact, the whole room needed decorating, really. And the tap dripped so, whilst she was at it, why not get a new kitchen fitted. She decided she'd try lying down in every room in the house, because this was clearly the only way to gain a truly objective view of the decorative state of the house as a whole. She'd start with her living room – in fact, she'd do that as soon as she got upstairs with her refreshed drink – and the old folks' living room was a bit dreary too. She remembered thinking that as she'd lain beside her father in bed earlier in this long day. Yes, decorating the old folks' rooms in general would be a good thing, because it would maintain the value of the property, the downstairs being the first part anybody sees. That would be a job for after her father had died, whenever that might be. When was he going to die? She wished he'd get on with it.

She stirred, like a beached killer whale, managing to roll onto her belly, from which position she heaved herself onto all fours, then her knees, then, leaning on the waste bin, her feet, where she wobbled some more. She'd forgotten the lemon peel, so she squatted, again with the support of the bin, and retrieved it, but decided the knife had best remain where it lay, which was conveniently close to the wall and so not a hazard.

She staggered over to the sink to wash the lemon peel, where she turned on the tap much too fully, and was splashed by water as it bounced noisily back up at her. Bloody stainless steel everywhere, too much, get rid of it, it's noisy. She sniggered, then tittered, then choked as she tried not to guffaw, the water dripping down her face and bosom.

'Where's the bloody glass,' she regained her sense of decorum, as she attempted the tricky task of pushing out three cubes of ice without dislodging the remainder, 'ah, glass meet *glace*, *glace* meet glass!'

All the cubes fell out, only some of them into the glass, which was just hilarious. Nishanthi pushed her arm tight against her mouth to stifle the howls of laughter which followed, causing her to wobble dangerously once more. The ice on the floor would just have to stay down there with the knife

She stood upright and still, at last, her bottom braced firmly against the work surface behind her, and poured a massive shot of rakia over the ice, onto which she attempted to float the lemon peel like a child's boat. Being wet, it sank immediately and, with resignation and not a little disappointment, Nishanthi set off for the door, the first stage of the ascent to her oh-so-comfortable sofa.

Podi Kelle had listened in amazement to the row Nishanthi was making in the kitchen, wondering what had got into the girl that she seemed to care so little about the rest of the household. Had her selfishness really reached the point where her growing children and dying father meant so little to her? The crash, which she assumed meant Nishanthi had fallen over, was so loud that she thought she ought to go and investigate, but she decided someone else would do that if they'd been awoken, and there was no point engaging with this elephantine madwoman if they'd not.

As she heard the kitchen door open and Nishanthi emerge, Podi Kelle had become so distracted by the goings on across the hallway that the sudden ping which came from her phone surprised her so much that she let a little wee flow. It was a text message. It was Ken replying. It said <hello, darling! fncy hearing frm u>. She understood and was pleased by the first part – darling, indeed! – but hadn't a clue what the second part meant. However, she needed the toilet now, rather urgently, and hoped that Nishanthi had made it upstairs so that she could cross over to the downstairs cloakroom undetected.

Nishanthi, alas, was only half way up the stairs, clinging on to the bannisters for all her life was worth, swaying out of control, absurdly. She spotted Podi Kelle as she emerged into the light of the hallway, and tried to make herself invisible.

'You ok, Nishanthi?' asked Podi Kelle, unable to pretend that there was no-one there.

'Yes – yes – yes...' Nishanthi struggled as she attempted to seem sober,

'I'm werry vell. No, I'm very very – you know...'

Forgetting the more important role which she'd given her glass-carrying hand, she attempted imperiously to dismiss Podi Kelle, but it didn't feel appropriate to be waving a glass full of honeyed rakia at the old lady below her. So she waved instead with the other hand, forgetting equally the function to which this one had been put, and having once let go of the bannister she collapsed onto her back, spilled her drink down her front, and slid, bump-bump-bump, down the stairs until she arrived at Podi Kelle's feet, her skirt around her middle and knickers – too fancy, too slight, too small – in Podi Kelle's plain view.

This was too much for Podi Kelle who, without any acknowledgement of the peculiarity of the situation, without saying a word, darted off to the toilet to attend to a task inconveniently begun and dangerously close to completion. At least, she thought, this avoided the unavoidable truth of there being no etiquette in precedence on which she could draw to assist the daughter of her mistress who, she couldn't fail now to understand, was rollingly, hopelessly drunk.

If, however, some small part of Podi Kelle's action had been taken in the hope that the problem of Nishanthi's drunken collapse at the bottom of the stairs might go away, it was in vain. Nishanthi lay exactly where she'd fallen as Podi Kelle emerged from the bathroom, her washed hands still clammy wet. She touched Nishanthi's face, since the girl seemed to have drifted off to sleep, and the coldness of her fingers produced a shocked return to consciousness.

'Hello, Podi,' she peered through setting eyes, her sense of humour now vanished, 'I seem to have fallen down stairs. Do you think you could help me up, please?'

'Come on, daahleeng,' Podi Kelle bent, offering a hand in the hope of heaving Nishanthi's mass – surely twice her own – back onto her feet, and up the stairs to somewhere safe and discreet.

Through the open doors to her bedroom she heard her phone ping again.

'Oh, is that person still I-M-ing Timmy?' Nishanthi heard it too, 'Bloody nuisance. Must stop that.'

Unable to shift Nishanthi even a little, all Podi Kelle could do was assist

as she rolled onto her front and began to crawl up the stairs, leaving the glass lying on its side, the ice and lemon like escaped fish nearby. Podi Kelle did what she could to preserve the little that remained of Nishanthi's modesty, tugging at the skirt, but the action of crawling up the stairs achieved the same end anyway.

'I like your cardi,' Nishanthi paused for a moment and squinted sideways at Podi Kelle, 'it's nice and cosy. We like nice and cosy, don't we. Podi?'

'Ha.'

'I was wondering...'

'Yes?'

'Huh?'

'You wandering?'

'No. No. I was wondering, not wandering.'

'Ok, what you wandering?'

'What? Oh – I don't know. I don't know what I was wondering. Am I wondering?'

'You go sleep now, remember in morning maybe.'

'Yes. Yes. I like your cardi, Podi. D'you knit it yourself?'

'No, your mum knit for me. Remember?'

'No.'

'Hari, your mum. Last year.'

'I don't remember that either.'

They had arrived on the landing, with Nishanthi still crawling on all fours, the ability to walk on two legs having deserted her completely. Podi Kelle thought that a bystander, had there been one (which happily there was not), might have thought initially that she was taking a massive, ungainly dog for a walk, encouraging it to take one more step, then another and another, leading it to its bed for the night.

Once in the family living room, Nishanthi silently clambered up onto the sofa, nearly falling only once, before collapsing into its soft cushions, where she

lay, a spent force. Podi Kelle stood over her for a moment, to make sure she was safely resting, and to remember her as the small child she'd once cared for. As she turned to leave, Nishanthi moved fractionally, with a grunt, and without opening her eyes muttered something which Podi Kelle failed to catch.

'What you say, daahleeng?'

'I said...' there was a long pause, a mustering of energy, '...I love you, Podi. You're always there for me.'

Podi Kelle retreated without saying anything further, part of her touched by Nishanthi's appreciation, but the other part annoyed that it took drink – a lot of it, it seemed – to make her a pleasant person. She switched off the light, and tip-toed downstairs, eager to read Ken's second message.

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Arnold was relatively cheerful the next morning, sitting upright in bed with the laptop actually on his lap, when Dr. Aziz called in to see how things were. She'd developed the habit of driving by Holly House if it was convenient, dropping in without calling first in order to get a better picture of her patient as he actually was, rather than as he wanted her to see him. She was greatly troubled that Arnold had continued to eschew a specialist's examination, refusing even to go to the hospital, and that without his cooperation she could do nothing more to help him, other than monitor his decline.

Angelina and Podi Kelle had stayed by Arnold's bedside during the examination, as usual, and all the usual pleasantries had been exchanged, when there was an unaccountably great thud on the floor above, followed by the loud and protracted moan of one in pain. Dr. Aziz, who had finished and was packing her bag, stopped and looked round for either an explanation, or an invitation to go and help, but preferably both. As it was, she saw nothing but the gaping, wide-mouthed astonishment of the others, each of whom stared up at the ceiling, lost in incomprehension.

It was Podi Kelle, having knowledge not yet available to the others, who guessed what had happened and recovered first. She lowered her head, searching hard for an acceptable way to introduce the topic which, inevitably, was now at hand.

'That Nishanthi falling off sofa,' she began.

The statement was ridiculous, not for reasons of inaccuracy since it was plainly true, but because it was so incomplete. It was like accounting for a plane crash by stating only that it had hit the ground. The fact the Podi Kelle spoke first, moreover, led the others to realise that she knew some of the explanation behind the calamity which had just occurred over their heads, which itself made the matter more mysterious.

'What do you mean, Podi?' asked Angelina.

'Nishanthi slept on sofa last night.'

There was a heavy pause, as it appeared that an incident of domestic disharmony was about to be discussed in front of an outsider. Angelina tutted inwardly, acknowledging to herself that she'd been right all along about the coolness between her daughter and son-in-law. What had happened between them last night, she wondered? It must have been a most unusual row for Nishanthi to sleep on the sofa, as ordinarily she would have kicked Timmy out, for sure, and kept the bed to herself.

'How do you know that, Podi?' Arnold demanded, vainly attempting to take control of the situation.

'I helped her get there last night. You both sleep, she fall on stairs.'

'Is she all right?' Dr. Aziz was about to rise to the challenge.

'Hari, she ok. Just she...' Podi Kelle paused, still searching for the right form of words, '...she had big drink last night.'

'Nishanthi was drinking?' Angelina didn't think this was possible, knowing that her daughter barely ever touched a drop.

'Hari. Drink.'

'Well!'

'Stupid girl,' chipped in Arnold, 'and why's she still on the sofa – or rather why's she just fallen off it – at ten in the morning? She's normally been up in the loft for four hours by now!'

'Big drink!'

'Oh dear!' Angelina was embarrassed, 'That's why the kitchen was such a mess this morning?'

'Hari.'

'What mess, what had she done?'

'Well, everything was knocked around when I went in to make your breakfast – the bin was in the middle of the floor, and there were little puddles of water...'

'You don't mean...?' Arnold interrupted, his own guilt reawakened by the fear that peeing on the floor was becoming a commonplace within his family.

'No no – I assume she'd dropped ice cubes. And there was a knife on the floor which I nearly trod on. Thank god I was in there before Tasha and the twins!'

'What the hell's she doing that for?' demanded Arnold, becoming agitated.

'Keep calm, Arnold,' Dr. Aziz stepped into the exchange, 'look why don't I just pop up there and see if she's ok?'

'Oh, would you, please, doctor?' Angelina smiled.

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Timmy was in the office, hard at work, catching up on the stuff he'd left undone during his Bulgarian trip. He'd arisen in time to see the kids off to school, as was his habit generally, and had been unsurprised to find that he was alone in bed. Nishanthi usually started work so early that rarely was she beside him when his alarm went off. However, when he opened the lounge door, which was usually never closed, and discovered his wife snoring on the sofa within, he was astonished. He couldn't remember a time when she'd ever elected to sleep on the sofa, not once throughout their marriage, although he'd been invited to do so on more than one occasion (personally, he found the sofa in the office to be altogether more conducive to a good night's sleep). It was true that the last words they'd exchanged the night before had been short and harsh, and also true that he'd gone to sleep quite soon afterwards, leaving Nishanthi no choice but to sleep on a sofa, if she was truly so cross that separate beds were deemed necessary, but it didn't really make sense.

He had steered the twins away from the lounge, protesting because they'd got into the habit of watching videos as they ate, and instead led them down to the kitchen, where Tasha was preparing their breakfasts. Immediately, the explanation for Nishanthi's irregular behaviour became clear. Last night, when he'd gone to bed, the naughty bottle Ivett had sent was standing beside his suitcase, and it was full. He knew this, now he thought about it, because he'd picked it up and wistfully pecked it goodnight. This morning it was in the kitchen, and it was half empty. But it still didn't really make sense, because Nishanthi hardly ever drank.

He decided to leave her to sleep it off (what a headache she was going to wake up with!), kissed the twins goodbye, and went up to start work. The only thing which he knew had emerged for sure on this bizarre morning was that he had a reasonable claim to the moral high ground, and this was going to be tremendously useful given the conversation about his plans he knew they were going to have to have at some point soon.

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Angelina and Podi Kelle followed Dr. Aziz out of the bedroom, leaving Arnold staring up at the ceiling once more. Of the many things which had become clear to him as he had lain there for these weeks, one was that people never examine their ceilings, many of which must be in need of decoration most of the time. Oh, the rich benefit to be accrued from being forced down, when the only way to look is up.

If he could peer through his ceiling, beyond he would see his overweight, angry daughter reclining on the sofa, explaining to his GP why she had drunk so much that she had required the help of the servant to climb again the stairs down which she'd just somersaulted. She could have killed herself, stupid girl, whom he'd not brought up to drink anyway. Her brother had always drunk, but she hadn't. And he assumed he would see his wife lurking on the landing, waiting for Dr. Aziz to leave before herself entering the lounge to see Nishanthi. They were so dissimilar, mother and daughter, that there would be no danger of inappropriate questions giving rise to furious answers, as there would have been had Arnold gone to see her, since they never engaged sufficiently to get under each other's skin. Instead, Angelina would say pleasant things as she buzzed about tidying the children's paraphernalia, whilst Nishanthi lay back, her arm cast over her eyes

dramatically, putting up with it all.

Looking further up in his imagination, he could see the office, the whole of the top floor, with its white sloping ceiling and cubicles formed by the inside of the dormer windows. It was always so busy, with his daughter hard at work on her computer (usually), Timmy with his head in one of the library of identical law books which filled the shelves, and Ruth, by the filing cabinets or answering the ever-ringing phone, gluing the team together. Although Arnold had put his entire estate into the purchase of Holly House, he wasn't so foolish as to believe that he'd made much of a dent in the price, and he knew that the engine which ran the family was right there, two floors above him. He should have realised at the time that he was surrendering himself to the charity of others rather than, somehow, vaguely, imagining he had remained head of the family.

He remembered enjoying being head of the family, when the children were young, being difficult, growing up, but still biddable by and large. When he had required them to do something, he smiled, he would insist that they did it before he had counted to three. He would reach two and, having failed to achieve a satisfactory response, switch into fractions to delay reaching the point of no return. And now, beyond the loft, beyond the slated roof – two and a half – beyond the old poplar trees in the garden, which grew higher than the house – two and three quarters – beyond the jet he could hear coming in to land at the airport – two and seven eighths – he knew he was avoiding the ultimate question – two and fifteen sixteenths – he couldn't stop himself from asking it – two and thirty-one thirty-seconds – above the clouds – THREE.

Where was god, if not on his heavenly throne? Where was Jesus, if not at his right hand? Where was the paraclete if not in flight above his head? What was in the void? Was nothing something? Was his end his end?

There was a distant, electronic beep.

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Dr. Aziz gently opened the door and craned her head round. 'Nishanthi,' she whispered.

Nishanthi looked up and, through half-closed, still-pissed eyes, mistook the covered head of Dr. Aziz for a swaddled baby being passed through the door

by an unseen third party. Only when she saw a grown-up's face rise towards her, brown amidst the light blue of the hijab, could she make sense of Dr. Aziz's entrance. And only then did she realise that she wasn't in a state to receive visitors. But it was too late, she had been found out.

'Good morning, Dr. Aziz,' she whimpered.

'May I come in?'

Nishanthi was sitting where she'd fallen, beside the sofa and leaning up against it, her forehead resting on her up-stretched hand. Dr. Aziz thought her posture was curled, defensive, regretful, and with her muscle tone relaxed – surrendered, in fact – she looked very large and very uncomfortable. But not injured.

'How are you feeling?'

'Ah, a subpoena. I suppose it was inevitable.'

'No, I just wondered if you were ok? We heard you fall.'

'I only rolled off the sofa. It's not so great a drop.' Nishanthi furrowed her brow as she thought through the implication of the 'we' of Dr. Aziz's statement, come to that of Dr. Aziz's presence at all. 'What time is it?'

'It's just gone ten.'

'Christ alive, what a dog's dinner this is!' She let her head fall back onto her hand. 'So you and my parents heard me fall off the sofa from downstairs?'

'And Podi Kelle too, I'm afraid.'

'What the bloody hell's it got to do with Podi!'

'She helped you up here last night, she says, after you'd fallen downstairs.'

Through pained eyes, Nishanthi looked up at Dr. Aziz, wishing that that wasn't true, but remembering nothing.

'Fucking hell!' her head fell back onto her palm, 'Excuse my Bulgarian.'

'That's ok. May I come in?'

Nishanthi waved her hand over the unoccupied end of the sofa, an

invitation to enter the room and sit down. Dr. Aziz carefully shut the door behind her as she approached, catching a glimpse of Angelina behind her, creeping up the stairs.

'Nice glass of red wine, was it?'

Nishanthi recognised the targeted probing of a professional, since it was exactly the style of opening gambit she would have used with a difficult client. But there was something too ironic about this question coming from a head-scarfed Muslim. She looked apologetically at Dr. Aziz, preparing her for the impolite answer which she felt she was obliged to give.

'I'm pretty sure you wouldn't recognise a nice glass of red wine from a glass of Ribena, Dr. Aziz!'

'Oh, you've got to be kidding!' laughed the doctor, 'I love a glass of red wine. And white. Don't mind a rum and coke, if it comes to it!'

'But, but you're...' Nishanthi waved her hands around her own head in a manner which was intended to suggest the hijab.

Dr. Aziz laughed loudly, 'Oh, this bloody thing!'

She unwrapped her head scarf, and let it fall lifelessly onto her knee.

Nishanthi was astonished by the gesture, and by the frankness which it revealed. 'Didn't see that one coming!'

Dr. Aziz chuckled, 'We could talk about people only seeing the headscarf, not the person, if you like, but I'd rather talk about red wine.'

'Hang on! You can't do....' Nishanthi struggled for the right word, '...THAT, and just carry on...'

'Oh, you know what, it's not really that important – not really – just a bit of silk, look!' she wafted the shapeless fabric in the air.

'Why d'you wear the bloody thing, then?'

'The usual.'

'Huh?'

'Y'know, parents, community. I wear it for my children as well.'

'Children?'

'Yeah. I don't know if it really matters whether kids are brought up in their culture or not, but they can always abandon it when they're older if they want. But only if they've grown up with it. You can't do it the other way round.'

'How old're your kids?'

'About the same age as your twins – one a year older, the other a year younger.'

'Is their dad a... what are you?'

'I'm Gujarati. So's their dad. We met at med school, of course.'

'India?'

'No, never been there – well, we've done the tourist stuff – Taj Mahal, Amritsar, all that stuff – but I've never been to Gujarat. There's no family there anymore. Born here – I mean here here – right here, in Luton. My parents were kicked out of Uganda and got lucky!'

Nishanthi harrumphed at the suggestion that getting lucky equated to ending up in Luton.

'Dad's not great these days, but they're getting on with it. We're in Kimpton now. They live with us, same sort of deal you've got here. Your house is bigger, though. We're in an Elizabethan manor which is great, but it's all a bit close, if you know what I mean.'

'Servant?'

'No no, they were never that posh. Shopkeepers all their lives.'

'Not religious?'

'Not in the slightest.'

'Head scarf?'

'That's not a religious thing, just cultural.'

'Just!'

'Well, yeah, but you know what I mean. It pleases my parents – they're really conservative! – and gives my kids the option. Oh, and it's useful

professionally with older lady patients.'

Nishanthi's body sunk further down into its slouch, as if the attempt at conversation was becoming too much.

'You weren't born here?' Dr. Aziz persisted.

'No. Hybrid mutt.'

'Just with you being a Christian family?'

'That too!' Nishanthi made a renewed effort, shifting into a marginally more upright position, 'Except I'm not religious either, of course. The oldies are. I was ten when I came here, Sri Lanka to the Home Counties – which was where my father thought he'd been living anyway.'

'Except Bedfordsh...

'...dfordshire's not one of the Home Counties – yes, they know that now! Luton's as good as anywhere in middle England, I suppose.'

'Get back to Sri Lanka at all?'

'Every couple of years or so. Take the kids home.'

'Their culture!'

'No, nothing like that,' Nishanthi became irritated by the effort of this interrogation, 'Just that we can't leave them behind yet. When they're older...' she looked wistfully into the future. 'Anyway, they're quarter-English, quarter-Polish, quarter-Tamil, quarter-Sinhalese in theory, and wholly English in practise – no headscarf, no funny religion...'

'Funny religion! How about funny language?'

'No, no language – which one anyway, Tamil or Sinhala? I grew up speaking English – can hardly expect them to be different.'

'Little English people.'

'Brownier than their mates at school, that's all.'

'That bother you?'

Nishanthi's temper began to rise, and, with a groan, she lugged her weight into a position which had the makings of something confrontational.

'No, actually, I don't care a bit, not one little bit,' she snapped, 'they're English because they're here, and I didn't have the option you had to bring them up with a choice, a decision to make later when they've grown up, because I was always just brown-English myself.'

'Except you're not – you're less English than me.'

'What the fuck's English anyway!'

'Good point! I suppose it's what you are if you're not something else.'

'In that case, I think I'm not English, because I am Sri Lankan. And I came here because my parents – my father – made me.'

'And now that he's so poorly...?'

'...I'm wondering why we ever came here.'

'You've got your practice, your husband, your children...'

'Yeah yeah yeah, but I wonder if it's too late for me to go back – this is where I live – but, y'know, it makes you think when your father's dying. Makes you think.'

'Makes you drink?'

Nishanthi, brought suddenly face to face with the reality of this ghastly morning, would have slapped Dr. Aziz at that moment, had she been any closer.

'Oh, that!' she shouted, 'Yeah, well, it's been a tough weekend.'

'Do you usually drink?'

Dr. Aziz's transformation back into the distant professional was complete.

'No, Dr. Aziz, I don't. In fact, I never drink. Never drank. It's quite good fun though, isn't it, so I might do it some more.'

'In moderation?'

'I don't know, maybe not. Maybe I'll drink lots and lots, then with the practise I'll get better at it and not fall off the sofa.'

Dr. Aziz smiled, as she deftly wrapped her hijab round her head, tucking the trailing end in at her temple.

'Your haircut's great, by the way,' Nishanthi attempted to recover some dignity, 'where d'you get it done?'

'I've got a lady who comes to my house.'

'Nice one.'

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From within her small room, Podi Kelle heard Dr. Aziz leave. It sounded as if no-one had been on hand to show her out, a courtesy which ought to have been shown to a doctor, without doubt. She had herself been preoccupied with her Nokia, on which she had now received a series of text messages from Ken, some more understandable than others, and with which she had sent a number of replies, all of them notably succinct. Something about this message business was quite difficult, she had decided, unclear as to which one of her language skills, the Nokia or the tentative nature of her new relationship with Ken, was principally the cause.

The latest message, however, was different from the rest. It wasn't small talk, it wasn't a hard-to-understand reflection on their situation, it wasn't abbreviated beyond the point where she could tell what Ken was saying. It was an invitation to call round and have a cup of tea, that afternoon, with Ken's address included. This was a great challenge, Podi Kelle thought, one which interrogated not only her willingness to develop this new friendship, but also her ability to step outside the role she owned and the household in which she owned it. Nipping out covertly on a Wednesday evening was one thing, but to leave for her own purposes during the day, a weekday, felt like something for which she needed permission.

On the other hand, what point had there been in acquiring her Nokia and battling to learn its arcane operation, if it hadn't been with a view to developing her relationship with Ken? And the only person who would notice her absence was Angelina, the only person who knew about Ken, so it was reasonable to think that a quiet word of explanation would secure, well, not permission exactly, rather an understanding, an agreement, an acceptance. But it was a bit naughty, for all that.

With none whatsoever of the deftness of the teenagers she'd watched, she

gazed at her phone and painfully pecked out <yes> in reply to Ken's invitation. Almost by return, he replied <gr8 3.00pm>, which, she decided, couldn't really be 8.30 typed as badly as she might have, not if the invitation was to tea.

Ken lived very near, as it happened, just round a couple of corners, a short walk to a block which she knew. They were retirement flats, and once or twice, on the way back from church, Angelina and Arnold had stopped the car outside them to discuss the potential contingency of one day moving in. Podi Kelle, then, had plenty of time to do, and be seen to be doing, useful things around the house before she had to set off.

Like Arnold, she expected that Angelina would be busy fretting around Nishanthi upstairs, so went to prepare lunch. All was left to her, as usual, and she pondered the best way of making sure that her labours were recognised. Making a noise in the kitchen, always a favourite since the clashing and banging never failed to catch the attention of the household, wasn't an ideal approach this morning, with not just a dying man within earshot, but also his hungover daughter. Ah yes, perfect, if she included Nishanthi in her lunch preparations, taking a tray up to her, that would do the job nicely, that would be registered.

And it was, but not quite as Podi Kelle had intended. Preparing the lunch involved nothing more than heating up some left-over chicken curry and rice in the microwave, during which time Angelina came downstairs, looked into the kitchen to check on her, and went to join Arnold.

Podi Kelle made up a plate, put it and a glass of water on a tray, which she carried through to Arnold and Angelina's bedroom to announce that she was just taking a little something up to Nishanthi – poor thing will be hungry by now – and that she'd be right down with their lunches too.

If she'd delayed her about-turn for just a moment, she might have heard Angelina express the view that taking food, or indeed anything, up to Nishanthi right now was a mistake, that she was best left to her own devices. But she didn't, she swivelled with great deftness on one heel, maintaining the tray at a perfect horizontal, and ostentatiously left the bedroom just as Angelina began to raise her index finger and draw breath to speak.

She entered Nishanthi's living room after knocking gently, smiling, rather

pleased with herself. Nishanthi was sitting on the sofa, looking very sorry for herself. The room was much tidier than it had been last night – Angelina's work no doubt.

'Brought lunch, ah,' Podi Kelle was delighted to report.

Nishanthi glowered at her, narrowing her already-hooded eyes, and, without so much as a word, raised her middle finger in a gesture which Podi Kelle didn't wholly understand, but which she'd seen others make and the drift of which she grasped.

'You very rude girl!' she hissed.

'Fuck off, Podi!' mouthed Nishanthi silently.

Podi Kelle attempted to stomp down the stairs angrily, as Nishanthi would have herself, but found to her dismay that she was too light to make the right sort of noise, and so returned to the kitchen to do a bit of clattering and banging before taking lunch through to the bedroom.

Arnold was sitting up in bed, appearing to be reasonably cheerful, reading something on Timmy's laptop, while Angelina sat in one of the armchairs, looking wistfully out of the window.

'Nishanthi very rude to me!' complained Podi Kelle on entering.

'And to me,' responded Angelina, without looking round.

