



**Grades
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Short Stories

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EVELINE

James Joyce

She sat at the window watching the evening invade the avenue. Her head was leaned against the window curtains and in her nostrils was the odour of dusty cretonne. She was tired.

Few people passed. The man out of the last house passed on his way home; she heard his footsteps clacking along the concrete pavement and afterwards crunching on the cinder path before the new red houses. One time there used to be a field there in which they used to play every evening with other people's children. Then a man from Belfast bought the field and built houses in it-not like their little brown houses but bright brick houses with shining roofs. The children of the avenue used to play together in that field-the Devines, the Waters, the Dunns, little Keogh the cripple, she and her brothers and sisters. Ernest, however, never played: he was too grown up. Her father used often to hunt them in out of the field with his blackthorn stick; but usually little Keogh used to keep *nix* and call out when he saw her father coming. Still they seemed to have been rather happy then. Her father was not so bad then; and besides, her mother was alive. That was a long time ago; she and her brothers and sisters were all grown up; her mother was dead. Tizzie Dunn was dead, too, and the Waters had gone back to England. Everything changes. Now she was going to go away like the others, to leave her home.

Home! She looked round the room, reviewing all its familiar objects which she had dusted once a week for so many years, wondering where on earth all the dust came from. Perhaps she would never see again those familiar objects from which she had never dreamed of being divided. And yet during all those years she had never found out the name of the priest whose yellowing photograph hung on the wall above the broken harmonium beside the coloured print of the promises made to Blessed Margaret Mary Alacoque. He had been a school friend of her father. Whenever he showed the photograph to a visitor her father used to pass it with a casual word:

"He is in Melbourne now."

She had consented to go away, to leave her home. Was that wise? She tried to weigh each side of the question. In her home anyway she had shelter and food; she had those whom she had known all her life about her. Of course she had to work hard, both in the house and at business. What would they say of her in the Stores when they found out that she had run away with a fellow? Say she was a fool, perhaps; and her place would be filled up by advertisement. Miss Gavan would be glad. She had always had an edge on her, especially whenever there were people listening.

"Miss Hill, don't you see these ladies are waiting?"

"Look lively, Miss Hill, please."

She would not cry many tears at leaving the Stores.

But in her new home, in a distant unknown country, it would not be like that. Then she would be married-she, Eveline. People would treat her with respect then. She would not be treated as her mother had been. Even now, though she was over nineteen, she sometimes felt herself in danger of her father's violence. She knew it was that that had given her the palpitations. When they were growing up he had never gone for her, like he used to go for Harry and Ernest, because she was a girl; but latterly he had begun to threaten her and say what he would do to her only for her dead mother's sake. And now she had nobody to protect her. Ernest was dead and Harry, who was in the church decorating business, was nearly always down somewhere in the country. Besides, the invariable squabble for money on Saturday nights had begun to weary her unspeakably. She always gave her entire wages-seven shillings-and Harry always sent up what he could but the trouble was to get any money from her father. He said she used to squander the money, that she had no head, that he wasn't going to give her his hard-earned money to throw about the streets, and much more, for he was usually fairly bad on Saturday night. In the end he would give her the money and ask her had she any intention of buying Sunday's dinner. Then she had to rush out as quickly as she could and do her marketing, holding her black leather purse tightly in her hand as she elbowed her way through the crowds and returning home late under her load of provisions. She had hard work to keep the house together and to see that the two young children who had been left to her charge went to school regularly and got their meals regularly. It was hard work-a hard life-but now that she was about to leave it she did not find it a wholly undesirable life.