Podi Kelle stood still, without speaking again, until the fact that she was carrying lunch for them all was noticed, and Angelina rose to help. Arnold appeared either not to have noticed, or to be taking no notice, lost in the internet.

'Arnold, put that down, please, Podi's brought lunch for us.'

'In a minute.'

'No, come on!'

'Wait wait...'

'But it's here...'

'And I'm reading about the creator and destroyer of all things, the omnipotent, he who is before the past and after the future...'

'Well lunch is neither, it's now!'

Arnold huffed, and laid down the laptop on the bed beside him. Podi Kelle could see a picture of a bright blue Indian god on the screen.

'You read about god, no?' Podi Kelle asked, puzzled.

'Indeed I am, Podi, about Vishnu, one of the triumvirate with Brahman and Shiva, one of the other trinity.'

'Ah, chicken curry today,' she responded as she placed a plate on his knee.

They heard Nishanthi stir above their heads, and all three grew silent.

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By the time she had arrived at Ken's place, Podi Kelle was late. A large part of the delay had been in busying herself until there was an obvious and convenient moment to speak to Angelina alone, which presented itself only when she came through to the kitchen, where Podi Kelle was making early preparations for dinner. She had come to make a cup of tea, having sat for a long time in the armchair, silently, doing nothing, whilst Arnold resumed his reading about Hindu gods and Podi Kelle bobbed in and out.

Asked if she too wanted tea, Podi Kelle seized the moment and announced, tentatively, that she was going out to have tea with Ken. Angelina looked up at her, but said nothing, nodding silently, unhappily.

Having tidied the kitchen, washed her face and put her coat on, Podi Kelle crossed the living room from her bedroom, intending to signal her departure silently to Angelina, without Arnold seeing. She was sure he'd be asleep by now anyway. But as she approached the other bedroom door, which was open, she heard Arnold stir and hesitated at the threshold.

'Finish your tea, it'll be cold!' Arnold said drowsily.

She peered in, carefully, and saw Arnold lying down, about to snooze, the laptop on Angelina's side of the bed beside him, Tiger curled up at his feet.

As he lay, rolling on the edge of sleep, he had noticed that Angelina, having returned from the kitchen with a cup of tea, had sat once again in the

armchair, where she remained in a state of taciturn contemplation.

'What?' she reacted.

'Finish your tea.' Arnold brought himself back from the beginnings of his slumbers. 'What's bothering you, old girl? What's the matter?'

'What?'

'I asked what it is...'

'Yes, I heard, but why are you asking?'

'What do you mean, why am I asking? I'm asking because I'm asking.'

'But you never ask how I am. Or anything.'

'Rubbish. That's a ridiculous thing to say.'

Arnold started to stir.

'No, don't get up – keep calm. All I'm saying is that... oh, look, never mind.'

'Never mind! Never mind!' Arnold was irritated.

'Just be, will you. Go to sleep. I'm bothered about Nishanthi and the way she's behaving.'

Arnold lay back and eased himself on his side, ready for sleep once more, 'Oh, that! Nothing new there, then – apart from the drinking,' he grunted.

Tiger stirred, stretched luxuriously and curled up again, in the opposite direction. Podi Kelle stepped silently away from the door, tiptoeing towards her exit.

Minutes later, at last, she stood at the door to Ken's block of flats, shivering on this icy day. She hesitated briefly before pressing the button, but it was just too cold for second thoughts. Her finger was so frozen that she could barely tell if she'd made contact.

The intercom spattered into life, 'Hello, Dilisini – do come in – first floor, on the left...' followed by a buzz and a click as the door unlocked.

Podi Kelle remembered her beginnings, in a place with no locks at all, as she began to climb the stairs.

Ken, with an enormous smile on his face, was standing on the landing, waiting for her. He stretched out his arms in a gesture of welcome, and Podi Kelle stepped straight into them, so that he wrapped her instinctively into his embrace.

'Cold, ah!' she announced as she laid her head on his chest, a gesture she'd not made since her youth, and then not shivering.

'Come in come in come in,' Ken hadn't expected her to greet him in this way, 'get yourself warm!'

Ken's room seemed tiny as Podi Kelle first entered. Not only was it a fraction of the size of the rooms in Holly House, it was also cluttered, with hardly a surface not covered in objects too numerous for her to take in at first glance. It was warm, though, and made warmer when Ken reached down to switch on the electric fire, which stood in the place where a chimney breast could have been.

'Sit down sit down. No, take your coat off, let me hang it up. There. Sit sit.' Ken seemed flustered. 'I was worrying that you weren't going to come – it's getting dark,' he said glancing towards the window.

'Yes, ah, sorry I late. Get away tricky.'

'Oh, not to worry – you're here now!' he smiled, 'Tea? Cake?'

From Ken's seat where, as an act of courtesy he'd bidden her to sit, Podi Kelle had time to survey the room whilst he was up making the tea. It was a single room, an all-in-one L-shaped studio, the double bed tucked tightly round the corner, and the kitchen and bathroom each off the tiny entrance hall. She could hear Ken as he boiled the kettle, but he was out of sight, so she took the opportunity to peer curiously at his collection of objects.

It seemed like every patch of wall, and every table and ledge was a memory. There were photos of Ken and his wife, ranging from an ancient, glass-framed black and white wedding picture right up to them both in old age and in colour, in which she looked frail. Her last picture, Podi Kelle wondered? And there were pictures of their two children, two boys, which he'd never mentioned – but what opportunity had he had to mention them, since there were so many other things to talk about. The boys had been photographed through the ages too, from very small to being each with their own families – Ken was a grandfather –

including a graduation shot for each of them, like Nishanthi and Timmy had. And beside the photos of the boys in academic dress, there was one of Ken in his own graduation gown, clutching a paper scroll and smiling broadly at the camera. It must have been a recent picture, since he was older in it than he was in that last shot with his wife.

The family photographs, numerous as they were, represented only a small part of Ken's collection of life's things, and as for the rest, many were familiar to Podi Kelle, having come from Ceylon as souvenirs of his life as an imperial servant. There were hand-carved elephant book ends, a box made of sandal wood, a *miris gala* just like she used to have in the kitchen at Ambuluwewa, photographs of Ken in his white police uniform, including one of him beside a dead elephant in which he held a rifle and looked pleased with himself, which didn't please Podi Kelle. As she looked further, she realised that some of the furniture on which Ken's collection of memories stood was, itself, hand-made in local wood, bought from village craftsmen, exactly as she remembered it. She was transported back to her own world, amazed by how much it was part of Ken's world too.

She wondered if he still felt the cold as harshly as she did, or whether you had to have been born in the tropics not to be able to adjust to Luton in January. But, then, how did he adjust to the heat of Ceylon when he'd first arrived? That police uniform didn't look particularly light.

Ken lurched out of the kitchen, carrying a tray. His limp was awful, but he was plainly its master. It occurred immediately to Podi Kelle that there was a reason why the seat she'd been invited to take was rightly Ken's, so she stood as if to help with the tray, but settled sideways onto the sofa.

'No no, have my chair – I insist...'

'Yes, Ken, but you need – tall chair better for one leg!'

He smiled at her gratefully. Knowingly or otherwise, he thought, she had deftly reduced his missing limb to a matter of domestic, shared knowledge, so that it would never again have to be mentioned. But she hadn't finished with the matter.

'How you lose leg?'

'An elephant got me.'

'That elephant?' she nodded towards the photograph.

'No, not that one. That one never got anyone ever again.'

He didn't seem embarrassed by the photograph. 'Why you shoot it, ah?'

'It was in musth, running amok in the village.'

'Why it not chained?'

'It had been. Its mahout was very experienced – I knew him well. But this particular bull was having a bad time of it, and broke his chains. He killed the mahout and went on a rampage in the village. I was the local policeman, so it was me who had to shoot it.'

'Why you smile in photo?'

'I don't know now. Back then, I suppose, it was all rather exciting.'

'Different now. Wouldn't shoot elephant like that!'

'No, of course, you wouldn't shoot a wild elephant at all, but a domestic elephant in musth – I think you'd still have to shoot it if it broke free. You'd have no choice.'

'So how come elephant got you if you so good shot?'

'Well, that's the thing. I got a reputation for being exactly that, so every time a bull in my region went crazy, it was me who was brought in to shoot it. It didn't happen very often, maybe three or four times. And on the last occasion, I missed. Considering, I think I was lucky only to lose my leg! I've never been so scared.'

'You stay in Ceylon after?'

'God, yes, you couldn't have dragged me away. I loved it there. They promoted me to a desk job, that's all. Left at Independence. I still miss it.'

'Me too!' Podi Kelle sighed. 'You have many elephant things here. You like elephants?'

'Yes, I do. Funny, isn't it! And funny how we collect things as memories.'

Ken leaned over the side of his chair, and rummaged under the table on

which he kept his *Radio Times*. He brought up a battered old tin with a picture of an Indian pavilion on the front, a Union Jack shield above and Thorne's Extra Super Creme Toffee beneath.

Podi Kelle squealed.

'You have tin – I have tin,' her chest swelling with pride, 'but my tin Huntley and Palmers!'

'Seriously!' Ken laughed.

'Ha, tin with things – biscuit tin – I bring and show you when next time I come.'

'Next time? Great.'

Launching himself from his chair, Ken dragged himself over to the sofa, where he sat beside Podi Kelle, placing the tin between them so that they could begin to rummage through its contents.

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At the end of the office day, the judder of the front door closing behind Ruth disturbed Angelina, who, ironically, had nodded off in the armchair as she waited for Arnold to fall asleep. She had been aware of the children coming back from school earlier, but not to the point that it had awoken her. What a pair of old codgers, she had thought as she took stock of Arnold and herself, both sleeping the daylight away.

Thinking she should check on Nishanthi, maybe try again to speak to her about her behaviour, Angelina crept first over to the bed to take a look at Arnold. Often, these days, she had to make sure he was still breathing, but not today, as he lay snoring and bubbling, his mouth wet with mucus. She decided that there was no single emotion which was a combination of relief and disgust, but that it was possible to experience both simultaneously.

Assuming that Nishanthi would be at work by now, Angelina set off for the top floor, quietly bypassing the kitchen, where she could hear the twins with Tasha, preparing their dinner. She paused on the first landing, the stairs being steep, and was pleased to see the living room door wide open, as usual, suggesting things had returned to normal in this world above. One more push, up the second

flight of stairs, and she emerged into the white openness of the office.

Timmy was alone there. He was hard at work on his computer, clearly concentrating since he had failed to spot Angelina's arrival, and she coughed politely to signal her presence.

'Oh, hi, Amma!' he smiled.

'Hello, Timmy – sorry, I'm not interrupting am I?'

'No, not at all, come in! I've got some coffee on the go – want some?' he said, heading for the little kitchen area in the corner.

'Oh, thank you – lots of milk, though, cos you make it so strong!'

'You and Arnold and your weak coffee! Anyone would think you weren't used to strong flavours.'

'I'd rather have tea any day...'

Immediately, Timmy made as if to put the kettle on, rather than pouring coffee for her.

'No, Timmy, don't, coffee's fine – it'll help wake me up. I've been asleep most of the afternoon.'

'You're not the only one!'

'No, I know, I sat with him whilst he dropped off.'

'I wasn't talking about Arnold, I meant Nish. Flat out in bed most of the afternoon.'

'She's not been up here at work?'

'Nope. There's a first for you!'

'Well, goodness. Crikey.'

'So what's been going on while I was away, then?'

'I was going to ask you the same thing.'

'What do you mean?' Timmy felt a pang of guilt.

'Between you and Nish? Drinking like that. She never drinks. And she was so short with you when you went off to Bulgaria three weeks ago. She was no

better when you came back yesterday. Is there something wrong between you two that I should know about?'

Timmy pondered for a moment whether his mother-in-law should know anything at all about his relationship with her daughter, good or bad, but realised that the nature of their co-habitation meant that enough was already known. Inevitably, answers would be required.

'Truthfully, Amma, I haven't a clue what's going on. The world seems to have started to grind to a halt since I went away – it's in the air, I can feel it. Obviously, poor Arnold lying there, so ill, must be affecting everybody, wondering when he's...' Timmy stopped himself from being obvious.

'But when you went away?'

'Oh, no, that was just...' How to explain to Angelina the complexities of the jealousy over Ivett? 'She just gets a bit stressed when I go away and she has to hold the fort. That's all it was.'

'She was so cool when you came back yesterday too.'

'Yep, the other end of the same thing, I suppose. The drinking just might be because Ivett – you remember Ivett, she stayed here? – Ivett sent her a present, some of the local liquor with honey in it. Filthy stuff, but to Nish's taste, it would seem?'

'She's obviously unhappy, isn't she.'

Timmy didn't want to say that he'd known this much for months, in case the finger was pointed at him for not doing anything about it.

'Well, yes, but with Arnold so ill, it's small wonder she's unhappy. Who isn't!'

Angelina wondered if she was unhappy herself. Or, at least, unhappy enough.

'I don't know. It bothers me. They never stop being your children, you know.'

'Yes, I do know, I've realised that already with the twins, bless 'em!' Timmy smiled involuntarily. 'I've not really had a chance to speak to Nish yet

myself – I was out of it yesterday, she's been out of it today. What a pair, eh!

Angelina winced at this reminder of her own snooze. 'I just want the two of you to be happy.'

'I know, Amma, and so do I. That's exactly what I want. We've got a lot of talking to do about the business – there're going to be a few changes – and I'll try to talk about us, her, Holly House. Don't worry, I'll sort it all out.'

'Oh, thank you, Timmy. You're so good, you know.'

'Drink your coffee, it'll be cold.'

'Oh, yes, of course.'

'So how are you? How have you been coping? I only got the basic information whilst I was away. It's all been a dreadful shock, especially for you.'

'I think it's been a bigger shock to Arnold. Do you know, I really think he believed he'd go on forever.'

'Don't we all?'

'Goodness, no! I've known for a long time that I was going to die.'

'Well, we all know th...'

'No, you don't know it, at your age, not in the way that an old person knows it. You reach a point when it feels correct to die, a bit like going home at the end of a holiday. It's exciting to see what'll be waiting for you when you open the front door again.'

'Well, yes, but...'

'Oh, I know you don't believe there's anything after, but maybe you will when you're older. I'm absolutely sure that God's waiting for me, and for Arnold, which is why it's ok for him to leave us now, even if it's not what we would wish for.'

Angelina could scarcely believe the propagandist line she found herself spinning. She was saying the polite things her parents would have expected her to say, but between Timmy and herself, who was she trying to convince? And which side of the argument was the less true, that she was confident of meeting god on the other side, or that this was why she wasn't feeling just that bad about Arnold's



impending end? Faced with the question, she had to admit to herself that she was, in fact, sanguine about her own end because she was old and had got used to the fact – about which she could do nothing anyway – and that she wasn't particularly upset about Arnold dying because she was looking forward to the peace and quiet – and, once again, there was nothing she could do about it anyway.

Timmy misunderstood Angelina's silent pause, and reached over to squeeze gently her arm, seeking to offer comfort whilst she tried to recover her composure, struggling on the brink of grief.

'Ooh, careful,' she laughed, 'you'll make me spill my coffee!'

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Podi Kelle left Ken's flat late, taking with her a brightly coloured Ganesh. They had talked and talked and laughed and laughed. They conversed sometimes in Sinhala, and Podi Kelle was a little bit pleased that, whilst she knew very well that her English was poor, Ken wasn't as good in her language as he thought he was. They had shared histories, explored memories, and she had explained her domestic situation, unsurprised to know that Ken had been puzzled about where she came from and went to. She had had a lesson in what she considered extremely advanced use of her Nokia, felt better able to communicate freely in texts since she understood the point of abbreviations, and now felt that in future she could call and speak to Ken anyway. And the hand-holding had led to kissing, proper, deep kissing, which had thrilled her, and resulted in moments of great tenderness, as they lay curled together on the sofa.

Ken's collection of elephant objects, which continued relentlessly into the depths of cupboards and drawers, included several different representations of elephant-headed Ganesh. Upon hearing of Arnold's new-found interest in Hindu gods, he'd offered to lend him one of them – a gesture, perhaps, of friendship, or maybe a diversion from one elderly man to another, the proximity to death of either being a moot point. Ganesh was the remover of obstacles, Ken said, so Podi Kelle thought it might be of some use to Arnold.

There was a kiss at the door, a slightly fumbled embrace whilst Podi Kelle juggled the elephant god, a promise to be back soon, a look into the eyes, and then she was out in the dark, frosty night, returning to Holly House.

She kept shifting Ganesh from one hand to the other because he was heavy, and becoming heavier with each step. She resorted to carrying him in her two frozen hands, remembering how the village women used to carry loads on their heads and regretting now that this was a skill she'd never mastered. Halfway home she had to stop and put Ganesh on the ground, to rest her arms and blow warm air into her fists, mindful that it was probably disrespectful to the god, but that dropping him would have been much worse. She offered an apology in her thoughts.

A couple of teenagers came round the corner, their cigarette ends glowing red in the night, their coarse laughter shattering the crystal air, their demeanour alarming and upsetting to Podi Kelle, who felt very vulnerable suddenly. She prayed that they'd ignore her, just walk on past, but they didn't – she was too easy a target.

'Oi, what we got here, then!'

'Looks like one of them to me!'

'Oi, you a Paki?'

'Fucking smell of her!'

Podi Kelle stood absolutely still, hardly daring to breathe, her heart racing wildly. She wished that she'd accepted Ken's offer to walk her home, that he was there to keep her safe. She hadn't been set upon like this for many years, and was terrified.

'Fuck me, she's got one of them Paki gods!'

'Fucking Jesus, the fucking cheek, coming over here, bringing their own fucking ways!'

'Who needs kicking most, her or the fucking elephant? Oi, bet I can kick that further than you!'

'You reckon!'

'Yeah – shift, Paki, don't want to kick you too, do we. Not yet, anyway!'

One of the boys ran forward, as if to kick Ganesh, but as he lifted his foot to make contact, he slipped on the icy pavement and tipped over backwards,

cracking his head loudly.

'Fuck, mate, you ok?'

'Jesus fucking Christ – fuck me! What happened?'

'Fucking ice, fucking slipped!'

'Fuck! Give us a hand up. Fuck!'

'Let's fuck off. She's not worth it!'

'Yeah, god that hurts, let's go.'

'Paki bitch!'

Through her fear, Podi Kelle began to feel the warmth of the knowledge that it was all over, a relief so great that it was almost worth suffering the assault to experience it. She bent down to pick up Ganesh, looking him straight in the eye as she bumped him up into her trembling arms again.

'Thank you, Ganesh – you very powerful god!'

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Arnold was delighted with the loan of a god, and curious to know about the man who had made this splendid gesture. It wasn't entirely clear that he grasped fully the nature of the relationship which Podi Kelle was developing with Ken, and the reference to the Methodist prayer group had been glossed over, but he was very unwell during the next two days, and appeared simply not to care about the details. He spent his waking hours continuing his online reading about Hinduism in general, but now particularly with regard to Ganesh, his new best friend. And during the moments when he was drifting off to sleep, he peered with devout fascination at the gaudy statue standing on his bedside table.

Father Thomas had called to visit the following Wednesday morning. Angelina suggested in advance that it might be an act of respect temporarily to place Ganesh in Arnold's little chapel, out of sight, but Arnold would have none of it, citing the obvious beauty and strength of the presence together of the crucifix above the bed and the elephant-headed god beside it, both within the ambit of a dying man. Angelina had made a less-than-subtle reference contrasting elephant-headed and pig-headed, but let the matter rest.

An Anglican through and through, Father Thomas took no offence whatsoever upon being introduced to Ganesh, despite his not unreasonable surprise at finding Arnold in bed with an elephant, as he put it. He did, however, seek to correct Arnold when he spoke of his positive approach to ecumenism.

'The ecumenical movement is strictly interdenominational within the Christian church, Arnold, aiming to bring about unity in the Church's mission, in other words one united church. You seem to be referring to interfaith plurality, which is a matter more of tolerance and cooperation than organic unity. Wouldn't you say?'

'No, I wouldn't, as a matter of fact,' Arnold bristled, 'I'm talking about not one unified church for humanity – in fact, bugger the Church – I'm talking about one unified god for humanity. Call him what you want, but there can plainly only be one god, and I no longer believe that the Christian version is the correct one, that we have the monopoly!'

Father Thomas gasped inwardly, but smiled patronisingly at Arnold, the smile of the professional humouring the keen amateur. Arnold, not so ill that he didn't know when he wasn't being taken seriously, reached his arm out and with three fingers lightly touched the rounded belly of Ganesh.

'Here, touch just here, Father...'

Father Thomas extended his fingers to Ganesh's abdomen, placing them with disdain beside Arnold's, as if being asked to touch a garden slug.

'They say that all the universe is contained in Lord Ganesh's belly, his stretched, rounded belly. Can you feel the tingle in your fingers as you touch him, Father? Can you feel the energy that comes from him? Can you feel his presence?'

'Well, er, well no, I can't, Arnold.'

'A closed mind! Oh dear oh dear...!' Arnold tutted disrespectfully. 'You see the red dot on his forehead? That's a port – my mother used to wear one, but I don't think she realised she was giving herself permission to see through her third eye, to focus her meditation, to worship her intellect.'

Father Thomas tried to hide his shock at how ill Arnold had become, how greatly he had deteriorated since his last visit. Why, the man seemed to have

begun to lose his mind. Presumably it was the reduced blood flow to the brain which had produced this wholly irrational response to a lump of sickly-painted plaster. He glanced up at the plain wooden cross above Arnold's head and offered a silent prayer, asking for tolerance and help from this oh-so-more-rational symbol.

Arnold had asked Podi Kelle to thank the unknown man who had lent him the statue, to pay to him his respects, and invite him to visit so that they could discuss Ganesh together, demonstrating a level of enthusiasm for new things she'd not seen in Arnold for years. Taking him at face value, and assuming this to be Arnold's approval of her new friendship, she arranged for Ken to visit that evening, so as to allow Angelina the opportunity to go out to play bridge whilst she remained on hand to care for Arnold.

Once Angelina had driven off, Podi Kelle slipped on her coat as she told Arnold that she was just going to collect Ken, and wouldn't be long. He looked terribly ill, and she wasn't at all sure that he was in a fit state to receive visitors, but he had remained so enthusiastic about meeting someone new that she made him promise to lie still whilst she was out, not to do anything at all.

As she left the bedroom, she peered back and saw him reach out his frail arm to touch Ganesh, and the smile which came over his face.

He lay for a short while, feeling the tingles in his fingers, experiencing the very presence of god for which he had yearned so greatly these past weeks. Then he drifted into a light sleep.

Very soon disturbed, he assumed that the sound of the door being opened, and the movement in the hallway, quiet though it was, signalled Podi Kelle's return with his new friend, but no-one appeared. The thought crossed his mind that the movement sounded curiously like his heavy-footed daughter treading lightly, but he didn't care to be puzzled.

The hushed activity was Yogam, arriving for the pre-arranged session with his sister in the office, which had indeed caused Nishanthi the considerable inconvenience of having to take small, gentle steps as she came to let him in. On no account, at Yogam's absolute insistence, should their father know of his presence in the house.

The air in the office was clammy with ill-humour, and Timmy, who shook Yogam's hand enthusiastically and welcomed him to Holly House with a broad smile, nonetheless left the room immediately. Yogam caught his sister's sneer as her husband walked down the stairs.

'What's with you two, then?' he asked indelicately.

'Nothing,' she lied plainly, 'let's get down to it, shall we.'

Her desire to get her brother and father to speak to each other once more, before it was too late, was as strong as it had been the previous Saturday, during the boozy lunch at the Phoenix, but her plan hadn't developed much beyond that point. What had been a good idea then, and which still felt like a good idea now, had seemed possible only with a belly full of fizz. Not helped by the distraction of the great rows she'd been having with Timmy since his return – especially when he had astonished her with the news that he was concerned about her unhappiness, and wanted to talk about it – she had abjectly failed to develop any ideas whatsoever about how she might lead her brother back down the stairs to their father's bedside. So, instead, she sat herself down next to Yogam on the office sofa, and began the process of explaining the law as she viewed it, whilst seeking from him clarification about the order and nature of events as they had unfolded.

Yogam couldn't grasp why he was having to go through this, what help he could give to his lawyer sister in a matter of law, and he found it dull. In his irritation, it eluded him altogether that there had been a plot at the heart of this enterprise, albeit a drunken one, and that he was in the house under false pretences.

That Nishanthi had no end game, and Yogam was unaware she was looking for one, was about to be rendered immaterial by Ken's arrival downstairs.

Podi Kelle returned with her boyfriend, after a limped journey which, to judge by Ken's high spirits, was evidently less painful than it looked. As she and Ken had passed the spot at which she had been confronted as she had carried Ganesh home, she told him what had happened on Monday evening. He stood very still, controlled in his fury, something of the policeman he had once been informing his response. He said that kids who treat elderly women in that sort of brutish way should be caned, although he acknowledged that this was a point of

view which was out of fashion in modern Britain. Podi Kelle remembered that it was a common-enough event when she'd been a youngster, when the boys (usually, but not always) who had been caught committing some minor offence would be beaten by the white policeman. It seemed to work back then, she thought, and this had been a punishment which was meted out for far less nasty behaviour than had occurred on this spot three nights earlier, so maybe he was right.

As they passed through the gates of Ludlow Avenue, Ken drew breath, nodding his approval of this well-heeled, trouble-free community apart. He said that Podi Kelle wouldn't have had any bother within these gates, none at all, not on a private road. And the houses – the mansions – it was rather like entering the cantonments back in the good old days. Fantastic cars parked up, too.

He stopped and looked up at the façade of Holly House for a moment, before taking Podi Kelle's hand to mount the two steps up to the porch.

'This is a lovely house, Dilisini,' he whispered, 'you're very lucky to live here.'

'Hmm...!' she grunted, turning sideways to smile gently at him so as to diffuse the dissatisfaction she'd expressed reflexly. 'It take lots cleaning, and me do it!'

Ken laughed, not fooled in the slightest. He knew that Podi Kelle's retirement was a relative concept, because she'd been very frank about her feelings when she'd described her situation three nights earlier. Even so, for one not so much at leisure as she would have liked to have been, this was a good-looking house in which to spend those final years.

Ken was still laughing when they entered the house, a jolly, robust laugh which Arnold heard immediately, and to which he took a liking. Podi Kelle hadn't mentioned Ken's false leg when she'd talked about him – an oversight, since she'd thought no more about it – so Arnold struggled to make sense of the odd sound of the footsteps, as his visitor entered the lounge from the hallway and approached the open bedroom door. It crossed his mind that, as a child, he would have been terrified by the sound of an unidentifiable monster's footsteps as they drew inexorably closer to him. Not much point being terrified of anything now.

As Ken appeared in the doorway, he lurched forward towards Arnold with a broad grin on his face and hand outstretched.

'வணக்கம்,' he said, airing one of the very few Tamil words at his disposal.

Despite his pleasure at having a new visitor, Arnold was feeling very weak. He was unable to sit up in bed, and struggled to raise his hand to shake Ken's.

'How do you do? I'm so sorry you find me like this. I've been better, you know!'

'I know, I've heard about you – about all of you – from Dilisini. She told me.'

Arnold was thrown, since he had no idea who this Dilisini was of whom Ken spoke.

'Ah, good, well you must tell me all about yourself. Podi Kelle tells me you were a policeman in Ceylon?'

Ken hesitated, having spotted Arnold's confusion, himself now unclear as to whether they were speaking of the same person, whether Podi Kelle and Dilisini were, well, both Dilisini.

'Yes, I was. Best years of my life, I reckon!'

'Oh, I look forward to hearing about them very much,' Arnold smiled weakly, his voice faint, his breathing moist and noisy. 'Get us some tea, Podi.'

Ken rankled at hearing Dilisini called not just by the wrong name, but by a shortened, familiar form of it, and that so she could be given an order. She smiled fleetingly at him and took her leave silently.

'So, how long have you lived in this lovely house, then, Arnold?'

'We've been here... we've been here... you know, I can't remember!'

'Oh, never mind. I understand your whole family live here too?'

'No, just my daughter and her family.'

'But you have a son too? Dilisini talked about bringing up the children all



those years ago in Ambuluwara.'

'Ambuluwewa.'

'Ah, yes, Ambuluwewa. I was never posted in that region. This house must seem something else compared to what you had there?'

'No, we had a large country house on the estate. It was very grand indeed. And plenty of servants to run it.'

Ken felt the urge to be annoyed by Arnold, but knew that it was necessary to be tolerant of a man whose gaunt appearance was so sickly that it had shocked him. He recognised in Arnold the same bodily ruin into which he'd watched his wife collapse before she died. It didn't matter that her illness and Arnold's were unrelated, the effect was the same: it was plain that Arnold's days were coming to an end.

'I bet you didn't have a Ferrari parked outside it, did you!' Ken laughed.

'Well, no, hardly. Roads – not good enough, I don't suppose. Now, your Ganesh...'

'Ah, yes, do you like him?'

'I wanted to thank you for lending him to me, Ken, it means a lot. I'm dying, you know...'

Ken stuttered, made a noise, unable to find something useful to say.

'...and it's brought me comfort beyond anything I might have expected a few weeks ago.'

'I'm so pleased.'

'How old are you, Ken?'

'I'm just eighty. Well, eighty-and-a-half now, I suppose. God, I don't know where the last year went to!'

'I couldn't agree more. Especially now! Except it goes slowly when you're flat on your back. Anyway, I was saying, I'm nearly eighty, too...'

'Ah, Dilisini didn't know how old you are exactly – so you're a couple of years older than me.'

'No, I'm younger than you,' Arnold still puzzled over who Dilisini was.

'You're eighty-two...'

'No, eighty, too...'

Ken's hackles began to rise. 'Yes, that's what I said.'

'What is?'

'Eighty-two.'

'No no no, eighty, too.' Arnold paused to calm himself, fearing the danger there might be in becoming too exercised, and in so doing realised where the problem lay. 'I'm sorry, I meant eighty as well.'

Ken laughed, but not very much, an elderly man trying very hard to be amused.

'As I was trying to say, I'm nearly eighty, too, I mean – oh, you know what I mean – and it feels like I've waited all my life to be as close to god as I feel with Lord Ganesh by my bedside. Are you religious?'

'A little bit,' replied Ken, coming to think that Arnold wasn't altogether right in the head, 'I'm sort of a Methodist.'

'Oh. I see.'

A silence descended between the two men, which was just long enough that it wasn't possible to pretend there was none. Whoever spoke was going to have to open a new line of conversation. Ken wanted to say that he'd clearly stayed long enough, that he didn't want to tire Arnold further, and that he'd go home now. But he needed Dilisini beside him for that line to work.

'I'll go and give Dilisini a hand carrying in the tea, shall I?'

As Arnold watched him heave his lopsided body out of the room, he wondered how Ken was going to be better at carrying a tray of tea things than Podi Kelle would be. He'd heard Timmy come downstairs and go into the kitchen minutes before, so he assumed there would be a few moments of socialising over the kettle before anyone returned to his bedside, and he welcomed the solitude, reaching out unsteadily to touch Ganesh's belly.

Ken found the kitchen, correctly assuming it to be the room from which

he could hear hushed whispering. The door was half open, but he knocked anyway since he could think of no social convention to follow in this set of circumstances. Inside, he found Timmy and Podi Kelle in an urgent conversation about the presence of Yogam in the house, neither of them having been given any advance notice of his visit. Ken and Timmy were introduced, pleasantries were exchanged, and the tea, which was standing already made, was carried through by Ken, as promised.

Ken was confused by the garbled half-explanation given to him by Podi Kelle and Timmy as to the significance of Yogam's presence in the house, and stopped in the hallway, trying to be clear about what he could and couldn't say.

'So the son's here why?' he whispered through clenched teeth.

Arnold's hearing, one of the few of his faculties which had not gone into decline, had become fine tuned to the sounds of the house during his confinement, and he heard clearly Ken's question. Five minutes earlier he had been unable to find the strength to raise himself in bed, but he found it now. He sat up as if spring-loaded and, dizzy from the exertion, waited for Ken and Podi Kelle to come into his bedroom.

'A Ferrari outside, you said!'

'No, ah, I said not.'

'Not you, Podi, stop being so silly. You said there was a Ferrari outside, Ken.'

Ken was sharply annoyed at the way Arnold had spoken to Dilisini. 'Yes, Arnold, I did.'

Podi Kelle grasped Ken's arm, seeking to bring under control the mounting irritation she could sense in him.

'And did I just hear you correctly say something about my son being here in the house?' Arnold coughed up some mucus.

'No, Arnold, you did not. You heard me whisper something about your son being in the house.'

'Yogam is in the house! Is that right, Podi?' Arnold's voice was raised

now, and he had started to climb out of bed. He coughed some more, producing a huge volume of liquid which he had to swallow before he could continue. 'Is that right, Podi Kelle?'

'I don't see – Timmy say!' Podi Kelle protested.

'I see! He's in on it too, is he? All of them together! What, are they plotting what to do with my money after I'm gone?' Arnold stumbled as he attempted to stand on his own two feet. 'And what about you, Podi, and Angelina? Are they going to throw you both out?'

Ken lurched forward to catch Arnold, supporting him under his armpits as he began to collapse.

'Take your hands off me!' Arnold hissed, his breath bubbling, 'Who the hell are you, anyway?'

Ken was tempted to let Arnold fall flat on the floor, but instead helped him gently to sit back on the edge of the bed. Podi Kelle noted the extreme difference in physicality between these two old men, the one grey-skinned and apparently formless, the other flushed, tall and muscular.

'Timmy! Timmy!' Arnold tried to shout, although only a husky bark came out, 'Timmy, come here...'

Timmy, who was in the hallway about to climb the stairs with his coffee, had already heard the kerfuffle, and turned sharply on his heels to rush into the bedroom. Just as he entered, Arnold appeared to slip into a state of unconsciousness, with violent, jerking coughing spasms, and he slid helplessly towards the floor. Ken reached out again, but was too late to catch him, just as Timmy thrust his hands forward instinctively, still grasping his mug of coffee, which emptied on the carpet, leaving a steaming patch only inches from where Arnold fell.

Sure that Arnold had entered his last few moments of life, Timmy immediately drew his mobile phone from his pocket and called Nishanthi. She was, as expected, irritated to have been interrupted by him, but this wasn't the time to tread delicately.

'Nishanthi, shut up, will you. Just shut up for once. I think you need to

come downstairs now – right now – and I think you'd better bring Yogam too. Right now!'

There was a moment's pause, whilst Arnold squirmed at their feet, coughing as if under water, before those surrounding him heard the noise of brother and sister descending from the loft, running downstairs. Nishanthi loomed into the doorway, wide-eyed at the scenewhich met her. Yogam followed close on her heels, and stood aghast for a moment, before breaking in on everybody's fixated incapacity.

'We need to call an ambulance,' he declared, pulling his mobile from his pocket.

'No, Appa didn't want to go to hospital. He specifically said he didn't want to, he wanted to die at home,' Nishanthi responded.

'Are you all fucking mad!' Yogam cried in astonishment, 'look at him – just look at him! He needs to be in hospital.'

'But...!' Nishanthi tried again.

'Not interested, sis, I'm calling an ambulance. For god's sake, what's wrong with you all!'

As he waited for his nine-nine-nine call to be answered, Yogam began unthinkingly to take charge...

'Ambulance, please... and put the kettle on again, would you, Timmy... yes, hello, could I have an ambulance right away, please... Podi, please find a blanket or something to cover him... it's my father, his heart is failing I understand, and he's become terribly ill... Nish, get a pillow under his head... yes, it's Holly House, Ludlow Avenue, Luton, please hurry...'

It soon felt like the wait couldn't have been longer, to the point that Yogam announced furiously that he'd been bottom-drawerred, and was about to get his phone out again. Just in time, they heard the distant siren of the ambulance whining closer through the chill night. Arnold had entered a half-waking state, hopelessly incapacitated but, at least, no longer drowning.

'What a fucking idiot!' said Yogam, looking down at his father.

'Excuse me, but I don't think that's any way to speak of your father under any circumstances, and especially not these!' responded Ken, instinctively.

'Oh right, your father strict but fair? That it?'

'Yes. Yes, made me the man I am, since you ask?'

'Good for you, sweetie!' Yogam swept his hand through his plume of white hair and pouted at Ken. 'Mine was strict but unfair. Although he still probably made me the man I am!'

'Yog, don't...' Nishanthi stepped forward and gripped her brother's arm.

'You don't get it, do you. None of you understand the one thing which is important to understand about him, about my father, and that is that he thinks he's right about all things in just about equal proportion to the times he's wrong about them. And somehow his bombast convinces everyone around him that he knows best. Well, he doesn't. He's a burke. And you want proof, then look at him, look at the man who thought he could deal with this illness on his own, with just a bit of prayer to help, look at the man dying without dignity on the floor.'

With perfect timing, a pulse of blue light began to sweep across the curtains, and Yogam turned with a sniff, cutting through the silence of his own creation, to go to the door.

For all who had shared those moments of panic only a few minutes earlier, the paramedics were a wonder to behold. They were calm, exact, knowledgeable, and took control of the situation, lending a great sense of relief, a release of tension amongst the bystanders. The twins, having heard the ambulance stop outside their home, had rushed downstairs, followed by Tasha, and they too were witnesses to the moment when Arnold, barely aware of his circumstances, was loaded onto a trolley and wheeled out of the house, accompanied by Nishanthi. Yogam declined the opportunity to go.

As he crossed the threshold, Arnold peered upwards, trying to make sense of his changed world. Yogam saw him stare directly into his eyes, but couldn't read any reaction, before his head lolled onto one side, incapable of focussing for more than a moment. The twins sobbed silently, both convinced they would never see Parta again.

Not at all sure who Ken was, nor what right he had to have been part of the evening's proceedings amongst the family, Yogam offered him a lift home since it was the easiest, most pragmatic way of getting rid of him. This presented an opportunity for a brief ride in a Ferrari which Ken wasn't going to pass up for anything, although he didn't express his gratitude in those terms and, given the circumstances, sought not to appear to be at all enthusiastic. He promised to call Podi Kelle in the morning – the evening had been a disaster, it was true, but for the two of them equally. Yogam didn't want to wait for his mother, and became agitated by the slowness with which Ken struggled to get himself (and his leg) into the Ferrari, but he too promised to call in the morning. The V12 crackled and spat ostentatiously as it disappeared into the dark, cold night.

The house was still and empty when Angelina came home, after a happy evening at the bridge club partnering Edmund. Her mobile had not been turned on, so Podi Kelle and Timmy had waited to explain the sequence of events to her. She paused, stared at the empty bed, showed no sign at all of any emotion, drove to the hospital.

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When Angelina began to awake the next morning, she could hear nothing. Not a sound came from elsewhere in the house, no sign of life did she detect. She turned over, trying to prise her eyes open, and saw through gummy eye-lashes the empty space beside her. Her eyes shut again, and she breathed deeply, relaxed, then snorted violently as her situation became real. She sat up with a gasp, unsure of what would come after waking alone, un-partnered for the first time in decades, scared of the unknown.

After only a moment, however, she decided that Arnold's absence wasn't disturbing in the least. In fact, there was a sense in which it was a blessing. No bed-bound ablutions, no choppy mood swings to deal with, no truculent whining. He was not beside her, but he was still alive, and she wondered whether it would feel different when he was not beside her and dead. Was it his immediate presence that mattered, or his presence just somewhere, anywhere, on the surface of the globe? If he was in Sri Lanka on a visit, say, she would be happy not to have him beside her in bed this morning, but if he died there and would never be beside her again, would she be upset?

But then she realised that, as a matter of near certainty, he would never now be beside her again, since it had been suggested the night before that terminal care was to be Arnold's treatment.

She had arrived at the hospital to find Nishanthi waiting quietly for her, Arnold having already been admitted to a ward. The junior doctor who had examined him had told them that she would make sure he was kept comfortable during the night, and that a full assessment would be made by a specialist in the morning. The youngster opined that if the disease was as advanced as it appeared, there was a very good terminal care facility within the hospital grounds, so there was no need to worry, and why didn't they both go home and get a good night's sleep. And, curiously, despite her inexperience, the young lady doctor had been absolutely correct, there really hadn't seemed to be any need to worry.

Angelina was aching with tiredness, and felt she could have stayed in bed for hours longer. She had considered having Podi Kelle bring breakfast to her in bed, even thought about calling her on that wretched Nokia to which she seemed to be glued these days, but her own phone was out in the hall, in her coat pocket, so she'd have to get up to fetch it. In any case, she felt a little-understood sense of leadership this morning, an unwanted burden which had descended upon her as she had lain utterly awake through much of the night. Arnold's removal to hospital seemed, this day, now, to be a crisis, and she recognised that it was the British way to maintain a stiff upper lip at such times..

Although there was no sign of her within, Podi Kelle's bedroom door was wide open when Angelina stepped out in her nightie into the living room. The house was very still, so that she could hear in her ears that buzz that never went away, yet which was rarely noticeable. Why was Podi up before her, she wondered, what was she doing? Had she gone out to see Ken? His visit, it was plain, had been a disaster. That bloody elephant! She turned round and went straight back to her bedroom, picked up Ganesh and struggled with him through to Arnold's chapel.

'You two can get to know each other a little better!' she muttered, as she placed him beside the elaborate, brassy, Victorian crucifix which stood already on the bar top.

She heard Podi Kelle come into her room, so left the chapel, pulling the door closed behind her.

'Ah, sorry, you pray, ah?' asked Podi Kelle, carrying Angelina's breakfast through to her on a tray.

'Praying? No. What for! Podi, you shouldn't have bothered with my breakfast. I was just coming out, actually.'

'You sleep bad, I listen.'

'I know, but even so. And if you heard me then you must also have had a bad night.'

'I ok! Where Ken's Ganesh?'

'That's what I was doing in the chapel. I've left him chatting with Jesus on the bar.'

'He so fat and happy compared Jesus. I like very much.'

'Yes, it's a nice object. I like his pottu – might start wearing one like that myself!'

'You never put pottu now, always wear in Ambuluwewa. Back to bed, have breakfast.'

'Podi?'

'Hari?'

'Do you think you could bring my mobile to me? It'll be in my coat pocket.'

'Who you call? I teach text if want?'

'It's just in case Yogam calls – he's the only one who rings my mobile, never uses the land line in case... well, you know. I suppose he can now.'

Podi Kelle brought her own tea back in with her when she fetched the mobile, and sat down on the edge of the bed to drink it whilst Angelina ate her fruit and cereal. She had intended to switch on the mobile before handing it over, knowing how unfamiliar with it her mistress was, but, to her surprise, it was already on. It hadn't been when Timmy had tried calling it last night.

'So he's gone, then, Podi,' Angelina sighed, looking over at her companion, 'I wonder if he'll ever come home again.'

'Hari. I think same thing.' Podi Kelle reflected momentarily. 'Him burk!'

'I beg your pardon!' Angelina frowned, surprised that Podi Kelle knew that word.

'Yogam said last night. Boss not always right – burk cos got so ill home.'

'Oh, I see,' nodded Angelina, thinking the assessment was probably fair, 'no, he wasn't always right, not by a long chalk. I forgot to check what time is visiting time last night.'

'Go online to see,' Podi Kelle suggested with gravitas, glancing over at Timmy's laptop, which stood on Arnold's bedside table.

There was a moment in which Angelina couldn't tell if Podi Kelle was being serious or not, but then she caught the twinkle in her eye, and they both giggled at the ridiculous idea that help could be obtained as simply as all that, just by summoning it from the sky.

'You clown, Podi! No, I'll call the hospital later.'

'Ah, you want lesson on mobile?' Podi Kelle grinned enthusiastically, still eager to show off.

'No, thanks, Podi. As I say, if it rings it'll be Yogam, and I know how to answer it just fine, thanks. Where's everyone else? The house seems empty.'

'Kids school, Tasha out, Nishanthi, Timmy, Ruth office.'

'Oh, everything as normal, then. That's good to know. I'll get up and shower, and we can plan our day.'

Podi Kelle's phone beeped in her bedroom, a message from Ken she expected, so she tripped off to attend to it.

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In the office, Timmy was drawing to the end of a phone call which, in Nishanthi's opinion, had taken far too long and been excessively chummy. She was not pleased.

'What was that all about?' she demanded to know.

'Huh?' he responded, coolly, resentful that relations between them continued to be strained five days after his return.

'Don't you 'huh' me! You know perfectly well what I'm talking about. That wasn't a call to a client, was it.'

'No.'

'So who was it a call to?'

'To whom was it a call, if you please...'

'Timmy, so help me I'll shove your English Grammar down your neck if you do that to me once more,' she spat, poisonously.

'Collins up the colon would be more poetic!'

She rose to her feet and tottered briefly, before regaining her balance, glaring at him in such a manner as to cause Ruth to announce urgently her need for a bathroom break and make a rapid exit.

'You fucking...' Nishanthi began, but so acutely irritated was she that no further words came to mind, no insult quite seeming up to the task to which she wished to put it. Her inability to express her fury infuriated her still further.

'Sit down, Nish, just sit down,' Timmy urged her calmly, recognising that there was no more fun to be had in this exchange.

'I... I...'

'Yes, darling, I know, but just sit down and we can talk properly. That's it. It's ok.'

'Timmy, I swear...' rasped Nishanthi, retaking her seat.

'Yes, I know. I'm sorry I wound you up. Calm down please. Why are you so tense anyway?'

In order to reject fiercely any notion of her being tense, Nishanthi began to rise again, hissing like Tiger meeting another cat. She tightened her jaw to the extent that the platysma muscle became visible, despite the ample layers of padding beneath which it lay, and Timmy remembered that this was the face she

used to pull at the moment of orgasm when she'd been leaner and keener.

'Tense? Tense! Who's tense?!'

'Sorry, sorry, come on, sit down properly. Sit. Plant it, lady!'

'My father's dying in hospital and you're having amusing chats with 'Don' on the office phone. I'm sorry, it just got to me.'

'I know.'

'It's one of those things I knew was coming, but now it's here it seems like it's come too fast.'

Timmy resisted the temptation to ask facetiously if she was referring to her father's hospitalization or to his conversation with Don.

'Well, we know now that he's in the best possible hands, don't we.'

'Do we? Really? I don't know. The NHS in Luton? Is that the best we can do?'

'We have no reason to doubt the skill and good intentions of the NHS in Luton. None at all.'

'Yes, but surely all the best doctors go to London?'

'Says who? And in any case, love, this isn't about the doctors, is it.'

'What? Of course it's about the doctors! What a ridiculous thing to s...'

'Nish, stop. It's not about the doctors because it's about the nurses. They're not going to make him better, they're going to keep him comfortable. He's going into terminal care.'

'We don't know that yet. They're assessing him this morning. Maybe they'll...'

'Nish! You saw him last night, you saw him turn purple, you saw him on the floor. He's not getting better. He's not getting better.'

Nishanthi lowered her head as her eyes filled up with tears, and turned sharply round on her swivel chair.

'So tell me about Don,' she tried not to let her voice break, barely succeeding.

'You know perfectly well who Don is,' Timmy's voice was a model of calmness, 'you must have got the gist of the conversation. Don's the bloke from the publisher who wants the book.'

'So you're going ahead with it, then?'

'Yes, love, I am.'

'And what about us here?'

Her voice had fallen to a whisper as she asked this pregnant question. Timmy was unsure as to the degree of ambiguity which his wife had intended, but doubted anyway that her emotional state this morning was robust enough to explore what he felt was the true nature of the problem they faced.

'Well, perhaps not now,' he gestured significantly towards Ruth with his eyes as she re-entered noisily, 'maybe, yes, let's not work late into the evening today, let's stop early and have a drink together when the twins are down.'

Nishanthi, taken aback at the idea of having a leisurely evening drink with her husband, failed to find a ready excuse, and so tacitly committed herself. She began to type once more.

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Podi Kelle had exchanged texts with Ken, explaining that she needed to be at home today whilst the house settled down without Arnold, when she heard Angelina's mobile ring. Assuming it would be Yogam calling, she thought nothing of making her way across the living room to stand in the doorway of Angelina's bedroom, so that she could be part of the conversation.

Angelina was showered but not yet fully dressed, sitting on the bottom edge of the bed in her bra and knickers, and facing away from the door as she struggled to answer the fiddly phone.

'Yes, hello,' she finally managed, 'is that you, Yogam?'

She paused, gasped, and pulled up the towel which had lain across her knees in order to cover herself. On it had lain the breast form she had been about to insert, which now tumbled to the floor and rolled away.

'Edmund! But... I mean...'

She listened for a moment.

'Yes, so I did... yes, I know... but I didn't think you'd actually phone me... well, no, no it's not... I'm sorry, Edmund, my husband's been taken into hospital, I don't think it's proper for you to call me.'

She listened some more.

'I don't know, Edmund... I don't think I'll be coming to bridge for a while... maybe you should find another partner... yes, goodbye, Edmund.'

She brought down her phone and ended the call. 'Goodbye, Edmund,' she repeated noiselessly.

Podi Kelle began to turn away, seeking to do nothing if not mind her own business. But she made the smallest noise and Angelina spun round to face her, her face hanging in shock and shame. Podi Kelle had made no judgement about the situation, exercising the servant's studied skill of neither seeing nor hearing anything, but Angelina was unable to accept that she wasn't being judged. She felt judged. She felt she wanted to be judged, judged and found not guilty.

'It's someone at the bridge club. I mean it was someone at the bridge club.'

Podi Kelle remained silent.

'He asked me for my mobile number last night. I don't know why I gave it to him. Stupid of me. I had no idea he'd actually call.'

'It ok have friends,' nodded Podi Kelle.

'Yes, but he's not really a friend, Podi, not at all really, and... and... and...'

Angelina ground to a halt, without anything useful to say further.

'We should go hospital, you think?'

'Yes, yes we should. Quite right, Podi, quite right. Oh, look, the mobile's wet from my hair!'

'Give me, I dry. You want help dress, ah?'

'No, Podi, thank you. Thank you, Podi.'

As the two old ladies drove to the hospital, they each found themselves

becoming anxious. They talked nervously about the likely outcome of the assessment which, they assumed, Arnold would have undergone by the time they arrived. They agreed that it was unlikely he would be coming home again. They agreed that he was, at last, in the right place. They agreed that he should have gone there immediately, at the beginning of his illness, rather than stubbornly hanging on to the idea that everything would be all right for everybody at home. They even agreed he'd been selfish. But they didn't talk about their own anxieties, and, beyond the common root of a natural fear of the unknown future, wouldn't have agreed if they had.

For Angelina this was going to be a period of preparation for widowhood. Her ruminations as she'd surfaced this morning had become resonant, and she was talking herself into accepting that being without Arnold was broadly the same whether he was in hospital (or elsewhere) or dead – in which case she was already, effectively, a widow and there was nothing further to fear. She was well-enough placed to be widowed, she reasoned, as well-placed as anyone could be, with a secure home, two children, two grandchildren. She had some small savings put aside, which had never been fully disclosed to anyone (not even really Arnold) dating from when the Ambuluwewa estate finally had been sold, for a pittance, twenty-odd years earlier. And she still had her companion beside her. So far so good, she thought.

But she also recognised that the finest years by far of her adulthood – no, more accurately, the majority of her mature years – had been spent with a man whom, having arrived at his lowest point, had been described as a burk by his own son, and that this was a view surprisingly yet wholeheartedly endorsed by her servant. Moreover, if her servant thought he was a burk, then presumably her servant, and the rest of the world indeed, thought she was a burk for having married him in the first place, and not just because he was Tamil. In fact, now she thought back to their wedding day, she recognised that all her unhappy relatives had held exactly that view of her.

So she was fearful about her future for one reason, and one reason only, and that was that the new start which was being handed to her was coming so late in her own life. The years with Arnold, whatever their nature, had been so numerous that the years ahead without him, at her age, had to be fewer. They had

spent their lives together on a balcony of marriage supported by many pillars, and only the one which was founded on romantic love had fallen away. It would be necessary to dismantle the rest of the structure if she was to go forward with her own life alone, and she was unsure that she had the energy and time to do it.

Podi Kelle's view was the opposite. She recognised in the demise of Arnold the beginnings of the collapse of the structure which had led her to be here, in this car, in Luton, in the cold of winter. Since everything was falling apart, and she had nothing of her own to dismantle, she felt keenly the possibility that she might one day be unburdened of her position and status, and that that day might well be close.

She had no interest whatsoever in being disloyal to Angelina, with whom she had spent the greater part of her life, and no desire to cause any distress, since that life, on balance, had been broadly pleasant enough. It had certainly been an unusual life, not at all what she'd expected, and she'd come to enjoy, quietly, that which was unusual. And therein lay the source of her present anxiety, being that her penchant for adventure had always been hampered by her lack of resources, that she'd been able to be daring only in small steps.

She understood without question that the presence of Ken in her life alone was what made possible the large step she was now contemplating, the great adventure which she hoped lay ahead. Indeed, Ken was the very adventure, the paradoxical source of her nervousness. She recognised that the friendship she had begun to develop with him was young, that there might be a limit on how far and in what direction he wanted it to mature, but she was aware of the possibility at least that she might be able to spend her final years as the partner of a man, in a loving relationship, the mistress of her own space.

Of course, there was a strong possibility that this was all wishful thinking, a ridiculous notion, but she felt free to hold onto the hope because she knew she was safe, that she would never be without a roof over her head whatever happened. She had moved out of her home once before, for a man whom she known even less well than Ken, and been allowed back then. But she didn't now have the luxury of time which she'd so flagrantly wasted back in her youth, when she'd failed to give her future its due consideration.

'Aiyo!' screamed Angelina, swerving to avoid an elderly lady who had stepped off the pavement in front of the ageing Peugeot.

'Aiyo!' screeched Podi Kelle, simultaneously, 'old stupid woman give me heart attack!'

'We'd better not die in a car crash before we get to see Arnold,' Angelina muttered, dryly.

'No, cannot die now, ah!'

'No, definitely not.'

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Arnold lay still in bed, connected up to machines without knowing what sort or by what means, not entirely sure about the sequence of events over the last few hours, nor where he was, beyond the glaringly obvious fact that he was in hospital. He remembered hearing that Yogam had been in the house but nothing much thereafter, other than fleeting, disconnected moments of lucidity

There were people around him, dressed largely in white, whom, he had thought initially, might be angels. Although they spoke without sound and moved in slow-motion, he had now come to think they had to be just medical staff, not so much because of the lack of wings (which could be tucked away neatly, he supposed), but because one of the older men was wearing a yellow-spotted bow tie and those silly half glasses which sit on the end of your nose, and he thought it inconceivable that a higher being would desire the first or require the second.

He didn't know what these people were doing around him, and couldn't make any sense of their gestures or actions. They appeared at one point to laugh at something spoken by the man in the bow tie, and he thought he could have been in a silent movie, except that the characters were moving too slowly, rather than too quickly. Then one of the younger people noticed him looking at her, and plainly she alerted all the others that they were being watched. Was this the action of the guilty, Arnold wondered, a group of people caught in the act of doing something they ought not? Another of them leaned over, looked directly into his face and smiled a sickly, pretend grin.

'Mr. Balasingham...'

His name hit him like a roll of thunder, cracking in his head, shaking him to the surface of wakefulness. He could hear everything now, understand that he was being examined by the specialists whom Dr. Aziz had wanted him to see those weeks ago. He wasn't at home, where he wanted to be, and he began to panic, tried to lift himself up on his elbows. There was something on his face preventing him speaking properly, so he began to try to shake it off, like a dog emerging from its bath.

The girl who had noticed first his wakefulness sat on the edge of his bed and held his shoulders gently. She seemed not to be pushing him down, but nonetheless he lay back as he surrendered to her touch.

'Hello, Mr. Balasingham,' she grinned, 'my name's Ranvir. I'm a student doctor.'

'Hello,' replied Arnold, puzzled by the sound of his own voice.

'Let's just slip this off your face for a moment,' she said, gently sliding the oxygen mask down over his chin, 'there, that's better, we can have a chat now.'

Arnold breathed in deeply the natural air around him, but it wasn't satisfying, didn't feel like there was enough of it. He caught a good dose of the scent Ranvir was wearing though, which was lovely, like the smell of the flowers of the ironwood trees of his childhood, which grew around the school in the hills where his father had been headmaster. And it wasn't just her scent, it was her face, her skin, her gorgeous smile – everything about Ranvir was lovely. As he bent his head forward to look at her, he could see her pale brown skin disappear down the loose neck of her hospital gown, so that he could just see the bulging top of her breasts.

'Very good, Ranvir,' interrupted the man in the bow tie.

'Thanks, prof,' she grinned arrogantly, the job well done, as she retreated from this, a patient to whom her consultant now wished to speak.

The consultant didn't sit on his bed, didn't smell of anything nice, had a mongrel beard and wasn't interested in even pretending to be a friend. Arnold was annoyed, and felt a barely-resistible urge to begin this new relationship by informing him that he looked like an antiques salesman off the telly.

'You've had quite a turn, Mr. Balasingham,' this much was obvious to Arnold, who was beginning to feel breathless, 'so we're going to spend the day running some tests to find out what's going on, and then we can decide what's best for you.'

'Being at home's best for me, Dr...?'

'Mr. Jaeger.'

'Oh, a surgeon... ' Arnold was struggling with his breathing now, and attempted to pull the mask back over his mouth.

'Nurse, would you?'

The consultant stepped back to allow a nurse to get to Arnold and deal with the mask correctly.

'A surgeon, I note.' The mask made a very great difference, to Arnold's surprise. 'Are you contemplating operating on me? I think I'm past that, don't you?'

'We just don't know at this stage, we just don't know. We are a good cardiac team in this hospital, and there's every chance we can do something for you, but only once we know exactly what we're dealing with.'

'So you can look into a man's heart can you, Mr. Jaeger?'

'Yes, Mr. Balasingham, we can. Right inside.'

'And how long will these tests take?'

'Again, it's difficult to say. Why, have you something better to do?'

The professor's firm laughed loudly.

'Yes, Mr. Jaeger, I have, since you ask,' Arnold glared, disrespectful of the fact that this might be the man who could save him, 'I have a family to live with, a god to understand, a life to prosecute. It might not be a long life, and it almost certainly wouldn't appeal to your sort, but it's nonetheless my life, and I want to live it.'

Mr. Jaeger smiled and nodded, before glancing up knowingly at his juniors.

'Well, we'd better get on with it all, hadn't we then. Ranvir, you seem to have laid a claim on Mr. Balasingham – would you like to begin by taking a history?'

Ranvir stepped forward once more, but she no longer seemed to be the great beauty she'd been only minutes before.

'What's your date of birth, Mr. Balasingham?'

'What's yours?'

Ranvir's smile seemed very studied, very professional, 'I was born in nineteen eighty-two. And you?'

Arnold realised he had probably been just as cocky when he too was an up and coming twenty-year-old, but he was that no longer and he muttered his date of birth into his oxygen mask indistinctly, embarrassed.

'Sorry, Mr. Balasingham, that was nineteen...?'

'Nineteen twenty-two.' Arnold paused to catch his breath. 'Nineteen twenty-two.' Again he checked his breathlessness. 'Got that all of you?'

The medical team was leaving Arnold's bedside just as his domestic team arrived. They overlapped in the middle of the long ward, with neither side realising that they had in common the welfare of the agitated, oxygen-dependent individual in the last of the serried beds.

'They all look so ill,' whispered Angelina, as she passed between the beds.

'This hospital, ah!' responded Podi Kelle, too loudly.

'Shhh! Yes, I know, but it doesn't look like any of them are getting better. Perhaps this is where the very ill ones come to die?'

'No, look, him not so bad – him sit on bed do toe nails.'

The gentleman in question raised an eyebrow as Podi Kelle progressed noisily by. Angelina stared back at him as she too passed, and agreed that he didn't look as ill as the others.

Angelina hadn't seen Arnold in this ward the night before, so didn't know where his bed was, and now, as she approached the end of the ward without

spotting him, began to feel her pulse quicken. Had she been given the correct information as to his whereabouts? If not this ward, then where? Maybe it had been this ward, but he had slipped away in the night and now lay in the mortuary? Did they really have cold slabs of marble in the mortuary, or those magnificent kitchen drawers? She had reached the far end and he was not to be seen.

Podi Kelle, turning back to look once more, spotted the raised hand of the man in the nearest bed, waving feebly for them to step to his bedside. Arnold, withered, his lips grey-blue behind the transparent mask, was barely recognisable.

'Oh, *there* you are!' Angelina's attempt to disguise her shock at seeing him like this made her sound like she was congratulating Arnold for a particularly successful round of hide-and-seek.

'What a ridiculous thing to say!' objected Arnold, his wife's meaning not lost on him. 'I'm not here deliberately, in case you'd forgotten.'

'Well of course I'd not forgotten. Don't be so bad tempered, Arnold!'

'Might I ask how you'd feel if you were left trussed up in bed like a bundle of tatty paperbacks?'

'A bundle of tatty paperbacks? What are you talking about, you silly old man?'

'How dare you call me a silly old man! If I feel like a bundle of tatty paperbacks, then that's what I feel like.'

Podi Kelle, sensing that this ritual of welcome between the old married couple was just about complete, stepped between them and said gently, 'Good morning. How feeling, ah?'

'Yes, you ok?', Angelina added, embarrassed.

Arnold took a moment to reply, as he gulped for oxygen. Even with the mask on, the exertion of being cross had been a little too much for him, and he wondered if the oxygen supply could be increased. Then he wondered what would happen if it could not.

'Thank you for coming,' he said quietly, at last, his head lying heavily on the pile of pillows. The mattress was inclined somewhat, so that he was neither

sitting nor lying, but it was clear that there was a far greater force pulling down than pushing up. 'You just missed the doctors.'

'Oh, dear.'

'I don't suppose you could have done anything to help.'

'Well, no, but I'd like to have been here.'

'Hari, me too.'

'What did they say?'

'Tests, tests and tests.'

'When start?'

'Today, I suppose.'

'Well, what sort of tests?'

Arnold looked at his wife in that special way he had for dismissing disdainfully questions which he thought too stupid to answer.

'I mean, they must have said something about what they're going to do?'

'Look, I can't know what tests they're going to do because I'm not qualified in these matters. Moreover, I don't really care.'

'What do you mean you don't really care?'

'I mean precisely that. Exactly that. Not more nor less than that. I mean I don't really care.'

'But why?'

'Because I've been lying down for a while now...'

'But you've only just been admitted...'

'Yes, I know...' Arnold paused for a moment, to avoid becoming breathless, '...but also for a while at home before I came here, in case you'd forgotten. I am not ready to die, make no mistake, but I am even less ready to carry on like this. I do not want to be treated.'

Arnold stared unblinkingly first at Angelina, and then Podi Kelle, so as to be sure that they had understood the full weight of what he was saying.

'But you don't know if they can make you feel better until they've done their tests. How can you make that decision already?'

'They made it clear that things aren't looking good. It was in their manner. Maybe they'll fit a pacemaker – I heard one of the students suggest it and the twit in the bow tie nodded as if that would be about all they could do.'

'Well, that'd be better than nothing, wouldn't it?'

'I have no idea. None at all. But I do know I'm not prepared to be cut open from throat to navel just so they can practise on me, because I'd never recover fully. Even if I actually survived it.'

'Medicine?' wondered Podi Kelle.

'I don't mind taking pills, if they help, and I'll agree to a pacemaker I suppose, although I don't really know what it involves. But that's it.'

'And the...?' Angelina gestured to indicate the oxygen mask.

'Hmm, yes, this – it appears that I'm stuck with this whether I like it or not.'

'Cannot breathe, ah?'

'Nope!'

'You funny colour last night on floor!'

Angelina thought this an unhelpful remark from Podi Kelle, but also thought he was still a funny colour now, even with the mask. Just what sort of funny colour he must have been without it she could hardly imagine.

'On the floor?'

'Yes, ambulance come when you fall on floor.'

'I don't remember much about last night. Only little bits.' Arnold chose not to comment on his memory of Yogam's presence, since it had become clear to him that it was in his best interests to remain as calm as he possibly could.

Podi Kelle's mobile pinged in her bag. She reacted instinctively before stopping herself, assuming an air of indifference as to whatever the message might be.

'You're supposed to turn your phone off, Podi,' reprimanded Angelina, 'they can stop vital machines working if they ring in hospital, it said down there.'

'Yes, sorry, ah,' Podi Kelle glanced around furtively, hoping that the message from Ken hadn't just caused the death nearby of one too weak to withstand its incoming force.

'That'll be from your friend, will it?' asked Arnold.

'Hari, Ken,' nodded Podi Kelle, as if reproofed.

'I remember him coming to say hello to me yesterday, but I can't honestly say I remember much more than that. Did he get home safely?'

'Hari. Safe.'

From within Podi Kelle's bag the mobile now started ringing, which caused her to freeze with embarrassment, with fear, with shame – with confusion. It wasn't her mobile. It was Angelina's, which she'd thrown in her own bag after she'd towelled it dry earlier, and the rightful recipient of the call didn't register the ringing as coming from her own phone.

'Damnation, Podi Kelle, take that outside would you!' Arnold snapped.

He glared as he watched his servant come close to a sprint as she dashed along the ward and out of the distant door, but then Arnold found himself smiling unexpectedly. She'd been a funny little thing in their lives, had Podi Kelle, and, yes, it had been complicated, but he was fond of her in his own way. He was fond of everybody in his own way, and wanted to be back at home again, there to spend the last few hours/days/weeks of his life amongst his people.

Alone with his wife, he addressed her gravely but affectionately.

'It's over, Angelina. Our life together, our marriage, it's over. I'm truly done for now, but that's ok, I suppose. It was going to come eventually.'

Angelina lowered her head, unable to find anything suitable to say. A tear filled up her right eye before falling onto her lap.

'I have loved you, you know,' said Arnold, his voice muffled by the mask.

'Yes, and I loved you too,' responded Angelina, in a private whisper.

There was a long moment in which nothing was said. Angelina reached



out and held Arnold's hand. It was cold and, as he gripped, there was no strength in it.

'One of the things I remember about last night,' Arnold broke into the silence, 'is being carried out through the door on the stretcher, and the porch light was shining on those rose bushes in the front garden. They're in a tangle.'

'Yes, they are rather.'

'Do you think you could ask Timmy to find a moment to tidy them up a bit? I'd like them to be neat for when I come home.'

Angelina couldn't help herself raising her eyebrows at the suggestion that her husband might be coming home.

'Oh, yes, my dear wife, I'm coming home, never doubt it. I want to die at home. With you. With the others. I might not be there for long, but I'm coming home.'

'Ok, I'll ask him. Just tidy up the roses?'

'Well, you know, that sort of thing. I don't suppose I'll see them flower again, but I'd like to know that they'll look fine when they do.'

'I'll ask.'

The call on Angelina's phone had been from Yogam, as expected. He couldn't have known the timing would be poor, and was startled to find Podi Kelle on the other end when it was answered. He'd said as much, too, commenting that he had no idea that she knew how to use a mobile, in response to which she offered to teach him all about text messages. He told her that he knew all about them already, which popped Podi Kelle's bubble somewhat, as she had come to believe herself to be something of a pioneer in these matters.

Standing beside the noisy doors of the lifts, which opened and closed ceaselessly as cells of people came and went, she explained to him that they were at the hospital, that Arnold looked terrible, and that she'd got the blame when his mother's phone had rung, because it was in her bag, and that she felt a minor but perceptible injustice had been done to her as a result.

'Y'know what, Podi, I think it's perfectly safe to use mobiles in a

hospital,' Yogam reassured her when she expressed her concern over the damage which might have been done, 'I think it's just fear of the new. If someone answered a mobile outside a window, and on the other side there was someone on a life-support machine, I don't think he'd die!'

'I think you right, Yogam. Hari. Oh, your mum come – you want talk?'

'No, tell her I'll call later. I've got a meeting.'

Angelina had stepped out of the ward looking upset, barely acknowledging the young man who held open for her the heavy, swing doors. Podi Kelle nodded her thanks to him as she stepped over to wrap her arm around her mistress, and lead her gently towards the lifts.

'Yogam call.'

'Did he? Why did he call you, Podi?'

'Call you, not me. Your mobile in my bag cos I dry when it wet.'

'Oh, yes. I'd forgotten about that call.'

'Yes, me too...'

They stepped into a lift, together with four others.

'What did he say?'

'Ask if old bugger dead yet.'

Angelina looked round furtively at their fellow passengers, whose reactions were just as bad as she feared, somewhere between shock and amusement, with much nonchalant looking up at the ceiling. She said nothing further until the lift doors opened and they stepped out on the ground floor into the anonymity of the larger world.

'Did you have to say that, Podi?'

'What?'

'About the old... you know... what Yogam said?'

'But you ask what Yogam say. So I say.'

'Hmm. Is that all he said? Is he going to come to see me, or anything?'

'Said call later.'

'Oh, right. Should I call him back?'

'No. Meet.'

'Meet?'

'Hari.'

'Oh, meeting! He's in a meeting.'

'Hari.'

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Nishanthi had spent much of the rest of the morning peering periodically from the dormer window above her desk. It required some physical effort, for one of her proportions, to squeeze past the edge of the desk, with the corner which raked uncomfortably across her pudendum, in order to squint through the window at an oblique angle. In this position she could just about catch sight of the empty space where her mother's car usually stood.

She had found it impossible to settle, her head crawling with all the things she was worrying about. As her father lay in hospital, dying, she wondered whether she should have been more forceful about his care, and not allowed him to deteriorate at home. But he was her father, and it hadn't felt like her place to question his decision. He was her brother's father too, however, and Yogam hadn't felt the draw of obedience, not in the slightest, with the result that he had taken control and saved her father's dignity, at least, and possibly his life.

She would be furious with the twins if they took it upon themselves to make decisions for her, naturally, but that was because they were school children. She was a lawyer, qualified to make all sorts of decisions, yet had not been willing to make the one decision weeks ago which might have saved her father's life. In fact, she reflected, it hadn't even occurred to her that there was a decision to be made, because when her father had stated that he wanted to be left alone at home, she simply hadn't questioned it. If he ever came home again, this was going to have to change; she would have to take him in hand. Her mother hadn't questioned his judgement either. No, plainly, she, the daughter, was going to have to become the grown-up in this household.

As for her husband, busily planning a diversion in the course of his work life, altering the grand plan of their partnership, she didn't know what she was going to do about him. Short of reining him in, forbidding him to take things any further – a tactic which she had instinctively adopted, without success, when he had first announced the project – she could see no way of preventing him from setting off to write his book, and wasn't so sure that she had that level of control over him any longer. She might once have been able to instruct him in the matter of what was best for them, but he had become more independent, she sensed, so there was the possibility that if she delivered an ultimatum – it's our marriage or the book – he might just turn in the wrong direction. She decided she'd let the matter rest for now, that there was nothing else she could do.

But drinks together this evening? What would they talk about?

She spotted her mother's car as it pulled in, excused herself, and left the office. Timmy raised his eyebrows at Ruth, who smiled, kicked off her shoes and ostentatiously stretched her arms out as she leaned back in her chair. Not for the first time, Timmy thought she was somewhat less attractive than she seemed to think she was, and returned to his computer.

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It was about five o'clock when Timmy packed up in the office and went downstairs to take over from the nanny. After hearing the twins return noisily from school, which always brought a joyful smile to his face and a frown of distraction to Nishanthi's, it was his custom to allow them time to eat and unwind before descending, to relieve Tasha, and spend time with them.

Nishanthi had become accustomed to this, and had long since given up complaining that there was work still to do, work she would have to stay and complete on her own, even as Ruth, too, packed up for the day. Today, however, Timmy remarked that he would be back once the twins were in bed, to drag her away from her desk, whether she liked it or not. And he was surprisingly firm on the matter, she thought, for a man who seemed to skim along the surface of his life, never seeming to mind much what actually happened. She acknowledged to herself, therefore, that the evening drinks were actually going to take place, regardless of her view of the matter, and so began to plan her work in order that

she could have the current batch of loose ends tied up by eight o'clock, without creating any more.

And, with spooky synchronicity, as she saved the last file of her evening, at five to eight, Timmy appeared at the top of the stairs. He looked eager, she thought, like a chap picking up his date for the evening, which rather took her by surprise. Had he combed his hair especially? She smiled, albeit not broadly, nodded as she double checked that everything which should be done was done, and rose to her feet to accompany her husband on the journey downstairs..

Timmy was certain that a gentle, affectionate manner was the key to a productive evening, and was determined to resist the urge to wind his wife up. Doing so, he knew, amounted to no more than an easy laugh when no other cheer was on offer. He considered that they were going to have an important conversation, in which he doubted that the answer to her whispered 'what about us here?' of earlier would be found, but at least they might open a dialogue.

Because of the twins, it was imperative that the architecture of their marriage be preserved, whatever the nature of the relationship which occupied it thereafter. This was first and foremost, as far as Timmy was concerned. Beyond that, however, he desired to find happiness in his life at home, since there was so much of it which he enjoyed otherwise, and he now knew that an extravagant extra-marital liaison was fun but not a solution. On the other hand, the accusatory grilling having ceased since his first day back, he noted with a sigh of relief that it hadn't become a problem either.

'Why are you sighing?' asked Nishanthi,,examining the crown of his head, as he walked downstairs in front of her.

'Oh, nothing, just a sigh.'

He held out his hand at the bottom of the steps. She hesitated, recognising the gesture for what it was but not understanding why it was being made at this point, with no more than the landing to cross before they reached the living room. He stood and waited, smiling gently, unwilling to move until she had placed her hand in his. Shrugging slightly, she responded to his gesture, as a means to being able to descend from the final step and proceed, if nothing else.

'You know, you're getting a bit thin on top,' she observed.

'Ooh, you know how to set the tone for a romantic evening, don't you!' he chuckled.

She stopped and withdrew her hand, snapping, 'Look, I was only saying, ok! I didn't know this was meant to be a romantic evening, did I! Shall I just go back to work if I'm so fucking unromantic?'

'Come on,' he offered his hand again, calmly, 'I was only joking. Come on, let's make it a romantic evening, shall we?'

Nishanthi lowered her head, recognising that she'd been too sharp, realising that her husband was plainly making an effort, and acknowledging that she was not.

'Sorry.'

She took his hand again, and they walked together into their living room, where she flopped on the baggy sofa, at her favoured end, whilst Timmy went to the sideboard in which they kept the drinks.

'You'll be wanting some of that rakia, I imagine... oh, it's empty!' he held the bottle in the air, as if looking for the hidden drop lingering round a corner somewhere within, 'Have you been tippling?'

'I might have had a little bit of it since...'

'Since your night of...'

'Yes yes, since that night, ok. You don't have to rub it in.'

'Darling, I'm not trying to rub anything in. We've all had the odd night like that. It's fine, just not the thing to do every night. You're not...?'

'What?'

'...not drinking every night, are you?'

Nishanthi nodded glumly that she had been, but recovered immediately to a strident defence, 'But nothing like a much as I drank that night. Just one drink. Is that ok, my lord and master?'

'Of course. It's up to you how much you drink.'

'For fuck's sake!'

'What would you like instead?'

'Whisky, please.'

'When did you start drinking whisky?' Timmy was beginning to fail in his determination to keep calm.

'Yesterday,' she glared defiantly at him, 'after I'd finished the rakia.'

She saw his eyes flick briefly upwards, an involuntary gesture of irritation which pleased her.

'Right. Right then. Whisky it is. Do you want a glass, or will you drink from the bottle?'

'You're always quick with the snarky remark aren't you, always the smart arse!'

Timmy rose to his feet, breathed deeply.

'Stop. Let's stop this right now and try to have a pleasant evening. Ok?'

Nishanthi paused for long enough that her reply was moderate, in the right zone, 'Yes, ok. Ok.'

'Do you want water?'

'Please.'

'I'll run down and get some.'

'The water in the bathroom's just fine.'

'Is it?'

'It is!'

They both drank whisky, the first time in as long as Timmy could remember that they'd done the same thing at the same time in the same room. Apart from work, of course, and sleep.

'So what did your mother say about your dad?'

'I told you when I came back up again.'

'Hmm, not really! You said that he was alive and then went back to work! Did she know anything about what treatment he'll get? What the prognosis is?'

That sort of stuff?'

'Not much to tell, really. He's on oxygen, apparently, and looks pretty grim, otherwise they're doing tests to see what can be done. Amma says that he knows he's dying and wants to come home to do it.'

'Oh god, not doing 'at home' again. Surely he can't?'

'I suppose it depends on what they can do for him, if anything. The way Amma described him, it doesn't sound like he'd last a minute out of the hospital.'

'I hope he sees sense and stays put.'

'I'm not going to let him come home unless there's some improvement. I won't have it. It's not fair on the twins, for a start, to turn this place into a house of death.'

Timmy was surprised by Nishanthi's confidence in this matter, since he'd never before seen her take a strong position with her father.

'Being reasonable,' he said, 'it might be possible to have him home to die with dignity, but we'd need help. A nurse, maybe? But only if he's significantly better first.'

Nishanthi, lowering the glass from her lips, looked at her husband, her eyes wide at the absurdity of what she'd just heard. He wondered what he'd said to offend her this time, but then realised and chuckled, whereupon she spluttered with laughter, spraying a mouthful of whisky and water as far as the television screen. This was a good start, thought Timmy, although unconvinced it was as funny as all that.

With the promise of a thawing of the marital frost, they settled slowly, cautiously, into the conversation about Timmy's plans, the stated goal of the evening. He'd done his homework, and was able to make a suitably convincing case for his book project, all the while being careful to use a positive *when* rather than a conditional *if*. He knew he was going to write the book regardless of Nishanthi's views on the matter, so saw it as his duty to help her adopt views that were compatible with his. He demonstrated that the impact on their earnings would be within acceptable limits, argued that their practice was well-enough established that his constant presence wasn't required, responded to her point



about the increase in her work load whilst he had been in Bulgaria with the suggestion that they could employ a junior.

'And finally,' he shifted along the sofa, took her hand in his once more, looked her in the eye and spoke softly, 'finally, it would make me very happy to work on this project.'

She looked back at him squarely, unable to find a reasoned argument against the project, although still prejudicially ill-disposed towards it, and lifted his hand to her lips to kiss it gently.

'Oh, for fuck's sake, you have my blessing,' she sighed, a smile flashing briefly across her face.

Timmy wanted to leap up, bounce on the sofa and punch the air, crying YES YES YES, but thought that doing so would wake the kids, confuse the old ladies downstairs and appear just a tad triumphalist. So he nodded wordlessly his gratitude to Nishanthi, who now managed a small maintained smile.

Timmy was elated when he saw the look on her face. They had communicated, he felt, which was wonderful. This wasn't more important than obtaining her permission to write the book, since that requirement had been immutable, but he thought it might become so in due course, that there was the possibility that 'what about us here?' was a question with an answer.

He returned her gesture, and brought her hand to his lips, holding it there for long enough that he began to feel close to her physically. His eyes shut, he whispered secretively into her palm, 'Shall we go to bed? Y'going to sex me?'

He felt her stiffen, felt the slight tug on her hand which he knew meant he was to let go, felt her withdraw and lean away from him. Gently does it, he thought, keep it easy, don't push it too far.

'No, ok, that's fine, if you don't want to. That's fine. Another drink?'

'No, thanks, I just have one or two little things to finish upstairs. And you've got your first book meeting tomorrow, so you'd better get an early night, hadn't you.'

He watched as she drained her glass in one, like a pro, rose steadily from the sofa and made for the door. Thinking about the days since his return, he

realised that he'd spent the evenings up in the office, after the twins had gone to bed, doing preliminary research for the book, and that Nishanthi had been leaving before him. He had thought she'd simply gone down to bed, whereas, self-evidently, she'd been in this room developing a little drink habit all alone.

Of one thing he was quite certain, in relation to this unexpected change in his wife's habits, that she was too professional to attempt to do any work after she had been drinking. She was going back to the office to avoid him, and for no other reason.

'Yep, that's fine. I'll go and tuck myself in, then. Don't stay up too late, love.' he smiled, knowing that he'd achieved most of what he'd wanted.

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Twenty-four hours later, as he lay in bed with the radio on, rejoicing in the success which his meeting had been, he was disturbed by Nishanthi coming into the bedroom.

'God, I'm so thrilled! They actually pressed the go button! It's really going to happen!' he could barely contain his excitement.

Nishanthi walked over to the side of his bed.

'Well, that's another button pressed,' she said as she turned the radio off.

'Hey, I was listening to...'

'And I think we need to press a third button today, smiley boy,' she continued, as she started to strip.

He watched as she revealed her overflowing curves, standing in her underwear in what he thought might be a parodic attempt at seduction. But then she flung off her bra theatrically, revealing the full, pendulous magnificence of her breasts, and allowed her knickers to slide down her legs in an unmistakably slinky manner, and he came to understand that this was no parody.

She climbed into bed and was on him immediately, urging action from him of the type which needed just a little more preparation than she'd allowed for.

'Well, you randy minx!' he laughed.

'You'd better fucking believe it – ooh, you're shockingly hard all of a

sudden! What's come over you, then!'

'Nothing yet, madam, but I believe that's a state of affairs which might be about to change! Oh my god you're so wet...'

And as he lay, gazing ecstatically up with wonder at the sweating face of the woman he knew so well, yet presently hardly recognised, humping him with great vigour and the sexiest of whimpers each time she rubbed herself against him to and fro, up and down, he couldn't possibly have imagined what lay behind his wife's urgent fucking.

The day had begun in more or less the usual fashion – kids, nanny, secretary, Nishanthi already at work – when Timmy had got up. Today, however, the big meeting at the publisher's in London meant that he wouldn't be going to work in the office at all. Yet he had some time to kill before he had to leave, and in order to fill it (and calm his nerves) he decided to go to B&Q to buy the bamboo required to straighten up the roses, as requested by Arnold and conveyed by Angelina. He returned in good time, with a bundle of canes, changed into his corduroy suit (believing it to be a better match for a writer than his seldom-used, lawyer-ish business suit), and left to catch the train.

Angelina, returning from the hospital, passed Ruth on her way out for her lunch break, so she decided to climb up to the loft to report on Arnold's condition. She took with her Timmy's laptop, which she thought had probably served its purpose downstairs.

'Knock knock...'

'Oh, hi, Amma!'

Nishanthi didn't turn round, but carried on reading something on her screen.

'May I come in?'

'What? Of course you can! You don't need to ask.'

As her mother stepped up into the room, Nishanthi hit control S and swivelled round to face her mother, smiling broadly.

'How's Appa today?'

'Well, daahleeng, he's looking really dreadful...'

'Oh, dear!'

'...but they've decided to give him a pacemaker, so he's a bit more cheerful that something's happening.'

'What will that do for him?'

'Well, he says it won't make him better, but it might give him a bit longer. It'll help his heart beat more strongly, he says.'

'Oh, that's good then. When's it going to happen?'

'The next day or two, he says. Then he says he'll be home again a day or two after that.'

'Does he now! And what do his doctors say?'

'I suppose what he says.'

'Amma, we know that what he says is whatever he feels like saying. We need to talk to the doctors ourselves, to find out what's actually happening. We need to know how realistic it is for him to come home.'

'Oh, daahleeng, I don't think we should bother the doctors. Surely we just trust Appa's decision?'

Nishanthi stood abruptly.

'No, Amma, we do not trust his decision, not anymore. There are other people in this house whose lives are affected by this. What about the twins, for a start? If he comes home it has to be with dignity – his dignity – not least for the twins. Can you imagine how awful it will be for them if they grow up remembering their grandfather as no more than a withered old man puking and shitting as he lies dying? And what about you? Do you want him back like that?'

Angelina didn't really want him back at all, but thought it best not to say so. She handed Timmy's laptop to Nishanthi.

'I thought you might as well have this back – I suppose Timmy will be needing it again now he's doing his book.'

'He told you about that?'

'Yes, I saw him this morning when he came back from the shops.'

'He's off at his meeting right now. I hope it goes well for him, I suppose. Listen, Amma, I think I need to come in with you to the hospital to speak with the doctors. Shall we go together tomorrow?'

'But work?'

'Y'know, work's not everything, Amma. Some things are more important.'

'Ok, daahleeng. I'll leave you to get on with it now, though.'

'Thanks for bringing the laptop up, Amma.'

The more computer-savvy of the Balasingham-Nitka partnership, Nishanthi thought she should check Timmy's laptop to see what state her father had left it in, and to make sure that anything embarrassing that the old fool had put on it was deleted before it could be read by others. Left alone once more, she unwound the power supply, wrapped crudely around the closed laptop like a length of her mother's knitting wool, plugged it in and turned it on.

It didn't take her long to find the AOL Instant messages left for Timmy by Ivett, the cause of all the uninvestigated bleeping whilst her father had had the use of the computer. They were exuberant, coarse, sometimes filthy, absolutely unequivocal, leaving her in no doubt that her husband had been having sex with his host whilst in Bulgaria.

She was rendered insensitive at first, unable to take in the enormity of what she'd discovered. This, after not so many minutes, gave way to a burning rage which she felt she might not be able to contain. Certainly, had Timmy been in the house, within reach, for those minutes, then he might well have been subjected to a physical attack involving a weapon.

She read, read and re-read the messages. She read about Ivett's enjoyment of oral sex, of her willingness to have strong liquor – rakia, more to the point – poured into and drunk from her vagina. She read of the girlfriend, of the threesomes, the nights of abandonment, the use of a vibrator as the second penis Timmy's anatomy could not provide. She read of Ivett's bizarre fantasy about the things he would be doing with her – *Nishanthi, your so-sexy wife* – now he was back in Luton. And Ivett, it emerged, harboured a desire to perform cunnilingus

on a brown cunt – it didn't appear to matter which brown cunt, since any would do, but Nishanthi's was the only one she knew.

Ivett had reduced her to a brown cunt.

Nishanthi howled.

Her cries pierced the air of the office, so that Ruth, returning from lunch, sprinted up the last flight of stairs into the office, fearing for the worst, fearing that Nishanthi had just learned of her father's death. But no longer would the death of her father be the worst imaginable thing for Nishanthi. She'd entered into a world of torment much greater.

Spluttering something incoherent about the strain of the past few days being too much for her, tears cascading down her cheeks, Nishanthi grabbed the laptop and excused herself from the office, instructing Ruth to make do as best she could as she was going to have to lie down.

'Dirty bitch! Dirty dirty dirty dirty dirty dirty bitch!' she sobbed, collapsing onto her bed, holding the laptop as if it were half something of comfort, half something from which the life should be crushed. And there she lay, crying continuously, so that her pillow became soaked, struggling mightily to avoid being drawn down by the maelstrom of her emotions. She felt hatred. Hatred for Ivett certainly, hatred of her emotions being rent from her control, hatred of Timmy for his grotesque betrayal of their wedding vows, hatred of all of her life which, until a few minutes earlier, had seemed settled, steady and reliable, but which now seemed finished. Her dying father? She felt hatred for him for his bullying, his contrivance to prevent her becoming an independent female, his removal of her and her brother from the land of their birth in the service of his self-interest. She wished he would die, now, in the hospital, removed from his family by forces beyond his control, and that he would be a bother to her and her children no longer.

She was aware that she'd made a fuss about Ivett before this dreadful revelation, but she'd not really meant it, not actually suspected anything was going on. She'd done that, she knew, to demonstrate that she cared about Timmy, to let him know that their relationship mattered to her. Whilst she rejected out of hand any idea that she was culpable in the matter of her husband's infidelity, she did

wonder how the normal patterns of communication between the two of them had collapsed to the point that she had started playing a role.

She recognised that the instant messages had all been incoming, that Timmy probably didn't even know about them. And so it crossed Nishanthi's mind, as the addictive embrace of hope enveloped her, that the messages were all a fantasy played out by Ivett, opposite but not otherwise so different from her own fantasy *about* Ivett, and that Timmy had taken no part in any of the activities described in them. But, seriously, the level of detail was too graphic for them not to have occurred. What a pity Timmy didn't have a dragon tattooed along his penis, she thought, since it was certain that Ivett would have alluded to it and then she would have written evidence that they had been intimate.

The messages spoke of night after night after night of complete intimacy, of the sort she had hardly shared with her husband in all the years of their marriage. It wasn't even just a one-night stand, a casual shag, which would have been beyond annoying but probably something from which she could recover. No, it had been a repeated, pre-meditated betrayal of everything their marriage had been.

Everything their marriage should have been. Where had it gone, that marriage? There was no possibility that Timmy would have betrayed her in the early years. He was so in love with her, she remembered, so passionate around her, so sexual. She recognised that relationships change, that couples age, have children, focus on careers; but when the love burns less brightly, surely, it settles down to a steady, warm glow, rather than being extinguished.

Her thoughts circled around the horror which those messages represented, round and round, picking at it like carrion, trying to pull it apart, to understand what had happened, why, and what she should now do about it. She didn't sleep, not properly, but did fall into a state of meditation in which the world beyond her bedroom door was excluded, and was brought back from her distant place only when she heard the twins running up and down the stairs, screaming joyously at each other, laughing continuously.

Astonished that the time had passed so quickly, that her children were back from school, but confused as to what the noise was all about, she lifted

herself off her bed. It had grown dark outside. She switched on the light, glanced in the mirror – could have been better, but could have been so much worse – and went to investigate.

She found the twins engaged in a playful battle on the stairs, armed with bamboo bows and arrows and fitted out in breastplates made by stringing the canes together into a sheet. She recognised immediately the hand of Podi Kelle in this, because this was exactly what she used to do for her and Yogam when they were small in Ambuluwewa. And, indeed, there was Podi Kelle, standing in the hallway below, watching the children play and laughing with them.

Nishanthi was beside herself with fury, that the bloody servant had interfered once more in her children's upbringing, and that she'd set them up to engage in fighting games – FIGHTING GAMES – when they should be reading and playing nicely together. She was sick of other people interfering in her life, and would tolerate it no longer. She drew a deep breath, a gesture which was recognised by the twins and Podi Kelle, each of whom grew silent and still, sure of what was to follow.

At that instant, Timmy ran out of the kitchen, clutching a cruciform sword also made from bamboo, uttering a battle cry as he bore down on his children. They failed to respond with the hilarious squeals he'd anticipated. In fact, they failed to respond at all. Podi Kelle too stood completely still, the amusement gone out of her face. He followed the blank gawping gazes on the faces of his playmates, looking up to see his wife standing on the landing, her arms crossed, a countenance of doom on her face.

Nishanthi looked down at those below and understood wholly that they had been having a better time than she had. And it wasn't just today, when anybody would be having a better time, it was every day. Everybody, all of the time, had been having a better time than she. She grimaced as her children ran down the stairs, away from her and into the arms of their father, where all three looked as if they'd prepared equally for whatever punishment was about to be handed down by her, by their nemesis, the anti-mother which she now saw she had become.

Timmy's behaviour with Ivett had been unforgivable. But, in the context

of playing naughtily, it was possibly understandable, she considered grimly. If it appeared that she regarded all play as naughty, then there ceased to be any difference between degrees of naughtiness. Moreover, she saw here, without any ambiguity, the closeness her children felt for their father and the distance at which they had placed her, and knew absolutely that there was no possibility of the twins growing happily, successfully, without Timmy's presence in their lives. Consequently, Timmy was going to continue to be a presence in her life, and she'd better shape up and make sure that's how the future played itself out. Timmy's behaviour with Ivett had been unforgivable, but maybe it was forgettable.

A towel hung over the bannister, a large bath towel used that morning by who knows, which Nishanthi reached for, pulling it slowly, menacingly into her possession. She let out a screech and hurtled down the stairs, proclaiming herself to be a gladiator who would destroy them all with her net-of-doom, so they'd all better watch out. The twins responded instantly with their own shouts as they returned to battle stations, whilst Podi Kelle giggled and applauded. Timmy stood back and watched in amazement, as his wonderful wife did battle with her wonderful issue in their wonderful hallway, not understanding that her hoots of childish contentment were a disguise for howls of adult pain.

Later, when Nishanthi had climaxed on him and climbed off to finish him with her mouth, he had had to bite a pillow to mute his monstrous orgasm for fear of waking the household.

'My god! My god! My god!' he whimpered, 'that was fantastic, darling!'

She lay beside him and held him tightly.

'It's been quite a day,' she whispered.

'Not half! And I didn't expect it to end like that, I can tell you!'

'I'm so pleased about the book, Timmy. I think you're really going to enjoy doing it. And we'll rub along just fine here whilst you're away.'

'I can't tell you what this means to me, darling.'

'You don't need to. Truly, you don't. One thing, though...'

'Anything for you, my great love!'

'When you're doing your research in Bulgaria...'

'Uhm – yes?'

She snuggled in closer still, and whispered in his ear, 'I don't want you to stay with Ivett again.'

She felt his heart leap in his chest, heard him gasp for breath.

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Nishanthi and Timmy both slept terribly.

He had lain there in a confused state, partially elated about his book deal, partially anxious about his wife's coda to their love-making. Why had she returned to that theme, he wondered, and why at that moment, in that way? It was almost as if she'd engaged him in the sex act as a competitive gesture aimed at Ivett, and decided unilaterally that she had triumphed. But the business in Bulgaria had passed into history, as far as he was concerned, it had become trivial, unimportant, forgotten, his guilt had subsided, so how could she know? Perhaps, with the research he would be doing, it was a good thing that he would be often away during the next few months.

She had lain there in a growing state of anger over his affair, now that she had decided the way forward and could focus on the hurt alone. Having made love to him, she felt soiled, cheapened. She couldn't shake off the image of Timmy and Ivett together, laughing laughing laughing about her, recklessly enjoying the effortless abandon of a secret affair. It was easy for a mistress to give good sex, since that's all she had to do. She didn't have to run a house and look after the children. She didn't have to cook and clean. All she had to do was hand over her body for his use – her thin, bony, white body.

Nishanthi became no longer sure that she was able to let things lie as planned, but still determined to remain silent for now, whilst she knew her emotions were hot. She was entirely sure it was a good thing that Timmy would be away a lot over the next few months.

'Oh, fucking hell!' she yelled, leaping out of bed.

'Huh, what? What?' Timmy jerked into full wakefulness.

'I've fucking come on in the night. For fuck's sake!'

'Oh dear...'

'I haven't got any fucking tampons either. I'm not due for another week.'

'Well, I guess things don't always run to plan.'

'Shut up, Timmy. Will you get up and fucking help me strip the bed, please. Fuck! I'm bleeding like a sacrificed goat. I'd better go and plug myself.'

She wrapped herself in her dressing gown, and made for the bathroom, where she folded a wad of toilet paper into a pad. On the off chance, she stomped downstairs to ask her mother if she happened to have any sanitary towels lying around.

'I don't know, daahleeng. It's been some years since I needed sannies! Ooh, I know where there might be some, right at the back of my bedside cabinet. Podi, would you mind just looking for me, please?'

Podi Kelle dutifully went to the bedside cabinet, and did indeed find an ancient packet of sanitary towels, hidden archaeologically behind several layers of more recently-used items. Buried equally deeply, she found a tube of KY, which she dropped casually into her pocket.

'Oh. There we are, daahleeng, you can always trust your old mother, you know. Thank you, Podi.'

'What time are you leaving for the hospital this morning?'

'Quite soon, if we're going to catch the doctor.'

'Ok, I'll go and shower and get dressed. Timmy'll have to hold the fort upstairs this morning. And wash the bloody bedding. No pun intended.'

'Ah, if you go I stay,' Podi Kelle chipped in, 'I wash bedding.'

'Oh, Podi, you're a darling – would you, please? Timmy's useless at all that stuff.'

'Ha, no problem,' grinned Podi Kelle, wondering when was the last time Nishanthi had actually seen the washing machine, since it was always Timmy who did their washing. 'Men rubbish!' she tittered.

Podi Kelle had maintained a steady stream of text messages with Ken since his visit, although she'd not felt it appropriate to leave the house to see him. The messages had taken on progressively an unexpected but not unwelcome tone, in that they had become frankly saucy. It had begun with a bit of flirtatious innuendo from Ken, which Podi Kelle had taken some time to understand, being unfamiliar, except in the literal sense, with the term 'blue eyes'. But she got the idea soon enough and wasn't thrown again until she received the text containing the phrase 'rumpy pumpy'. She concluded, upon consideration, that this had to mean what she thought it must mean. Contemplating the possibility of having sex with Ken, even at their advanced age, she decided that there was no reason on earth not to. In fact, she was in no doubt that they were too old to wait any longer.

Thus it had been made plain enough in the texts that they were going to consummate their relationship physically, which had led to some very warm, loving – if necessarily brief – exchanges, and a discussion about the details. One of the great advantages of being old, they had agreed, was that they were very far removed from the need to be coy about these things. Ken had indicated that he would be going to his doctor to get some Viagra, and she had stated that she would have to get some lubricating jelly. For her, however, that had not been as easy as she would have liked, since all her personal needs were met as part of the supermarket shop she did with Angelina every week. Despite having decided they were too old for coyness, Podi Kelle drew the line at popping something so private in amongst the tea bags and chicken thighs, and yet had no money of her own. The serendipitous discovery of Angelina's long-abandoned tube of KY was, therefore, a tremendous gift, she felt.

She texted Ken immediately to say that *this* was the morning. He replied that, as luck would have it, he was just back from the doctor, and that he too was *geared up to go*.

She walked into Arnold's chapel and bowed her head solemnly. 'Thank you, lord Ganesh. You Ken's good god.'

Angelina and Nishanthi had already left, and she knew Timmy himself had put the washing machine on because the water pressure dropped whilst she was showering, briefly becoming scaldingly hot, which caused her to dance to the other end of the bath.

'Fug!' she growled, believing this to be what Nishanthi would say under these circumstances.

As she waited for the water temperature to settle, she looked down at her body, wondering how Ken would take to it. She was very thin, the form of her ribs being clearly visible, her breasts somewhat less so. Her legs, she thought, looked like the legs of children in Biafra, except not black, giving the impression that they might break under the slightest pressure.

'At least I got two of them!' she muttered, deciding that neither she nor Ken was in a position to be too picky in the matter of the other's appearance.

Discounting the intimate encounters with Arnold, which hadn't ever been proper sex, she couldn't remember the last time she'd been intimate with a man. She remembered having sex with her disastrous husband, but only vaguely and with no sense of joy, and couldn't remember if she'd had any other partners since then. If so, it had been so long ago that she had no recollection, yet she knew she hadn't forgotten how to have sex, how to do it. She was tremendously excited, emotionally, yet feared that she might struggle to become fully aroused erotically, but was determined to do her best, come what may. She knew, at least, from recent experience, that she would be able to bring Ken to climax, even if she couldn't get there herself. She shuddered at the memory of that moment with Arnold, which still made her feel like she'd cheated on Ken, and decided that nothing less than his death would erase the guilt.

She started to dress unthinkingly, and had to stop herself. She couldn't wear any old underwear, she thought, since she wanted to look sexy for Ken. Rummaging through her knicker drawer, she felt that none of the pairs within were nearly as sexy as she might have wished, not like the lacy things which Nishanthi wore. Briefly, she considered borrowing a pair of Nishanthi's, but realised that they were small and skimpy only because the bottom they had to contain was large and generous. On her tiny body – well, it was a ridiculous thought. And Angelina's knickers would also be too large and, anyway, were no sexier than her own. Then she remembered the new, still unworn knickers she'd bought on her shopping trip with Angelina. They weren't sexy, it was true, but they were crisply white, and would just have to do. What sort of underpants would Ken be wearing, she wondered? Was he as good with the washing machine as

Timmy? She hoped so.

'Hmm, cold outside, need thermal vest. Not sexy, but if no bra look like burned bra like hippy – make no difference anyway,' she contented herself with what seemed a satisfactory solution.

She finished dressing and stopped in the hallway to look at herself in the mirror. There was no question about it, she looked just like a little old woman, but she had across her face the broadest smile, and, in eyes which could sometimes be rheumy, nothing less than a twinkle.

Ken was shaking when she arrived at his flat, and she couldn't decide if it was nerves or excitement. If the former, then they had that much in common. If the latter, then she hoped she wasn't going to be a disappointment.

He drew her through his open door with his hands and, whilst holding her in an embrace, managed to kick the door shut behind them. She couldn't work out how he'd managed to do this, whether by teetering on his false leg and kicking the door with his real one, or by standing on the real leg and hurling the wooden one in the right general direction and hoping for the best. Wooden one? No, surely not made of wood? Would it be made of that pink plastic she remembered a brown manhaving at Ambuluwewa, who had lost a leg in a logging accident? That poor man and the rude English doctor had been a memory misplaced for probably six decades, she realised.

They kissed, deeply, standing in the hallway, holding on to each other as if this in itself would bring them into a physical union. She laid her head on his heaving chest, his manly chest, and felt the resonant vibrations as he spoke.

'Would you like a cup of tea?' he asked, awkwardly.

'No,' she replied, firmly, 'I want go bed with you. Immediate!'

'Right then! No point beating about the bush, as you say. After you...'

He hobbled after her as they made for the bed alcove, where she stopped and turned, studying his old face. She thought it was kindly, decided that she was in good, safe hands. He became shy as she examined him.

'What? What you looking at?'

'I'm looking at my Ken. That ok?'

He smiled downwards, bashfully, like a teenager. If he'd had two feet, he would have shuffled them for sure.

'I'm not sure I deserve to have *my* Dilisini looking at me!'

She reached up and began to undo his shirt buttons. He seemed about ten foot tall. Each button revealed more of his chest.

'Sri Lankan men never have hairy chest like you,' she beamed.

He beat his chest and made hushed Tarzan noises.

'You be my Jane, huh? My Dilisini Jane!'

Her mind flashed back again to the pepper vines in the jungle, upon which she'd never swung as a youngster, not once. What a wasted opportunity!

'Maybe you me go back Sri Lanka together, one last time.'

'One last time? One last time! Let's go back several last times,' he grinned.

She finished unbuttoning his shirt and stood on tiptoe to push it backwards over his shoulders. He was an old man, there could be no denying, but still he had a wonderfully strong frame, muscles which stood out, skin which was once tight. There was an awkward moment, unspoken between them, in which it wasn't clear if she would start on his trousers, or he on her coat and cardigan. He settled the matter, after a fashion, by taking her head gently into his two hands and leaning forward to kiss her exquisitely on the lips, leaving her hands meanwhile free to fumble for his belt. She was delighted by her dexterity, the fluidity of her actions, which caused his trousers to fall, as if shot, to his ankles. Rather, his ankle, for here was the artificial leg itself, gleaming and metallic and modern, not much like a leg at all. The shoe on the end, sticking out from under the concertinaed trousers, now looked more or less ridiculous.

His underpants, she was relieved to note, were actually quite nice and modern, boxers made from a shiny material and patterned, not at all like the ancient, yellowing Airtex Y-fronts worn by Arnold. He disengaged from Podi Kelle and sat carefully on the edge of the bed, so he could deal with the tricky

issue of removing trousers from over an artificial limb.

'What do you think of it then, my love?' he asked.

'It looks very science-fi. It good.'

'They've come a tremendously long way in the time I've needed one. I'll show you what this can do...'

'Maybe not right now, Ken...'

'Oh, no, no of course not,' he smiled, embarrassed, 'not right now. Look, it's a bit of a palaver taking it off – probably something I should do...'

He gestured towards the bathroom, and she nodded, watching him disappear round the corner in his shiny underpants on his shiny leg. This was the perfect outcome, she knew, since it avoided the awkwardness of her having to show him her not-shiny knickers, so she whipped off her clothes, leaving them in an uncharacteristically messy pile by the skirting, and hurried into bed, where she sat with the duvet pulled up under her chin.

Moments later, Ken emerged from the bathroom, naked. There was no sense in which she was being eased into the particular set of circumstances which arise from having a one-legged lover, since his progress towards the bed without either his leg or his underpants – which meant he had to hop, resulting in the unavoidable up and down flapping of his penis – made Podi Kelle want to laugh. She did well to suppress it into a smile, which she hid beneath the edge of the duvet in a gesture which, she hoped, made her look demure. She was assisted in this matter because she became distracted in equal measure by the skill with which he hopped, transporting his wonderful body with such unexpected lightness, and by the size of his penis which, flopping or not, was huge and very erect.

He stopped at the foot of the bed, standing as if for her inspection, a man forming right angles with his engorged member and single leg, like a gallows. He couldn't help but see her gawping.

'I know, it's wild, isn't it! Still, all present and correct, ma'am! Since I took that pill the doctor prescribed, it won't go away – been like this for an hour. I hope that's ok with you, my love?'



Podi Kelle could no longer restrain herself and laughed joyously out loud. Ken guffawed too, causing his erect penis to gyrate around an elliptical path.

She thought he looked magnificent. 'Ha, yes, ha, very ok with me! Come bed, elephant man!'

She lay back and drew the duvet modestly up to her chin before pulling it back on Ken's side, creating a triangle of invitation. He hopped to the foot of the bed and crawled towards her, on all-threes, purring like a leopard. She squealed like no animal she'd ever heard, nor one she could have made up, an involuntary noise which came right from the pit of her stomach, and which contained within it all her excitement and happiness. He slithered beneath the duvet and lay on his side, still and silently, looking into her eyes.

'Hello, my love,' he whispered.

'කොහෝමද මගේ ලස්සන කුමාරයා,' she replied.

'Oh, handsome am I? With one leg? And a prince! '

She slid her left foot over to touch his leg – it didn't even reach below his knee, such was the height difference – and he winced because it was ice-cold.

'එහේනන් මම ඔයාගේ උණුසුම විකක් හොරකන් කරනවා...'

'You've already got all my warmth,' he sighed, as he slid towards her and held her in a full frontal embrace.

She felt like she lay now in the furry, glowing embrace of the panther. He felt like he held in his arms a day gecko, but thought it best not to say so. His erection withered, and he worried that what had been was all that was going to be.

'ඔයා දැන් හයිස නැහැ,' she noticed.

'Oh, I think it'll come back in a minute,' he said with little confidence, 'let's just warm you up first.'

'සමාවෙන්න, මම හැමනිස්සේම සිතලයි.'

'Don't worry, you're so tiny it won't take long to have you roaring like a log fire.'

'Brrrrr!' Podi Kelle shivered, 'Grrrrr!'

Together, they lay back into their embrace, her head on his shoulder, whilst their body temperatures equalised.

'Why do they call you Podi Kelle?' he asked.

'එක මගේ නම.'

'But you told me your name is Dilisini?'

'ඇත්ත නමයි, මට ගෙදර අය කියන්නේ පොඩි කෙල්ල කියලා.'

'Your house name?'

'I go in Red House at Ambuluwewa from land and given new name.'

'Why?'

'They no like Dilisini.'

'What's wrong with Dilisini?' Ken stirred, puzzled, aware of the possibility that his well-defined sense of injustice was about to be invoked. 'It's a lovely name.'

'Podi Kelle name given me by boss in early days on estate, when they high up society. Visitors come Ambuluwewa from far – Kandy and Colombo – and he think modern name, servant name, more nice to use when ordering tea to sitting room. He probably forgot this not name because embarrassed. Real name on passport though.'

'But...' Ken was shocked, 'but now I think about it, it just means 'little miss', or something, doesn't it?'

'Hari! Children and English use, not knowing it's what servants called. When being friendly and call me 'Podi', they actually call me 'Little'. But I used to it, and everyone does these days, even mistress – forgotten what she used to call me.'

'I don't understand, not at all! What's wrong with Dilisini as a name?'

'It Vedda name. I am Vedda – my people left jungle to work on estate.'

'You're Vedda, are you?' Ken was very pleased.

'Hari. You like?'

'Yes, very much! I used to visit the Vedda people in my area – they taught

me to hunt with a bow and arrow, deep in the jungle. Lovely people.'

'We all gone now. We first people of Ceylon, before Sinhalese and Tamil and English, but not last.'

'Do you speak any Vedda?'

'No, all speak Sinhala now.'

'So you weren't brought up a Methodist, then?'

Podi Kelle thought this a question she could never have expected to have been asked by her new octogenarian lover, as he lay naked beside her, just as she could feel his erection returning. She gently scratched her finger nails down the length of his back, and he shuddered.

'ඔයාට ඒක ආස නැද්ද?'

'I like it very much! You make me quiver!'

'මන් ඔයාට නග්ගනවා!'

'Oops, you noticed! And I've made you warm too...'

'මට හරි සැපයි දැන්.'

'See, I told you! Come here, you hot little thing.'

They drew close to each other again, and she repeated her slow scratch down his back. As he quivered, he let his hand fall to her buttock, which he caressed softly as she sighed deeply into his ear. She wrapped her upper leg around his, so that his erection fell between her legs, and began to gyrate against it, rubbing herself, lifting herself onto her elbow the better to kiss his neck.

'ඔයා දැන් හොඳටම හයියි. ඔයා යකෙක්!' she squealed.

'And who did that to me, then!'

He reached down, beyond her thin pubic hair, curled his fingers, stroked gently.

'ඉන්න, ඉන්න, පොඩි මොහොතක් ඉන්න...'

'Sorry, sorry.' he thought he'd gone too far too soon, and pulled his hand away.

'ඒකට කමක් නැහැ මගේ සක්කුවේ KY ජේලි ටිකක් නියනවා.'

'I'll get it for you.'

'නැහැ, මම ගේනිනා,' she was embarrassed that now she would have to reveal her naked frailty to Ken, but realised that this was not a moment to be interrupted by hilarious hopping.

She unwrapped herself from him, and clambered, with some urgency, out of bed, retrieved the KY from her pocket, and was hurrying back to bed when he stopped her. She froze at the end of the bed, just as he had stopped to show his naked self to her, and was aware that her arms were twitching involuntarily, trying to cover her nakedness. No, she thought, if he's brave enough to stand here, then it was insulting if she was unwilling to relax in front of him. She breathed deeply, lowered her tense shoulders and allowed her arms to fall to her sides.

'You're the loveliest thing I've ever seen!' he sighed.

'You silly! Of course I not the lovely – but I best thing you get today!'

'You'll do for me, my beauty!'

He held out his arms and she fell willingly into his embrace again.

'Here,' she said, handing him the tube of KY, 'you make me wet.'

Ken dithered for a moment. At issue was Podi Kelle's body temperature, and whether it would drop too precipitously if he threw back the duvet so that he could see what he was doing with the lube. Otherwise he'd be fumbling in the dark, sight unseen, with a woman with whose anatomy he wasn't yet familiar. He chose to take the risk, and sat up as he pushed back the cover.

She tensed initially, as he began to apply the gel, but relaxed and found herself becoming highly aroused, wanting very much to feel him inside her.

'Come come come' she said, holding her arms out, opening her legs widely.

He dropped the tube on the floor and mounted her, gently, lovingly, needfully. As he penetrated her they both gasped together. She was burning with desire, but became distracted when his face, inches from her own, became contorted with discomfort.

'What, Ken, what matter?' she asked, urgently, panicked.

'I.. I... can't...' he lost control altogether and rolled off her, 'I can't maintain the position with one leg. I'm sorry.'

There wasn't a moment to lose, she realised, so she curled round over him and slid down onto his still-erect penis. It was a better fit, and she gasped with pleasure.

'Oh, so deep,' he whispered, looking up at her.

Their hunger for each other was so great that it took only moments before they both climaxed, simultaneously, exhaustingly. She looked at his red, tightened face through the haze of her own orgasm, and wondered if he was about to die of a heart attack, but he relaxed as he caught his breath, and broke into great roars of laughter. She held on as tightly as she could, being thrown around as if riding one of the unbroken horses at Ambuluwewa. A guffawing, one-legged man provides no sort of stable platform, she found.

'How you ever have sex on top before?' she laughed outrageously.

'My late lady wife...' he had to catch his breath mid-sentence, 'w-w-was a substantially bigger lady than you... a-a-and there was more to rest on!'

Podi Kelle screamed hysterically, tears rolling down her cheeks.

'Where t-t-tissues?' she cried.

'I f-f-forgot to b-b-bring them!'

There was no choice in the matter, so Podi Kelle, still laughing, climbed off Ken and ran for the bathroom, cupping herself to prevent spillage. She returned with a toilet roll only after she'd dried herself.

'It's not very romantic is it, this bit,' said Ken, now calmer, as he began to wipe himself dry, beneath her gaze.

'I like very much, it loving' she beamed, as she took a piece of toilet paper and wiped down a spot he'd missed.

She climbed back into bed, and into his arms. She was cold again, but it was known now that she would soon warm up, and they wrapped themselves around each other, deeply, possessively, mutually in love.

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Timmy's morning had not gone well by the time his wife and mother-in-

law returned from the hospital. On the face of it, everything should have been ok, as he'd been engaged in actions of the sort which, in general, brought him satisfaction.

He'd done as he'd been bidden, and washed the sheet and mattress cover, even hung them up to dry over the bannister on the landing. They looked pretty fresh, he thought. He'd also attempted to sponge down the mattress beneath, which itself bore a residual record of the night's mishap, although this without very much success. He considered that household tasks, far from bothering him, were enjoyable, that they kept him in touch with his place in the world.

He went then to the kitchen and prepared Bombay-toast for the twins before waking them, with breakfast in bed, on a tray, with orange juice. This was a gesture he seldom made, one which was never expected yet always appreciated, and for both children, being roused from their weekend lie-in in this manner was a real treat. Ordinarily, he would summon them to his own bed, where there was room for them both to eat together, but under the circumstances he woke Indrani first and led her to Nihal's room, where they snuggled into his cabin bed together, one at either end.

He batted away their confusion as to why they weren't eating breakfast in his bed when he explained simply that he'd washed the sheets, the evidence for which was plain to see on the bannisters beyond the open door. Talking to them in this elevated bed, at eye level as he stood beside them, was very satisfactory, he thought, and the suggestion that this is how breakfast in bed should be done in future met with their approval.

In order to shower, he left them to dress, which he knew meant that a period of mild mayhem would follow. They were still in their pyjamas when he returned, and he made them laugh by going down on his knees and begging them, in the name of all that's holy, to get dressed. They graciously allowed him to help, but only after he'd made it clear that he knew they were quite capable of dressing themselves. It was a reasonable deal, he thought. Then he settled them down to watch some Saturday morning telly, promising that he'd be back soon to watch with them.

Upstairs, where he had no intention of spending any time doing serious work, as Nishanthi would have ordinarily, he checked that everything was in good order, files in the right place and so on, whilst he waited for his computer to boot

up. He was interested only in knowing that nothing was wrong, that there were no urgent emails which needed an immediate, out-of-hours response, and to his relief he found that there were none. Well, there was one, an internal memo left for him by Ruth yesterday, hoping that everything was ok, in which she mentioned that Nishanthi had become very upset rather unexpectedly, and fled from the office. That must have been whilst he was at his publisher's. But he'd heard nothing about it from anyone, so assumed that the issue was hormonal and, therefore, unfathomable, and dismissed the episode as having little importance.

Feeling that he was now free to return to the twins, yet also a little jaded with respect to Thomas the Tank Engine, or whatever they would be watching, he decided he could usefully do some preliminary research on his laptop whilst sitting with them. He knew that it was still downstairs, more or less where Arnold had left it.

But it was not. And there was no-one around to ask.

Picking up the work mail en route, he returned to the office, tossed the envelopes unopened into the in-tray on Ruth's desk, and searched for his laptop. Becoming puzzled, he wondered if it had found its way into the living room somehow, and asked the twins if they'd seen it, which they had not. Confused now, he strolled into his bedroom, on the off-chance, and found it, on end, tucked between Nishanthi's shoes in the bottom of her wardrobe.

He had returned to the living room, and sat himself down beside the children before he started to piece together an explanation. Nishanthi's distress concealed from him, her off-hand remark after they'd made love about not seeing Ivett again, the movement of his laptop, these things suggested that she'd seen something on the computer, although he knew nothing of what that might be. He turned the laptop on, and waited for it to boot up.

But, hang on, if she'd found out about Ivett, why had she been so unusually pleasant yesterday to him, so playful with the kids, and so damn sexual last night?

The computer revealed no information whatsoever. There was no sign of any activity from Ivett whatsoever, which caused him to breathe a deep sigh of relief. Equally, however, he realised that there was no sign of any activity from Arnold either, and it dawned on him that Nishanthi had plainly cleaned the buffers, or whatever she cleaned, because he knew for sure that there would

ordinarily have been some sign of its use left in the something-or-other.

He didn't know what to think, so was left with emotions in such a tangle that he could think of nothing else, and sat blankly, ignorant of anything going on around him until the doorbell rang, half an hour later.

Nudged out of his dark reverie by the twins, who insisted he should go and answer the door, Timmy was aghast to find Phil and Gillian Jenkins standing on the doorstep. He knew who they were, had even said hello to them on the odd occasion, but had never spent any time with them, never had a conversation. They beamed at him, smiling their hellos.

'Just thought we'd call in on the old boy, see how he's getting on,' heehawed Phil.

'We've brought grapes,' whinnied Gillian, holding out in front of her a brown-paper bag in which, it was true, there were grapes.

Stumped for anything to say, his mind still elsewhere, yet aware that plainly these people didn't know that Arnold had been hospitalised, Timmy stepped back from the threshold and invited them in.

'I'll put the kettle on,' he muttered, leading them to the kitchen.

'Ooh, lovely, a cup of tea, just what we need,' said Gillian.

'Yes, super,' said Phil.

Timmy had sat them down, made tea and explained to them about Arnold's deterioration, and his emergency admission to hospital, yet still they stayed, expressing concern in every way they could, with fatuous offers of help to match. Then they wanted to talk about the twins, about how this business must be affecting them. Timmy got the impression that they were about to offer him advice on the best way to deal with his own children in this sort of situation. To his immense relief, he heard his wife and mother-in-law returning from the hospital.

But, no, not relief at all. He had no idea what now he faced.

'Oh, Gillian, Phil,' Angelina adopted the received expression of surprised pleasure as she entered the kitchen, 'how nice to see you.'

'We were just passing,' Gillian insisted.

'Yes, thought we should call in on old Arnold...' began Phil.

'...just to see how he was.'

'Is.'

'Yes, of course, is. Oh, silly me.' Gillian fluttered mildly.

'Well, you know you're always welcome. Oh, and I see Timmy's made tea for you already.'

'Yes, isn't he lovely,' Gillian smiled at Timmy, 'aren't you the lucky one, Nishanthi!'

Nishanthi was just entering the kitchen carrying some supermarket bags. She looked up and smiled broadly at the visitors.

'Lucky, me? Gosh, yes, I should say so.'

She excused herself politely as she passed through the group, heading for the fridge with the shopping.

'Here, let me take that,' offered Timmy.

'No, darling, it's fine, don't worry, I've got it. Perhaps a cup of tea for Amma and me?'

Her smile, her apparent tranquillity, even in the presence of the Jenkinses, was something Timmy hadn't expected. He found it wildly disconcerting, knocking further off-centre his sense of where he stood with his wife. What was she playing at, he wondered?

'February already, huh,' Phil filled the void, 'must be getting on for a year since that England Sri Lanka test, the one that you won.'

'Oh, is it?' Timmy had no interest in cricket, and carried on pouring tea.

'It is! Have you booked your tickets for Lords in May?'

'You?' asked Nishanthi.

'Oh, indeed, certainly I have.'

'No, I meant 'you' as in 'the one that *you* won!'

'Well, yes, y'know, Sri Lanka – Sri Lankans, you chaps.'

'How do you know this is a house which supports Sri Lanka?'

Angelina, sensing trouble, laughed. Gillian joined in, each as tense as the other.

'How do you know we don't support England?' Nishanthi came over to stand by her husband's side, linking his arm. 'This is home, after all, isn't it, darling.'

'Uhm, yes, dear,' mumbled Timmy.

'Oh, well, y'know, just thought that, well, y'know, I always supported England when I was in India, y'know.'

'Oh, Phil, that's different, we were only there for work, we weren't, uhm,

er...' Gillian was running headlong into trouble with her interjection, and could think of no way to recover except by mouthing noiselessly the final word, '...you know, *immigrants*.'

'Well, why don't we take our tea and sit down in the living room?'

Angelina's voice was raised significantly in pitch and tempo.

'I'm not an immigrant.'

Nishanthi's startling remark caused everybody to stop exactly where they were, and stare vacantly at her.

'But...' Gillian faltered.

'I've not come here for life, I'm just here for work. Like you were, Phil, I'm an expat. One day I shall go home.'

Angelina, unable to contribute further to a conversation which now needed to be continued in private, began to usher the Jenkinses through to her living room.

'How lovely to have seen you. Thanks for calling in.' Nishanthi smiled generously as the visitors left the kitchen.

Timmy was clueless, and stood, staring blankly at his wife. She took his hand gently and warmly, held it to her cheek.

'I've been thinking,' she told him, 'about what I'm doing, and why I'm doing it.'

'Yes?'

'Let's go and sit with the kids. We can talk about it with them. Come on, darling, bring your tea.'

She led him gently by the hand out of the room and upstairs to their lounge.

'When you two have grown up,' began Nishanthi, a child on either side, under each arm, 'when you two are old enough, I've decided that I'm going to go and live back in Sri Lanka.'

The twins were hardly interested, both shrugging their shoulders indifferently whilst they continued to follow the animated antics on the telly, even if at reduced volume. Timmy, on the other hand, sat opposite, an observer of his own living room, watching an entirely unfamiliar family scene play out before him. It wasn't just that, out of nowhere, Nishanthi had announced her intention to return to the land of her birth at some point in the future yet to be established, but

also that she was sitting casually here, with her children, on a Saturday, relaxing. Neither situation had been anticipated, and he couldn't help but feel that both were probably connected with what he feared she had discovered about Ivett. If only, if only, she would just come out with it. He scratched his head.

'You know, darling, you're definitely thinning on top, you really are!'

Timmy cared about his hair not in the slightest. He shrugged, copying the indifference of his children.

'This going to Sri Lanka thing is new. What's that about?'

'Oh, it's just things being what they are – Appa being so ill, and, you know, other things...'

Oh god, thought Timmy, here it comes.

'...it's set me thinking about what matters, what life's all about.'

'Oh yes?'

'Yes.' Nishanthi smiled serenely at her husband.

'Well go on!'

'I've been thinking that I never really wanted to live in this country – Appa brought us here at a strange age, really...'

'You were ten, if I remember correctly.'

'Indeed, just old enough to miss all my friends, miss the food, the life, the weather...'

'But young enough, surely, to have become English? To have made this home?'

'Yeah, sure, it's home. But Sri Lanka's still home too, and I think I want to go back. I've still got citizenship, don't forget.'

'Yes, I know, I realise. But what about the practice, the children, the family...' Timmy understood the weight of the phrase which was about to pass his lips without even thinking about it, 'what about us here?'

The slightest smile passed over Nishanthi's face. Timmy felt like it might as well have been the shadow of death.

'Oh, I'm talking way down the line, years away. When the kids are grown and graduated, when you're a best-selling author, when I've made enough money from this...' she started to make an F shape with her lips, but modulated it in the presence of the children, '...flipping legal practice.'

'But you seemed so happy with this flipping legal practice?'

'Really? I seemed happy? When was I happy?'

'You've been working so hard at it.'

'Pursuing the same dream that made me become a lawyer in the first place, pursuing an immigrant's ideal of becoming established as a professional person, doing what my father wanted me to do. Actually, my brother and me – us – to do. Except I wasn't sharp enough to break away, like Yogam was.'

'He didn't exactly break away,' Timmy shook his head indignantly, 'he was snapped off! I mean to say, I like your old man, as you know, but his attitude towards Yogam has been despicable.'

'I promise you, if Yogam had become a doctor, none of this would have happened. Appa would never have been happy having a gay son, but the compensation of him being his gay son-the-doctor would have more than made up for it. Appa cut him out because he refused to become a 'professional', because he went into the City.'

'But,' Timmy hesitated momentarily, feeling he was approaching dangerous ground, 'but you've been determined to make as much money as, well... you know...'

'Which is rubbish, isn't it. A waste of a professional qualification. Lawyers are supposed to help people, not rip them off!'

'Excuse me, we've never ripped anyone off, we always provide a good service, a fair service,' Timmy was astonished to find himself defending the practice.

'Yeah, well, it's not been enough for you, has it. And it's dawned on me that it's not going to have been enough for me either. If I wanted to make money, I should have followed Yogam into the City, but instead I pleased my father and became a professional. It's rubbish really, isn't it.'

Timmy looked blankly at his wife. He could understand – even applaud – everything she was saying, but he couldn't reconcile the fact that the woman to whom he thought he was married wasn't the woman whose views he was now hearing.

'So here's what's going to happen,' she continued, 'we're going to muddle along as we are, bringing up the kids, maintaining the practice, growing your writing career. I should think we'll be alone in this house by the time these two have left home, no oldies living downstairs any more, so at that point I'm going to

retire back to Sri Lanka. I suppose we'll sell this house, which will be handy. The kids will be able to visit when they want – live there if they choose – which will make them much more Sri Lankan than if they carry on living here as dark-skinned English people, because they'll be able to get a good, proper sense of where it is they came from.'

'And me?'

'Well, yes, you can come out when you want, if you're not busy elsewhere. You like Sri Lanka, so I don't suppose it'll be such a hardship for you, will it. And in the meantime, let's just concentrate on the things which matter, shall we.'

She looked Timmy squarely in the eye, and he was no longer in any doubt about what she knew. This whole scheme, he realised, was her response to his infidelity, and he felt a strong need to go away, to hide his shame. There was to be no escape, however.

'Hey, kids,' she shook them gently, diverting their attention away from the telly, 'why don't we all go out somewhere, hey? Wanna go to Whipsnade with daddy and me?'

The response was enthusiastic, the cries of *yay*, *wallabies* and the accompanying hopping of marsupial children made both parents laugh. They caught each other's eye, exchanged a nod of acceptance. The terms of the truce had been drawn up.

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Angelina huffed and puffed as she prepared herself for church the next morning. There was all the nuisance of getting up too early, which she'd felt every Sunday of her life since childhood, and the bother of dressing in a dignified manner, not to mention the fasting until after she'd taken communion, and the mixing with the Jenkinses and others like them, and and and. Church had always seemed like a tremendous sacrifice, but she reasoned that that's what it was probably meant to be, so went along with it for the good of her soul.

But some days she wasn't so sure, and this was one of them. For the good of what?... her soul?... really?... what soul?... where was it?... in what way could it be made good?... why had it ever been bad?

She'd missed the last three Sundays, whilst Arnold had been ill at home,

sure that her duty lay foremost in his earthly care. Father Thomas had visited, so he knew full well that Arnold was ill, but not until two Sundays had passed. This was the second Sunday since that visit, yet he had been again only once. Angelina was infuriated that her husband apparently meant so little to the vicar, since they had so often engaged in conversation, sometimes in lengthy and animated debates about theological matters, sometimes to grumble about the falling congregation. Arnold was a lay reader too, often standing in for Father Thomas at mid-week evening prayer. In fact, Arnold was in many respects the right-hand man of Father Thomas, and without question the most loyal, most dedicated, most reliable member of the congregation. They were friends.

Given their continuing absence from church, and Father Thomas's from Holly House, she thought that turning up this Sunday to tell him, on her own, in person, was the only way to let him know just how poorly Arnold had become. Otherwise, she probably wouldn't have bothered this morning, especially since no thunderbolts had rained down on her during the last month of her absenteeism.

She supposed that god knew that Arnold was ill, and that there was no need therefore to bend her knee and tell Him. Equally, if he didn't, and wasn't going to do anything about it, if his omnipotence had wavered, then she didn't care to tell him. It was probably all his fault anyway, as a matter of fact.

But what really annoyed her this morning, the thing that was most on her mind, was that Podi Kelle hadn't come home last night. What on earth was she playing at? It was just outrageous that she should behave in such a selfish way, knowing that they would be going to church this morning. Was she even safe? What had happened to her? It was all very well assuming that she was with that man – no, actually, it wasn't at all very well – but was she with him anyway? Had she been attacked again, like when she was carrying the Ganesh home? Maybe she'd run into the same two yobs? And in any case, what was she doing cavorting with a man at her age. It was disgusting. Urgh, had they really spent the night together? How dare she! Her place was here, in Holly House, where she lived with her family. She was a bloody servant, after all. She surely couldn't be having sex? Not really? No no no no no.

Angelina shuddered as the image of Podi Kelle and a man in bed together flashed before her.

'I mean,' she said out loud, 'I don't have sex anymore and I'm a married

woman!'

Whoops! Maybe the twins were in the kitchen – there are some things children shouldn't know about granny, she thought. Probably too early in the morning for them to be up, but better keep quiet, just in case.

She'd seen them coming back yesterday with Nishanthi and Timmy, whilst she'd been looking out of the window waiting for Podi Kelle. They looked exhausted, dear little mites, although they'd obviously had a great outing. And their parents held hands as they walked up from the car, smiling, happy. Angelina hadn't seen them together in that way for as long as she could remember, and certainly hadn't expected marital harmony to have been the result of Nishanthi's announcement that she was going back to Sri Lanka.

At the hospital, yesterday, Nishanthi had been shocked by the sight of her father, lying helplessly in bed, his skin uniformly grey apart from the purple-blue highlights on his nose, his ears, his eyelids, his fingers. He could barely talk, the effort being all but too much for him, and feeding himself was beyond question. At one point, he'd needed to pee, and a nurse was summoned. For privacy, she drew the curtain round Arnold's bed, not realising that there was a gap where two lengths of fabric should have overlapped. Nishanthi watched through this gap as the nurse, with care and tenderness, put on a pair of rubber gloves, drew back Arnold's bed covers, took out her father's penis and placed it in the neck of a jar, where she held it until the last drop of urine had flowed from him. Except it wasn't the last drop, as she had to take a tissue and dab the end of the penis to dry it. She reversed the stages and, smiling as she drew back the curtain, announced, 'there we are, all done.'

Nishanthi turned to her mother, 'I've never seen my father's penis before.'

'I'm sorry, daahleeng?'

'You heard. I just watched the nurse through a slit. I don't know how she does it.'

'Well, of course you don't, you're not a nurse.'

'No. No I'm not. Nothing so valuable.'

'Putha, don't be silly. Being a lawyer is valuable.'

'So that's it, is it, that's Appa's life? The three women in a man's life who deal with his penis are his mother whilst he's in nappies, his wife whilst he's fucking her and his nurse as he lies dying.'

It wasn't clear if her mother's exhortation to keep her voice down was because of what she'd said, the way she'd said it or because she was within earshot of Arnold.

'Is that it,' she continued in a harsh whisper, 'is that all there is? Well, maybe it's not just the wife he's fucking. But still, is that it?'

Aside from the peculiar mood which had overtaken her daughter, Angelina thought the visit had been very successful. Nishanthi had gone into full bossy mode and commanded a doctor to provide all the information they required. They learned that Arnold's pacemaker was to be fitted on Tuesday, and that an assessment would have to be made a couple of days after that. If the result was satisfactory, then they might think about allowing Arnold to return home at the end of the week. But expectations had to be maintained at a realistic level, as all the pacemaker could do, in all probability, was improve the patient's quality of life in the short term.

Mother and daughter decided to call in at Waitrose on the way home, for basic shopping for each household. Angelina had noticed that Nishanthi had bought a bottle of whisky, and raised an eyebrow as they walked across the car park.

'Don't do that, Amma, it looks ridiculous. And it is ridiculous. If I want to have a drink at the end of the day, I shall. I'm not becoming an addict, for god's sake. After what I've seen today – y'know, *life's too short!* God, I'm sick of this weather – winters seem to go on for ever these days.'

It was true, thought Angelina, the winters do go on for ever. In fact, damn the weather and damn church. And damn Podi Kelle too! She wouldn't go to church this morning. Instead she'd make herself a nice breakfast and go back to bed with it.

She had started to take her coat off when, astonishingly, Nishanthi knocked on her bedroom door and pushed it open. She had dressed respectfully, as if ready for church, just as she used to when she was a child. The white knee socks had been replaced with slacks, and the hair was too short to put into plaits, but otherwise Angelina's little girl suddenly stood before her, wearing a straw hat.

'Do you mind if I come to mass with you today, Amma?'

A lump grew in Angelina's throat.

'No, daahleeng, no of course I don't.'



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Appendix

Arnold sat on the edge of his bed, overseeing the tiny world which was his ward. He was wearing his tweed jacket with a cravat, since it felt important to be smartly dressed to leave hospital. His bloody stupid wife had suggested she should bring in his sarong for the journey home, on the grounds that it would be more comfortable, taking no account whatsoever of the discomfort he would experience at being seen out in house clothes. It was largely a matter of indicating to the doctors that he too was a professional, a man of standing. This couldn't have been obvious to them as he lay in bed in a hospital nightie, but it was a different matter now he was better.

No, not better.

Crossing his face, looped over his ears, was a clear plastic tube. Two sticking-up-bits formed what he was told was a nasal cannula, delivering oxygen into his nose. At the other end of the tube, on a strap over his shoulder, was an oxygen concentrator, about the size of a biscuit tin. It didn't contain tiny cylinders of concentrated oxygen, apparently, although why anyone should have smiled when he'd made the suggestion he couldn't imagine. It did something with nitrogen, but he couldn't remember what. Science had never been his strong point.

This was only one half of his medical hardware, the other part being the pacemaker which he had had fitted three days earlier. It had been placed under the skin beneath his left collar bone, and the site was still stitched and sore. With one device to help him breathe, and another to help his heart beat, it was hardly surprising that Arnold felt a little better than he had done upon his admission, nine days earlier. How happy he was about this otherwise simple fact was another matter altogether, however, since his physical improvement had come at a high cost.

Several times, before the procedure to fit the pacemaker, Arnold had felt that he had experienced a sensation of having met angels, real angels this time. It always happened at night, and the moments were typically so vivid that they had awoken him, breathless and spluttering. He had heard of gravely ill people having out of body experiences, about which he had always been sceptical, but that hadn't happened to him, and only once had he seen the bright light so often talked about,

which turned out to be a clot of a medical student peering into his eyes with a torch whilst he was more-or-less asleep. No, these brief encounters were something different, something other people hadn't described, and he had come to believe that, at last, he was receiving communication from on high. Could this mean that his end was approaching, that communication was allowed at last because his reward drew near? Should he be frightened if he was that close to death? Well, no, it was a comfort, affirmation of the existence of the divine at the time when he knew anyway that he was close to his end.

After the meetings with angels had ceased, immediately the pacemaker had been fitted, Arnold had felt deeply the loss of these holy encounters. That bloody fool consultant had asked this very morning, as he was preparing to go home, why Arnold was so gloomy. Wasn't going home everything he had wanted? It certainly had been, but Arnold was pretty sure that there would be no angels waiting for him in his bedroom. The angels were here, in this place, because, he deduced, the collective prayer of so many sick people was powerful enough to draw them down to Earth.

He knew that this was a topic which required a different sort of wisdom to that which, he supposed, Mr. Jaeger possessed, and that to bring it up for discussion was unwise. Nonetheless, as the strolling band of white-coats had approached Arnold's bedside that morning, he knew he was going to have to say something, because it was the biggest thing on his mind by far.

'Not too bad, thank you,' he responded to the surgeon's usual opener, 'but I had been seeing angels before my operation, and they've gone now.'

'Lying in your bed, thoughts running through your head?' asked Mr. Jaeger.

Arnold nodded, although he thought he heard a snigger from a student.

'You feel that love is dead?'

'Well, I suppose in a manner of speaking...!' Arnold was interrupted by unconcealed laughter from the group around his bed.

'I'm sorry, Mr. Balasingham, it's my fault,' smiled Mr. Jaeger, 'it's just that we don't really do angels here.'

'I beg to differ, *here* being the only place I've encountered them.' Arnold was affronted.

'It's more likely, I'm afraid, that you're describing encephalopathic events

arising from hypoxia – it's a state which can often give rise to delirium. The nursing staff have made notes that you've been having episodes of PND – paroxysmal nocturnal dyspnoea – which is when you wake in the night because of shortness of breath. Have you been waking up coughing?'

'Well, yes, but...'

'That's the most likely explanation, then. But you say it's stopped now?'

Arnold nodded, crestfallen.

'Well, that's a very good sign. It shows that the pacemaker's working at least as well as we had hoped.'

Arnold accepted that this was the scientific explanation of his visitations, and chose not to discuss the matter further, but within he reasoned that thingy-nocturnal-thingy was probably god's mechanism for allowing communication between angels and the earth-bound, within the limits of his mechanical system. The angels had felt too real to be simply a figment of his delirious imagination. And he would miss them, at least for now, whilst his health was a little improved. Perhaps as he slipped back into corporeal decline, as his connection with the physical world began to break, his spiritual world would open up again.

'You've already told me that the pacemaker isn't a cure...'

'That's correct,' Mr. Jaeger peered over his glasses.

'I assume, therefore, that I'm still dying...'

'Well, we're all dying, if you think about it.'

'Yes, thank you very much, I have thought about it. If you'll excuse the abruptness of an old man with too little time gifted to him, I'd be grateful if you'd try not to be facetious for once in your smug life!'

'Ouch!' said Mr. Jaeger.

The students' jaws fell uniformly open.

'As I was saying, I'm still dying, am I not?'

'In your terms, yes.'

'How long do you estimate?'

'I simply can't say – there are too many factors involved. All the pacemaker has done is to help your heart beat regularly, as strongly as it can. It's still a failing heart, though, and at its strongest, it beats only weakly.'

'I see.'

'You must take great care of yourself, and avoid any unnecessary

exertion, whilst exercising a little as you feel able. It's a difficult balance to achieve, but your GP will work with you. Who is your GP, by the way?'

'Dr. Aziz.'

'Oh, I know Nadyaa very well! She's very good. Yes, I've already written to her,' Mr. Jaeger looked for an affirmative nod from his registrar, 'of course, and you'll be coming back to see us too.'

'Right. I see.'

'So, good luck, Mr. Balasingham...' Mr. Jaeger extended his hand.

'Thank you...' Arnold had shaken it.

He was brought out of his reverie by the arrival of the porter with a wheelchair.

'Here we are, then,' gasped Angelina, who had become impatient as she waited, her husband lost in his own thoughts. 'Podi'll be wondering what's been keeping us.'

'Where is she?'

'Waiting in the car. I didn't know how long we'd be so I thought she could sit in it rather than me having to pay to park. Have you seen how much they charge. It's disgusting.'

'What would happen if they asked her to move? She can't drive.'

'Oh, I know that – they wouldn't bother a car with someone sitting in it, would they. Don't be so silly, Arnold.'

'I didn't think I was being silly,' he harrumphed.

'Well, you were. Now, are you comfortable? Good, then shall we let this young man wheel you to the entrance...'

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'You're bearded!' Timmy exclaimed as soon as he caught sight of Arnold stepping out of the Peugeot.

Timmy and Nishanthi had formed their own little welcome party on the steps of the front door, like the household turning out to greet a returning lord of the manor. Timmy hadn't been to the hospital to visit Arnold whilst he had been away, and wasn't expecting to see him return so whiskery. Actually, he hadn't been expecting him to return at all, and judging by what he now saw, he wondered why the hospital had let him go so soon.

Arnold looked dreadful, not helped in the least by the stubby white beard, which lent him the appearance of a tramp. He was badly hunched, leaning on a metal stick with three rubber feet on the end, carefully placing one shaky foot in front of the other, every single feeble step appearing to be a triumph of will over strength. Despite the stick, he had to be supported on each side by the two old ladies, and it was Angelina who carried the oxygen concentrator on her shoulder, carefully so as not to stretch too far the plastic tube and dislodge the nasal cannula. Although Arnold's colour was considerably better than it had been when the ambulance had collected him, he was notably thinner, and looked nine years older, not just nine days. On the other hand, he was walking, if only just, and that suggested some improvement had been achieved.

'Oxygen mask was irritating my skin,' replied Arnold, looking up at Timmy.

'Oh, I see. Do you need any help up the stairs?'

'No. No, thank you,' Arnold stopped as he approached the two steps up to the porch, 'we can manage.'

He looked at the steps as if he was approaching a glass wall, his confidence shattered by the discovery of his great frailty. Initially, he couldn't raise his foot high enough to place it on the first step, and it dithered in mid-air as the two ladies supported him from behind. Timmy tensed, expecting to have to rush in to prevent a disaster, but Nishanthi, who had linked arms with him, consciously held him back.

'No,' she whispered, 'let them do it.'

Timmy nodded, but still remained ready.

Eventually, Arnold got his foot down and, with the force of the ladies heaving him upwards from behind, managed to mount the step. He stopped to catch his breath, sniffing deeply as the oxygen flowed into his nostrils. He looked around him, as if taking in the view from this elevated position.

'Oh, thank you for doing the roses, Timmy,' he nodded with approval.

'You're welcome – it didn't take long. Sorry I couldn't bring them into flower for you.'

'Everything has its season, doesn't it,' Arnold began to raise his leg again, to surmount the second step.

It took him fully a minute to climb the step and cross the threshold into

the house, and two more to shuffle across the hallway, into the old folks' living room and beyond, into his bedroom. The carpet had been cleaned whilst he was away, he noticed immediately, and his pee bucket was missing.

'You cleaned me up, I see.' he mumbled.

'What do you mean?' asked Angelina.

'There's no trace of me left. Glad to see the back of me, I suppose.'

'Arnold, you stupid old man, the room has hardly changed since you left – all your stuff's exactly where you left it!'

'The carpet, the bucket?'

'Excuse me? Stains on the carpet and a bucket of urine? Are those the things you wanted to come home to? Come home for?'

'And where's Ganesh?'

'He's in the chapel, with Jesus.'

Arnold grunted and proceeded to ready himself for bed. 'I'll need the bucket back.'

He was more pleased to be back home than he was showing, but exhausted from the journey. He knew that Dr. Aziz was calling that afternoon, to help him organise himself with his oxygen, and take a look at the wound from his pacemaker procedure. He was looking forward to seeing her. She was a fresh face, a change. His sickness was wearing heavily on him, now that he'd left the safety of the hospital, and it was beginning to occur to him that he just might not want to carry on like this, so ill despite the best that modern medicine could do for him. He needed new things to occupy him, keep his mind off things.

He had had a light snooze by the time Dr. Aziz arrived, when it had already grown dark outside. Angelina attended the bedside whilst she was there, of course, and listened carefully to the doctor's advice, so she could ensure Arnold did as he was told. He had to walk a little, not just lie in bed every day. Equally, he didn't have to overdo things, walking about the ground floor just until it was becoming too great an effort. He had to monitor his diabetes more closely than he might have previously, something they would have been doing for him in the hospital. And he had to have his oxygen tube on him at all times, except possibly whilst he slept, and even then he had to have it very close to hand.

'It dries my nose out,' complained Arnold, 'it's very uncomfortable.'

'Yes, I know, it's one of the problems,' acknowledged Dr. Aziz, 'but we're

not now in a position to have any choice in the matter.'

'We?'

'Yes, Arnold, *we*, because it's not just you who's affected by your illness.'

'Seems to me it is!'

'Well, it's not from where I'm sitting.' she glanced round at Angelina, who nodded. 'You're going to have to listen this time.'

'What do you mean, *this time*?'

'I think you know perfectly well what I mean, Arnold!' she started to pack her bag, 'now be a good fellow, why don't you.'

Arnold felt patronised, was furious, and told Angelina so when she came back in from seeing Dr. Aziz out.

'Did you hear her,' he grimaced, catching his breath, 'talking to me like I'm a schoolboy? Did you hear her? I'm twice her age. The bloody cheek of it!'

'She also said on the way out that if you'd done what she told you when this all started, you might well be in a better place than you are now. Basically, she said *I told you so*.'

'Unbelievable! Tell Podi to bring my bucket, will you, I need to pee.'

'Podi's gone out.'

'She's gone out? Where to? At this time?'

'She's gone round to Ken's.'

'Ken? Who's Ken?'

'Ken's the man who lent you the Ganesh.'

'Oh, him.'

'Yes, him. She's with Ken most days now.'

'Is she now! What does she think she's playing at?'

'She's in a relationship with him. We've spoken about it a lot whilst you were away, and I understand her position now. I've given her my blessing.'

'How ridiculous. I'll talk to her. What time will she be back?'

'She won't be back. She sleeps there most nights.'

Arnold looked blankly back at Angelina, momentarily failing to comprehend that which, in his mind, was beyond comprehension. His maid? Sleeping with a man outside the house? It simply wasn't a possibility. Was it?

'Don't look at me like that, Arnold, you know exactly what I mean.'

'But, it's absurd. How can she possibly be sleeping with another man?'



'What do you mean, *another* man?'

'I... I simply mean that she belongs here, with you and me. That's all I meant.'

'Is it, indeed!'

'Yes, of course it is.'

'Hmm, well, you might like to know that she's organising herself to move out of here, to go and live with him.'

'For god's sake! When?'

'Some time in the next few days.'

'Where?'

'In the retirement flats, the ones we've looked at.'

'But... but... but why? They've not known each other long enough. Have they?'

'They're old and lonely, and don't want to waste a day apart. I approve. I think it's wonderful for them.'

'Lonely! That takes the biscuit. Lonely, indeed! The ungrateful bitch, how dare she say she's lonely when she's lived off us... lived with us all these years. How can she possibly be lonely. I don't understand at all.'

Arnold had become agitated, was lifting himself up on his elbows, which caused him to gasp for air and sink back down again. He looked distraught, like a beaten man, struggling to maintain control over his breathing, failing to accept that his household was breaking apart.

'Get over it, Arnold. She was never ours to own, so get over it. I'll go and fetch your piss bucket. Is there anything else you need, now you're reduced to only one woman?'

'What do you mean by that?'

'She told me everything, Arnold. She broke down and sobbed and told me everything. She's so happy to have found Ken, partly because she's escaping from you, you ogre.'

'What are you talking about?'

'I was unhappy about her moving in with him too, so I had it out with her, told her I thought it was inappropriate. I told her that we wouldn't be able to support her financially if she left – god, I feel dreadful for what I said to her. In the end, she confessed to me. She told me how you've sexually abused her all

these years, about how you threatened her if she wouldn't... wouldn't do things for you.'

'But, that's simply not true – I never threatened her, not once...'

'Do you expect me to believe that? Really? And now I'm wondering about the children, about Nishanthi? And what about Yogam? What made him the way he is?'

'Angelina – Angelina – I would NEVER have touched my children. NEVER UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES. How can you possibly say those things? Why's she lying about me?'

'You are a disgusting old man. I see that now. I will never be happy with you again, and from now on I'm just waiting for you to die. I'll look after you – I'll empty your piss bucket, give you your pills, give you food – but understand that I will never forgive you for what you've done to Podi Kelle.'

Angelina exited sharply from the bedroom, leaving Arnold alone in a state of shock. Moments later, he heard his computer boot up, and the brrrrrrr of the modem.

'Who's that? Hey. Who's using my computer?' he shouted through to the living room.

'I am!' shouted Angelina back at him.

'Don't be so silly, you don't know how!'

'Nishanthi showed me whilst you were away, thank you very much.'

'Why, for god's sake?'

'Because you've never shown me. Now shut up, I'm busy.'

'I...,' Arnold reeled as his entire world started to spin round on him, 'I really need my pee bucket. I'm sorry.'

'Fine, I'll bring it, then you can sort yourself out.'

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Angelina hadn't confided in either Nishanthi or Timmy, both of whom called in to see Arnold from time to time, in a relatively cheerful frame of mind. The twins also called in, but they were a bit scared of Parta now, having seen him leave in the ambulance, both fearing he was about to drop dead in front of them. They certainly didn't want to trampoline on his bed any more, although Arnold couldn't decide if this was because they had been told not to, or whether they had

decided themselves that it was just too risky. Whenever they appeared, however, it wouldn't be long before Angelina came in and took them away, muttering something about their safety.

He was beside himself, grief-stricken that his wife – his wife! – had taken against him in this way. And he was determined to have it out with Podi Kelle when he next saw her. If he ever saw her again, since she was never around now. So he took what joy he could from the non-antagonistic visits he received from the younger people in the house, and otherwise entertained himself with Timmy's laptop, which he'd been allowed to borrow once again.

On the Sunday morning, he'd been delighted to hear Nishanthi in the living room, who was evidently going to church with her mother. This was very welcome, something good at last. And when they returned, it was Nishanthi who came into his room to tell him that Father Thomas would be calling on Wednesday to give him communion.

'That's Ash Wednesday, isn't it?'

'Yes, Appa, and he's going to bring the ash stuff for your forehead as well, he said.'

'Oh, excellent.'

'What are you reading about on the laptop?'

'About sadhus.'

'Interesting?'

'Did you know that they have to attend their own funeral before they can be initiated? They have to give up every worldly thing.'

Nishanthi sat with her father whilst he described in detail the lives of Hindu holy men. Emboldened by what looked like her return to the Church, he attempted to explain where his thoughts and experiences had led him over the weeks, how he'd sought vainly for some sign from god, how the ascetic life, he had decided, was probably the only correct way to approach the divine, and that it almost certainly didn't matter which tradition. Yes, he was sure, every religion was after one and the same thing, if only they could all see it. He stopped short of telling her about his encounters with angels in hospital, because he was aware that his confidence in the reality of these meetings didn't stop them sounding like the rantings of a crackpot.

'So, what did Father Thomas preach about today?' he asked, finally.

'He was talking about the selection of the new Archbishop.'

'Oh, yes – what about it?'

'About prayerfulness and earthly decision making.'

'Hmm, I'm not sure how that relates to my theory. I'll discuss it with him on Wednesday.'

'I'm going to put the kettle on, Appa. Do you fancy a stroll through to the kitchen with me?'

Arnold did, and having double-checked that his oxygen supply was working correctly, he heaved his legs out of bed and shuffled, slowly slowly, out of the bedroom, supported by his stick on one side and daughter on the other.

The next day, Arnold lay propped up in bed reading on the laptop the latest news about the change of Archbishop, despite his fear that he might be taking his life into his own hands, since this investigation had produced such disastrous results in the past. Now, as he was becoming aware of the growing frustration within, he heard Timmy come into the kitchen. Yesterday he'd managed pretty well, he felt, even if assisted by Nishanthi, and he was keen to see if he could complete the walk unaided. If there was a problem, he knew that he could call out for Timmy anyway, and he was eager to spend a bit of time with him for a catch-up. He seemed so busy with work.

The walk wasn't easy, requiring Arnold to stop to catch his breath every few paces, but he enjoyed the sense of moving his body unassisted. His progress was too slow to count as physical freedom in any ordinary sense, but it felt very different to lying in bed – it was great to be up and about. As he entered the kitchen, he raised his three-footed stick and waved it briefly at Timmy.

'Behold, a god appears!'

'Hey, Arnold, what are you doing out of bed on your own?' Timmy momentarily panicked.

'What do you think of my trident!'

Arnold managed to return his stick to the floor just in time to prevent himself toppling over.

'Sorry, I wasn't expecting to see you here, that's all. Good afternoon, Arnold!'

'And good afternoon to you too, Timmy.'

'Why are you being Neptune?'

'I'm not! Shiva has a trident too – his thirisulam. He used it cut Ganesh's head off!'

'Right, I see. Here, sit down at the table. I'm making coffee. Want some?' Timmy thought his father-in-law had a very gloomy air about him, despite his attempt at making an entrance.

'I don't know if I'm supposed to drink coffee, but there's only one way to find out. But don't make it too strong...'

Timmy grinned as he turned away towards the kettle. In all the years of making coffee for himself and Arnold, they'd never fully established how strong was too strong, so it was always a bit hit and miss. He guessed that there would have been as many occasions when Arnold had thought it too strong as when he had thought it too weak.

'The three points represent past, present and future, creation, upkeep and destruction,' lectured Arnold as he waved his walking stick in the air. 'Shiva uses them to destroy the physical world, the world of the ancestors, and the world of the temporal, to create a blissful spiritual unity.'

The noise of the cat flap operating in the outer scullery was followed very quickly by the sound of Tiger crying out behind the inner door, pleading for admission. Instinctively, Arnold started to raise himself, but Timmy made sure that he got to the door first, and Arnold sat back down as Tiger padded nonchalantly into the kitchen.

'Hello, puli – not seen you since I came home! You'll be after food...'

Tiger was standing by his empty bowl, meowing extravagantly into the air, like a hound giving tongue.

'What makes you say that, then?' Timmy laughed.

'Stupid cat! With a name like his you'd think he'd be out catching his own prey, wouldn't you. Tiger indeed – more suburb than subcontinent!' smiled Arnold, fleetingly happy.

As Timmy opened a tin to feed Tiger, who made figures of eight around his ankles, Arnold brought up the topic about which he'd just been reading.

'What do you think of the race for Lambeth, Timmy?'

'The what?'

'The race for Lambeth...'

'I'm afraid just saying it again won't help, Arnold. What do you mean? Is

it like the Lambeth Walk but quicker?'

'Lambeth Palace, you madayan, Lambeth Palace! Where the Archbishop of Canterbury lives. Surely you knew that?'

'Er, no, I don't suppose I did – well, maybe, but I forgot. Whatever!'

'I'm worried.'

'Hmm, that's probably not good for you.'

'Well, it's important, the choice this time round. The Church is up against it.'

'Up against what?' Timmy really didn't care, but the conversation was keeping Arnold content.

'It's becoming relativist, changing to suit the fashion of the day. The Roman Church has kept most of its core values constant for nearly two thousand years, and it seems to be doing very well on it. I fear the Anglican communion's in danger of making some very poor choices, which will damage it.'

'Such as?'

'Well, women priests, for example. And worse, nancies.'

'Eh?'

'Women and nancies as priests. Poofs, you know...'

'Look, Arnold...' Timmy couldn't quite believe what he was hearing.

'And if that bloke who's the Archbishop of Wales gets in, he's such a woolly liberal that it'll happen, you mark my words! You'd think an Archbishop would have acquired some wisdom, wouldn't you.'

Timmy poured the coffee, wishing this was a conversation which didn't involve him.

'Look, Arnold, I have to say, I don't think you and I agree on issues like homosexuality. I don't know enough about women as priests, but if only men are allowed, I can't imagine what harm could be done if some of them are gay.'

'It's both a theological issue and one of tradition.'

'Hmm, tradition's not my thing, in that case, Arnold. In any case, isn't it up to god – if he wants women and gay priests, shouldn't he say so?'

'The synod reckons it's guided by god, but I don't think it is, actually. I don't think god's got any interest in the Church of England at all, as a matter of fact.'

'I assume that the Church of England retains an interest in god, though?'

'Well that's the issue, isn't it! If the church thinks it can change its mind about things just because they're unfashionable, then it gives the clear impression that it's more concerned with public opinion than with the divine.'

'Hmm, well, if you say so, Arnold. I'm not a church type anyway, as you know. Frankly, I don't think it matters at all.'

'That's ridiculous, Timmy! Of course it matters?'

'Only to those who think it matters. Which I don't'

'But it's about the people, the cultural heart of this nation.'

'It's not really, is it, Arnold.'

'What do you mean?'

'This isn't an Anglican nation any more. It's ridiculous to pretend it is.'

'This is still England at the end of the day!'

'Yep, an England in which there are many different peoples, many different religions, a country where homosexuality is legal and accepted – by grown ups, at least – and women are entitled to their fair share in society. I mean, come on, Arnold!'

Arnold was amazed that Timmy, his former ally in this house, had just accused him of not being a grown up.

'And, honestly, Arnold, you're not well – frankly, I think you'd be better off ...' Timmy's tone had become harsh and he checked himself, thinking that he'd spare the older man any further criticism.

'Better off what, Timmy? Better off what?'

Timmy was searching for a way out of the unpleasantness which was developing. He hadn't intended to pick a fight with a dying man – he realised, in fact, that he'd never before had any cross words with him at all. But Arnold was starting to sound like a reactionary oaf. Maybe that's what happens to old men as they die, they stop looking forward?

'I think you'd be better off taking care of yourself, now, Arnold, and not the rest of the world. You need this time for yourself.'

Arnold glared angrily at Timmy, not for what he'd said – he had a point, after all – but because he'd reminded him that the biggest thing facing him now was his death. Briefly, as he'd attempted to have a blokey conversation in the kitchen, Arnold had forgotten about his condition, about the betrayal and fury of his lying servant and his gullible wife, but it had gone wrong, and he had been

returned to the stark reality of his mortality.

He hauled himself to his feet, breathed greedily from the cannula, and turned unsteadily away from Timmy. Not a word was spoken as he wobbled through the door, and not a drop of the shared coffee had he touched.

He was left largely to his own devices the next day, with Angelina coming and going only to do those things for him which needed to be done, and no sign of Podi Kelle at all. Timmy and Nishanthi were too busy to call in on him, and the twins, for some reason, didn't appear either. The laptop had become the whole of Arnold's world, and he immersed himself in his reading in the hope of forgetting his plight. But in this he was largely unsuccessful, and he became morose as a result.

Early on Wednesday afternoon, as Nishanthi had promised, Father Thomas came to give Arnold communion. Angelina stayed in the room throughout, although spoke hardly a word to her husband.

'Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return,' intoned the priest, as he made an ashen sign of the cross on Arnold's head.

'Too bloody right!' answered Arnold.

'That's not generally the response I expect, Arnold,' admonished the priest.

'I'm not sure those are a helpful set of words to use for someone dying. Are you going to ask me next what I've given up for Lent?'

'It's the form of words authorised by the Church, so it's the form of words I use.'

'Why? Why can't you think of your own words? Why do you just have to parrot the words of others? Why not think a little about what you're saying?'

'Arnold!' snapped Angelina.

'Because, Arnold, liturgy is important. It allows us to know where we are, and why we're there. The best trained dog is the first off the lead, might I remind you.'

'What?'

'The best trained...'

'Yes, I heard what you said. My ears are fine.'

'I'm just trying to indicate that the Church has ways of doing things which have been developed over the ages, and which have been proven to be

effective. Look, you know this perfectly well, Arnold – when you're not searching for your place in the book, you can concentrate on what's written in it.'

'What are you talking about, Thomas! The Church is going to abandon everything it has shown to be workable. We're going to have women priests. We're going to have homosexual priests. What values does it have left? Where is god in any of this?'

'Don't worry yourself about these things, my son, the Synod will attend to all these matters prayerfully in due course.'

'In due course. In due course. The passage of earthly time. And don't call me 'my son!'.

'There is one thing which you ought to know, Arnold, because it might help should you choose to reflect on it. I thought you knew it already, as a matter of fact.'

'Indeed, and what pearl of wisdom might that be, Thomas?'

'It is that I am a gay man. Yes, you have had a poof administer to your spiritual needs for many years now.'

'But you are a celibate priest, surely?'

'Yes, a celibate homosexual priest.'

Arnold disengaged his attention from Father Thomas, and looked through the window at the world beyond. Father Thomas turned to Angelina and anointed her forehead with ash, before making ready to leave. Arnold had made it plain that he was taking no further part in this visit.

When Angelina returned to the bedroom, after seeing out their visitor, it was solely for the purpose of telling Arnold what she thought of the way he behaved, and to laugh at him for failing to have recognised that Father Thomas was a gay man. Everyone in the congregation, everyone, she told him, knew that he was gay, and no-one cared. What a fool he'd made of himself. Again.

Arnold was sullen, unrepentant, miserable. 'The best trained dog might be the first off the lead,' he muttered, 'but it still only runs in the park it's been taken to.'

Angelina didn't return to the bedroom until darkness had fallen. She brought with her some curry and rice on a tray, which she gave to Arnold.

'Aren't you eating with me?' he asked.

'No, I've already eaten. In the kitchen.'

'Couldn't you have waited, to eat with me?'

'I'm going out. I need to get ready.'

'Where to?'

'To play bridge, if it's any of your business.'

Arnold ate his meal silently as he watched his wife dress. It wasn't a surprise that she put a sari on, so he had nothing to say about that, nor when she started to put on some lipstick. But when she used the lipstick to draw a small round dot on her forehead, Arnold became curious.

'When did you wash off your ash cross?' he asked.

'Not long after Father Thomas had gone,' she replied flatly.

'Why are you putting a port on? You've not done that for years.'

'And I seem to remember telling you years ago that it's a pottu, not a port. For god's sake, Arnold, get it right will you.'

'Fine, but why now?'

'Because I thought I'd make an effort for the bridge club. You've got a problem with that?'

She opened her wardrobe door and took out the coat she'd bought during the shopping trip with Podi Kelle, still unworn and under a cover.

'New coat?'

'Yep.'

'When d'you buy that?'

'The other week.'

'It's quite smart. You could save that for my funeral.'

'At my age, there's no point in keeping things for best. By the way, Podi's moving out tomorrow. I'll be driving her round to Ken's with her stuff, and I expect you to keep out of the way. Is that clear?'

Arnold took another mouthful of his food, chewing it with his mouth open, as he watched his wife walk out of the room.

Nishanthi came to see Arnold after a short while. She had been warned that Angelina would be going to bridge, and asked if she wouldn't mind being on duty for the evening. Her father looked terrible, she thought, sitting in bed in pyjamas and dressing gown, gazing at yet another website about Hinduism. His face was rigid in concentration, and she wondered if all his mental capacity was being spent on the act of reading alone, with none spare to process any of the

information.

'Hi, Appa,' she said softly, as she approached the bed. 'Appa...?'

Arnold didn't respond.

'Putha to Appa – makal calling tantai – hello, anyone in?' Nishanthi was frightened by the silence.

Arnold snorted as he became conscious of her presence, which caused her to start, and she nearly spilled the Scotch she was carrying.

'Oh, sorry, Putha, I didn't see you come in.'

'Wow, I was just about to start worrying! Everything ok, Appa?'

'Ah, everything ok? Hmm, let's see now. Everything ok?' he chewed the words for a moment or two. 'No, Putha, I don't think everything is ok. Truthfully, everything is not ok. Yes, I'd say that's about right.'

'Ok, so what's not ok?'

She kicked off her shoes and climbed onto the bed beside her father, her hand pivoting like a gimbal to maintain at the horizontal the liquid in her glass, as she leaned back against her mother's pillows.

'Are you drinking again?' asked Arnold, noticing the whisky.

'It's been a long day, and I've come to relax with you at its end. So, yes, Appa, I am!'

'Why's everything going wrong for me?' groaned Arnold.

'Come on, Father! The fact of me having a drink at the end of the day doesn't amount to everything going wrong for you, now does it! For your information, this is my first drink today, and it'll probably be my last.'

'But why drink at all?'

'Because I've spent years being uptight, and now I've discovered that having a drink helps me relax. I can unwind at last!'

Arnold grunted disparagingly.

'It's true, you know, Appa. I've decided to be happy, and I'll take it any way it comes. You got a problem with that?'

'No, fine.'

'So, what else is going wrong for you, huh?'

Arnold turned his head sidewise towards his daughter, and gave her one of his looks.

'Don't do that, Appa. It's not a stupid question. You've got your oxygen

and pacemaker, so you've been able to come home again – it's what you wanted.'

'It's what I thought I wanted.'

'Honestly, I don't think any of us thought you'd ever be able to leave the hospital again when you first went there. I'd say you're doing pretty well, all things considered.'

'But nothing's right now I'm home.'

'Tell me about it, then...' Nishanthi took a sip of her whisky.

Arnold wondered whether he should talk to Nishanthi about Podi Kelle's lies – she was a lawyer, after all – but if his wife had been taken in, he couldn't be entirely sure that his daughter wouldn't be too. No, probably best to let things be, for now at least, and enjoy the company of the last member of the household who seemed to be talking to him.

'Everything I do annoys other people. I don't know what's changed, Putha.'

'Really,' she laughed, 'I don't think anything's changed! You always used to annoy everybody else!'

Arnold wasn't at all sure that this was a helpful thing to say, even though plainly she had to be joking. There was a time for levity, and this wasn't it.

'Yes, very funny, thank you. But I'm being serious.'

'So am I,' she took another sip, 'you've always been a very forceful character – you just have. But that's been ok. You've raised your children successfully, steered us in the right direction. You're sitting here in this house as the head of the family...'

'But it's not my house,' he sighed, 'it's only a little bit mine, and the family's not exactly a family any more, is it.'

'Of course it's your house. We all live here equally and,' she winked at him, pleased with herself, 'my father's house has many rooms!'

'Thank you for that!' he sighed.

'And sometimes forceful characters annoy the people they deal with.'

'When have I annoyed you, Putha?'

'Well, annoy's too strong a word, I suppose. You've certainly made me do things I didn't want to do at the time, but you thought they were for the best.'

'Such as?'

'Moving us here for a start!'

'But it was you and Timmy who moved *us* here!'

'No, not here as in this house, you haraka! I mean us to England.'

'What? But that's thirty years ago!'

'Yep.'

'And you're still going on about it?' Arnold was peeved.

'I don't think I'd say I was going on about it, exactly, Appa!'

'Go on, then, what else?' she had his full attention now, his illness having vanished from his mind.

'I don't know. I think you were a bit heavy handed with Yogam and me about our education.'

Arnold looked at his daughter as if she'd just made known some ancient and arcane mystery, rather than the commonplace which she felt it to be.

'But that's fine,' she sought to ease herself out of a conversation which, she could see, was clearly not going to go well, 'because we've both done ok for ourselves, and couldn't have done it without you. Anyway... enough of all that.'

'Heavy handed? How?' Arnold was amazed.

'I'm not saying... look, it's just the way you are, but that's fine because you're still my wonderful Appa,' she beamed down at him as she raised the glass to her lips once more.

'Heavy handed? I didn't exactly get my way with your brother, did I. He was supposed to be a medic. Fat chance of that!'

'But he went to Oxford – did well there – now makes a fortune.'

'You can take it from me that making a fortune's not that interesting when you're dying!'

'Maybe not, Appa, but he's not dying. In fact, I'd say he's living – I mean *really* living, having the time of his life.'

'But it's not responsible.'

'What isn't? Failing to look after his children, not pushing them harder in their exams – oh, wait a minute, he hasn't got any children, so it hardly applies!'

'He's not being responsible to us, his parents,' Arnold was determined to keep calm, and spoke very matter-of-factly.

Nishanthi, on the other hand, was beginning to become exasperated. She gulped down what remained of her drink.

'What do you mean responsible to you? How's he supposed to do that?'

'By being our son. Making us proud.'

'I think I'd be proud of him if he was my son. Yep, definitely! And plenty of fathers would be thrilled to know their sons drive Ferraris. Big red ones.'

'Well, at least you became a lawyer. That's the main thing.'

'What's the main thing?'

'You made us proud. You're a lawyer.'

'What's there to be proud about?'

'You're a lawyer!' Arnold hadn't fully understood the question.

'Hmm, a provincial solicitor specialising in conveyancing law. It's not much to be proud about, is it.'

'But still a lawyer.'

'I don't think you're getting it, Appa! Shouldn't we be proud about the things we've done, rather than just what we are?'

This question hit Arnold hard. It had been delivered with remarkable coolness, given the degree of Nishanthi's growing agitation, but he knew – because it was one of the things he'd thought about more than anything else during his illness – he knew now that he'd done nothing very much in his lifetime. And if he'd done nothing, why should anyone be proud of him? And if no-one was proud of him, what was his life worth? What had his earthly presence amounted to?

'Did Amma tell you I've decided I'll go back to Sri Lanka when the kids have left home?'

'She said something about it, but I don't think she thought you meant it – heat of the moment when the stupid Jenkins were here, I gather.'

'Yes, there was a bit of that, it's true, but I've thought about the idea a lot since then, and Timmy's supporting me – I'm going to do it. I'm going to go back and work with women's groups, I've decided. Eengland ree-tawned, doan't you knoar!'

'That's very vulgar. Please don't do it, Putha.'

'It always wound you up when Yogam and I did that,' she laughed, 'even when we were still kids in Ambuluwewa! You are funny, Appa!'

'So you're going to stop being a lawyer and go back to Sri Lanka?'

'Yep.'

'You're going to turn your back on the sacrifices your mother and I made

for you to get you here?'

The victim's tone, the whine, started to get to Nishanthi, who felt the need to stand up. Possibly she felt better able to dominate her father from that position, but certainly she didn't want to be as close to him any more.

'Sacrifices? What sacrifices?'

'We sold an entire estate to move here!' still Arnold maintained his composure.

'An estate that you never had anything to do with. An estate which I liked. An estate where we were landowners, with a responsibility for those who worked for us. An estate which made us important people in the area, doing important things. Do you think you sacrificed the estate so that I could leave all that behind and grow up in a three-bedroomed semi to become a solicitor in Luton? Or do you think that you sacrificed all that because you – you alone – wanted to live in England?'

Nishanthi's voice had crescendoed as she stood pouring scorn down on her father. He was deeply shocked by the vitriol to which he was suddenly exposed, but lay quite still, taking regular, calm breaths, whilst his daughter continued.

'Look at you, lying there with a smudge of ash on your forehead, the perfect fucking Anglican, the little Englishman...'

'But, Putha...!' he broke in, 'I thought you'd found your faith again? You have, haven't you? Please say you have!'

'Don't be so fucking ridiculous!' Nishanthi was shouting now, 'I'm going to church to keep Amma company. She needs a friend, you idiot. I'm going to get myself another drink.'

'Putha, stop, stop – we all need faith – we live by faith, don't we? What are we without faith? We're nothing...'

'Faith!' Nishanthi stopped and returned to her father's bedside, 'Faith! Fucking faith! Are you kidding me? For fuck's sake!'

Arnold cowered as his daughter seemed to explode into a rage which for outstripped her familiar, comfortable irritability.

'Faith is about trusting that the right things are being done to you, it's passive, it's about someone else acting on your behalf, it's the absolute confidence a child has that her parents are acting in her best interests, faith is at the very heart

of love. Fidelity is all that there is in love.'

She stopped screeching and succumbed instead to the grief which her rage had both generated and yet, thus far, held back. She stood motionless, her face twisted agonisingly, unable to breathe as she looked down on her father through unstoppable tears.

'Night night!' he whispered, trusting that a gentle tone was the best comfort he could bring to his daughter in her distress.

She gasped for air, and her shoulders fell. She turned and left the room.

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Arnold woke up reluctantly the next morning, both because he'd slept so badly and because he didn't want the awareness which came with wakefulness. Angelina had brought him some All-Bran, which she'd left on his bedside table, and she was now busy in the living room, he could hear. He could also hear Podi Kelle, which made his heart race threateningly, so he focussed on being calm. Raising his arms, with their motion he swept the anger from his mind up to the top of his skull, above the chakras, in the Ayurvedic manner about which he'd been reading.

Listening to them talk, he realised that the ladies were packing Podi Kelle's room. This, then, must be the day when she was moving out, a day he could never have imagined.

He was too weak to sit himself up in bed to watch them through the open door, although he could sense their movement. It was clear that they weren't aware that he'd woken up, since neither of them had come near him. And obvious that they'd not made any attempt to keep things at a hushed level, for fear of waking him.

'Hello!' he tried to call out, but his voice was thin and hoarse this morning.

The movement outside stopped, and for a moment there was silence. He could imagine the two women consoling each other with long, meaningful looks.

'What do you want?' responded Angelina, eventually.

'Nothing. Just hello.'

She appeared at his bedside. 'Do you want this cereal?'

'Yes, please. Could you help me sit up, please?'



'You fell asleep in your dressing gown. Didn't Nishanthi come and see you last night whilst I was out?'

'Huh? Why do you ask?'

'Because your dinner plate was still here when I came back.' Angelina heaved Arnold into an upright position, 'I thought she might have taken it back to the kitchen?'

'Oh, no – no, I didn't see her.'

'Here. Your breakfast,' Angelina thrust the bowl into her husband's shaking hand.

'Thank you.' he wheezed. 'Am I to gather that this is the day when Podi moves out?'

'Yes. Just lie still. I'll be back later.'

'The laptop...?'

Angelina picked up the laptop from the floor and placed it beside Arnold on the bed.

He made very heavy work of the All-Bran. What was once a light breakfast, nothing like the milk rice and seeni sambal he would once have had brought to him, now seemed a vast amount to get down, a real struggle. He paused between mouthfuls to listen to what was going on in the living room beyond, but could hear nothing clearly. Were they whispering, he wondered? No, they were speaking in Sinhala. No wonder he couldn't make out what they were saying.

It became clear that things were being carried out to the car, since he could hear the front door opening and closing, and the coming and going of the women, grunting as they lifted objects. What was Podi Kelle taking with her, he wondered? As a matter of fact, what was it that she owned? Everything here belonged to the family, since nothing had ever been given to her. Still, what did it matter. They were only earthly chattels.

He opened the laptop, attempted to find something interesting to read, but he was distracted by the goings-on of the women and couldn't focus on the screen.

At last, the space beyond his bedroom became quiet, and he heard the Peugeot start outside and begin to pull away. Then it stopped, and he heard someone come back into the house. He could tell it was Podi Kelle from the lightness of her movement.

'Podi,' he called out.

After a moment's pause, she appeared at the doorway, looking in impassively. He threw back his bed clothes and began to untie the cord of his pyjama bottoms.

'Aren't you going to be abused by me one more time?' he sneered, as he exposed himself to her.

She gazed at him sadly, pityingly, for an instant, before her look hardened to one of disgust.

'Fug you!' she mouthed, before turning on her heels and leaving Holly House.

Arnold listened as the car drove away into silence. Then he listened for something else, some other noise, something to distract him. There was only the sound of the fan in the laptop.

He couldn't reach the corner of the duvet which he'd thrown off, so lay there without a cover, and couldn't be bothered to do his pyjamas up again. What point, if there was no-one around.

His breathing was bad, laboured and wet, bubbling. As he lay and listened now to this noise, he remembered reading that the return of the soul to the cosmos was to Shiva like bubbles rising and returning to air. So he rose.

He heaved himself up into a sitting position, and eased each leg out of bed. Trusting that they would be strong enough to support his weight, he slid down on to the floor. He allowed his pyjama bottoms to slip down round his ankles, and carefully stepped out of them as he leaned back against the edge of the bed.

Grasping at his walking stick, he wobbled dangerously as he stood upright, before starting slowly in the direction of his chapel.

He halted, turned, closed the laptop, cut himself off from the world.

He removed his spectacles and the cannula from his nose, dropped the oxygen concentrator on the bed, dispensed with earthly possessions.

He put his glasses back on, unable to see without them.

He reached the mirror on the front of the wardrobe where he stopped and smeared the faint remains of the ash cross on his forehead into his third eye.

He trudged painfully, terrifyingly short of breath, towards the door to the chapel, where he threw off his dressing gown and pyjama jacket.

Naked, unshaved, smeared in ash, he entered the chapel and closed the

door behind him with a click.

He addressed Jesus and Ganesh with a tiny nod of the head.

'Neither of you did well with your fathers, did you,' he whispered, coughing up phlegm, 'but you both did ok in the end, didn't you!'

He thought this was very funny, but found laughter too difficult, so he steadied himself, as if he was about to step onto the high wire. Slowly, dread written on his face, he raised his walking stick, lifted high into the air that which had supported him. He raised his left leg, brought the foot to rest behind his right knee, and stood precariously for a moment.

'Creator, preserver, destroyer!' he wheezed, as his trident fell from his hand.

Arnold crumpled, fell to the floor as if all he was made of had vanished. He lay for a moment, looking up at the ceiling, watched it dissolve, and through it saw nothing.

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Angelina stood at the door to the den, her hand gripping the heavy brass doorknob. It would have pleased her if she was unable to turn the knob simply because the mechanism was broken, but she knew that the problem lay within her own workings. She hadn't entered this room since Arnold had died, and was still not entirely sure why.

She shouldn't spend too long here, otherwise people would start to wonder what had happened to her. She'd only come through to collect Ken's Ganesh, because he was about to leave. Most of those who had come back to the house, the very closest friends, had already left.

Poor Gillian had dragged Phil off quite early, just as he was settling into a good chat with Ken about their expat experiences. Phil had thought she was being very unsporting, breaking up a good party, but that wasn't at all why she wanted to leave. She had been in the kitchen because she wanted to be part of Yogam's sub-party, where the most fun was to be had, but lacking the confidence to be there as herself, she was lingering under the pretence of being the helpful person doing the washing up. Angelina had told her quietly that it wasn't necessary, that she should just fill a glass with wine and join in, when something within lowered the drawbridge of Gillian's timidity, and she observed bluntly that being a widow

might not be such a bad thing. Instantly, the drawbridge came up again, as did her hands, which she raised to her mouth in fists, as if to stop her voice should any further thoughts make a break. Her wide eyes were an indication of the mortification she felt, as she started to burble an apology. Angelina had comforted her with the news that she almost certainly wasn't the only woman present who had felt that way. She wondered how long the poor, frightened thing had wished her bore of a husband dead?

Phil, as it happened, had looked to be in the pink, as he chatted to Ken. He wasn't as – Angelina struggled with the word – wasn't as masculine as Ken (yes, masculine was exactly right – lucky Podi Kelle!), but he was upright and vivacious. They'd both turned out in a most respectable fashion for the funeral, dark suits, black ties, and conducted themselves with the correct degree of sombreness. For Phil this was only appropriate, since he and Arnold had been old friends, whereas Ken had only met Arnold the once, on that calamitous night of the hospital admission. And they seemed to be enjoying each other's company, so that Gillian's highly flustered exit, dragging Phil along in her wake, was a disappointment to them both. Angelina noted that they had exchanged numbers before Phil's exit.

Why, she wondered, had Arnold never been interested in mobile phones, as other men of his generation seemed to be? Not just men. Podi had been glued to her phone whilst she'd been away from Ken, and in one conversation she had heard her say something about nookey. Seeking to save the silly old thing's embarrassment by reminding her that the word was Nokia, she'd been told that nookey was exactly the word which had been intended.

Someone's mobile had rung during the interment, although it was someone at the back of the crowd. Was it a crowd, she wondered, not sure what constitutes one. There were a lot of people, for sure, many more than she would have assumed would have come to see Arnold off. It was surprising, really, that he had so many friends. Timmy had asked Nishanthi whether he was alone in thinking the turnout was so high because all Arnold's friends were elderly, of the generation which went to funerals as a mark of respect in general, but now specifically to drum up support for their own, whenever the time came. He hadn't meant to be overheard, and Angelina had taken no offence, knowing that younger generations don't have the same understanding of death as the elderly.

Angelina had hated from the outset the plot Arnold had bought for them both in that ghastly cemetery, which was full of dampness and green slime. It must have been twenty years ago that he'd insisted she drove the two of them out to inspect the place, which she'd found cold and isolated even then, in high summer as she recalled. She'd not been back since (which had to count as some sort of blessing, she supposed), so that turning up today, doing battle with the narrow pathways and overhanging, leafless branches, to be met by the chilling sight of a deep, dark, wet hole had caused her to regret not putting her foot down all those years ago. She had suggested then that they should be cremated and returned to Sri Lanka, but he'd insisted that their resting place should be in their new homeland. He had joked that he wanted to become part of the cold, dank sod of England. How apt. She had decided, even as she chucked a handful of dripping, worm-riddled soil into the grave, where it splatted on the coffin as if she'd thrown in a fresh elephant dropping, that she wasn't going to be joining him in this place for all of eternity. She must mention this to the children.

The atmosphere had lightened hugely at the Phoenix. It had been Yogam's idea to hold the wake there, and he'd insisted on paying for it. Such a considerate gesture – maybe it was his way of making it up with his Appa? There was soon chit-chat and laughter over the champagne – real champagne! – and there had been a moment when it had all seemed in danger of becoming disrespectfully jolly, especially when she had caught sight of Father Thomas crying with laughter at something Yogam had said. It wasn't an hour earlier that he'd been chanting that man born of woman has not only a short time to live, but is also full of misery. But let them be jolly, she decided. What's the point in being full of misery?

She really, really needed to open this door and go into the den. Between his death and his burial, whilst he had still been around in some sense, the loss wasn't yet absolute. Even now, behind this door, there was a sense of him being there, in her imagination at least. Something made her believe, just a little, that Arnold's ghost would spring up to lecture her on the difference between Hindu and Christian ideas of death. Worse, she thought, he would then insist that he was going nowhere until an exorcist had come to issue, in Latin, a solemn and authoritative adjuration casting him out from this place.

He would enjoy that.

He would have enjoyed that.

She'd been quite wrong when she had decided, during his hospitalisation, that Arnold's absence from her side whether by death or by geography amounted to the same thing. There was no return flight from death, and since she wasn't yet ready to follow him on that journey, it meant they were apart now for good. Well, for life. The chapter of her life spent with Arnold, so much greater than any other could be, had come to an end, and it did matter. It mattered very much. She was diminished.

What would her next chapter be? She supposed it would be her final chapter, so it seemed important to get it right. She couldn't say with confidence that her marriage to Arnold had been wrong, not wholly, but she hoped that she could do something – was better the right word? – no, stronger, more about herself, her grown-up chapter. Bit late, she smiled!

Open the door! she told herself.

She had already decided that she should hand over this set of rooms to the younger generations, now that she was the only old folk living here. These were four good rooms which they could use and enjoy as the twins grew up. The den could become a games room again. And they had the huge living room window facing the front garden and road, which let in so much light when it was sunny. She smiled, remembering that the Red House had been designed to prevent the sunlight entering, the exact opposite. Why had Arnold ever thought it was so simple to move from there to here? And yet they had succeeded over all these years, so maybe he was right.

She hadn't said anything yet about switching rooms around, since she was still finding support in those things which were familiar. She would tell Nishanthi in due course. She knew the children would be pleased, as they had always loved being in the old folks' living room, running round it to fill the space. They had looked so funny today, in their funeral clothes, dressed up like little adults, but they'd done very well. She had heard them whisper questions, intelligently, seeking to understand, and they'd been very brave when they'd said goodbye to Parta at the graveside. They'd clearly marked the day as special, and behaved accordingly. How lovely, then, when they'd come home and Nishanthi had plumped herself in between them on the sofa to tickle their ribs until they'd squealed. Timmy had beamed as he looked on. Such comfort in having a family.

Angelina realised, as she contemplated being without these rooms, that the den had never been hers anyway. It had been Arnold's from the very start. He'd never announced overtly that the room was for his use alone, but he'd occupied it as soon as they'd moved in, and filled it with his books, his stuff, effectively excluding everybody else. This wasn't a room she could give away, then, until she had cleared it of his rubbish. Claiming it back could be her job in the next few weeks.

In fact, what exactly did he have in there?

Angelina turned the knob. The mechanism was heavy (Holly House had been very well built, Arnold was always saying – three hinges on every door!), so any attempt at a decorous entry was very quickly set aside, as she heaved and shoved, a sudden movement which gave way to stillness and the void as the door swept open into the dark room. She reached round the jamb, fumbling, not entirely sure where the switch was, before turning the lights on. There was no sign of Arnold, neither in the dark nor in the light, nothing, no sense of him at all. There were all of his things but nothing of the man. She sighed twice, once because he wasn't there, and again because he was elsewhere. She entered and passed by Ganesh and Jesus, going to pick up Arnold's walking stick, which was in a very odd place between the wall and his reading chair. She'd take it back to the hospital when she got round to it. But she was here now to return Ganesh to Ken, so she picked up the heavy god and carried it out, through her bedroom and into the living room.

Podi Kelle was carrying a tray, collecting dirty tea things. Angelina and she had been out shopping again, for the right things to wear today (although Angelina did wear the new coat for the second time), and Podi Kelle looked very smart, very graceful, very feminine.

'Thank you, Dilisini,' smiled Angelina, 'but let me do that.'

Nihal leaned over towards his mother and whispered too loudly, 'Why has Podi changed her name?'

'Podi's not her real name – it's a nickname,' replied Nishanthi, 'but now she's living with Ken, she wants to use her real name again.'

'Who's Ken?' demanded Indrani, confused.

Ken turned and waved at the children. 'I am, and if you're very very good, I'll let you kick my false leg!'

There was a sudden silence in the room.

'What!' protested Ken, 'I used to let my own kids do it!'

'Really, mister,' Nihal was enchanted by the idea, 'I can really kick your leg?'

Ken laughed, 'Definitely – just not today cos I've got my best trousers on.'

Nihal looked up at his father, his eyes wide with excitement.

'That's not an offer you're going to get everyday, is it!' smiled Timmy, nodding his appreciation at Ken.

'It's very good of you to let Dilisini stay here with me for a few days, Ken,' said Angelina, 'I'm really very grateful.'

'I don't think I'm letting her, Angelina – in fact, if she wasn't staying it would only be because I was physically preventing her. And that's not going to happen.'

Podi Kelle stood alongside Ken and took his hand appreciatively in her own.

'Right, I'd better get going,' he said, kissing it.

Yogam offered Ken a lift home, rather than have him walk with a Ganesh through the dark streets.

'You're in the Ferrari, aren't you!' observed Ken.

'I am.'

'Do you think we could go the long way home, maybe?' he grinned.

'What, you mean the route through Milton Keynes and Bedford?' smiled Yogam.

'I think that would do very nicely indeed! Let me get my coat!'

Nishanthi and Timmy took the children upstairs next, since it was beyond bedtime.

'I'll see you tomorrow, children,' said Angelina, kissing Nihal and Indrani goodnight 'thank you for being so very very good today.'

'I love you, Parti,' said Nihal.

'Me too,' said Indrani, 'we'll come to see you tomorrow, Parti.'

And, at last, just Angelina and Podi Kelle were left, sitting looking at each other in the sitting room.

'Dilisini?' began Angelina.

'Hari?'

'Do you mind if I carry on calling you Podi? Just for a little bit longer?'

'No, not mind. It ok.'

'It's just that it's familiar, and everything else is changing. I won't do it for long, I promise.'

'Hari, it ok.'

There was a quiet moment between these two old friends, neither short of something to say, but both looking for something useful to say.

'I can't apologise, Podi, for what he was, what he did, you know,' began Angelina, 'because we're all here now because of him. The children, the grandchildren, you, me, in a way Ken, we're all here because of him.'

'Luton, ah!'

'Yes, isn't it odd! How could we have known back then in the Red House that we'd end up in Holly House – they're so different.'

'But we happy in both.'

'Yes. Hari. I think we were happy in the Red House, and I think I can carry on being happy here, whilst you've got Ken now.'

'And you play more bridge, maybe?' Podi Kelle looked daringly at Angelina.

'Oh, I don't know about that. Perhaps one day. But not yet. Not yet.'

'We got each other too. I live with Ken, but always come here too.'

'And bring Ken as well. He's very nice, I think.'

'Twins kick leg!'

'Yes, what an opportunity! I think it appeals to Nihal more than Indrani, I have to say.'

'Hari, boys!' laughed Podi Kelle, 'And Ken want go Sri Lanka with me. You come too. No reason not.'

Angelina thought for a moment. 'No, Podi, no reason not. I look forward to it. I think I'll go to bed now, Podi. It's been a long day.'

'Very long!'

'But if the day can seem so long, Podi,' wondered Angelina as she stood, 'how can a lifetime seem so short?'

'Isn't it!' Podi Kelle tutted.

'Night night,' Angelina took Podi Kelle into her arms and kissed her

lightly on each cheek. 'See you in the morning.'