She was about to explore another life with Frank. Frank was very kind, manly, open-hearted. She was to go away with him by the night-boat to be his wife and to live with him in Buenos Ayres where he had a home waiting for her. How well she remembered the first time she had seen him; he was lodging in a house on the main road where she used to visit. It seemed a few weeks ago. He was standing at the gate, his peaked cap pushed back on his head and his hair tumbled forward over a face of bronze. Then they had come to know each other. He used to meet her outside the Stores every evening and see her home. He took her to see *The Bohemian Girl* and she felt elated as she sat in an unaccustomed part of the theatre with him. He was awfully fond of music and sang a little. People knew that they were courting and, when he sang about the lass that loves a sailor, she always felt pleasantly confused. He used to call her Poppens out of fun. First of all it had been an excitement for her to have a fellow and then she had begun to like him. He had tales of distant countries. He had started as a deck boy at a pound a month on a ship of the Allan Line going out to Canada. He told her the names of the ships he had been on and the names of the different services. He had sailed through the Straits of Magellan and he told her stories of the terrible Patagonians. He had fallen on his feet in Buenos Ayres, he said, and had come over to the old country just for a holiday. Of course, her father had found out the affair and had forbidden her to have anything to say to him.

"I know these sailor chaps," he said.

One day he had quarrelled with Frank and after that she had to meet her lover secretly.

The evening deepened in the avenue. The white of two letters in her lap grew indistinct. One was to Harry; the other was to her father. Ernest had been her favourite but she liked Harry too. Her father was becoming old lately, she noticed; he would miss her. Sometimes he could be very nice. Not long before, when she had been laid up for a day, he had read her out a ghost story and made toast for her at the fire. Another day, when their mother was alive, they had all gone for a picnic to the Hill of Howth. She remembered her father putting on her mother's bonnet to make the children laugh.

Her time was running out but she continued to sit by the window, leaning her head against the window curtain, inhaling the odour of dusty cretonne. Down far in the avenue she could hear a street organ playing. She knew the air. Strange that it should come that very night to remind her of the promise to her mother, her promise to keep the home together as long as she could. She remembered the last night of her mother's illness; she was again in the close dark room at the other side of the hall and outside she heard a melancholy air of Italy. The organ-player had been ordered to go away and given sixpence. She remembered her father strutting back into the sickroom saying:

"Damned Italians! coming over here!"

As she mused the pitiful vision of her mother's life laid its spell on the very quick of her being—that life of commonplace sacrifices closing in final craziness. She trembled as she heard again her mother's voice saying constantly with foolish insistence:

"Derevaun Seraun! Derevaun Seraun!"

She stood up in a sudden impulse of terror. Escape! She must escape! Frank would save her. He would give her life, perhaps love, too. But she wanted to live. Why should she be unhappy? She had a right to happiness. Frank would take her in his arms, fold her in his arms. He would save her.

She stood among the swaying crowd in the station at the North Wall. He held her hand and she knew that he was speaking to her, saying something about the passage over and over again.

The station was full of soldiers with brown baggages. Through the wide doors of the sheds she caught a glimpse of the black mass of the boat, lying in beside the quay wall, with illumined portholes. She answered nothing. She felt her cheek pale and cold and, out of a maze of distress, she prayed to God to direct her, to show her what was her duty. The boat blew a long mournful whistle into the mist. If she went, tomorrow she would be on the sea with Frank, steaming towards Buenos Ayres. Their passage had been booked. Could she still draw back after all he had done for her? Her distress awoke a nausea in her body and she kept moving her lips in silent fervent prayer.

A bell clanged upon her heart. She felt him seize her hand:

"Come!"

All the seas of the world tumbled about her heart. He was drawing her into them: he would drown her. She gripped with both hands at the iron railing.

"Come!"

No! No! No! It was impossible. Her hands clutched the iron in frenzy. Amid the seas she sent a cry of anguish.

"Eveline! Evvy!"

He rushed beyond the barrier and called to her to follow. He was shouted at to go on but he still called to her. She set her white face to him, passive, like a helpless animal. Her eyes gave him no sign of love or farewell or recognition

“Cat in the Rain”

by Ernest Hemingway

There were only two Americans stopping at the hotel. They did not know any of the people they passed on the stairs on their way to and from their room. Their room was on the second floor facing the sea. It also faced the public garden and the war monument. There were big palms and green benches in the public garden.

In the good weather there was always an artist with his easel. Artists liked the way the palms grew and the bright colors of the hotels facing the gardens and the sea.

Italians came from a long way off to look up at the war monument. It was made of bronze and glistened in the rain. It was raining. The rain dripped from the palm trees. Water stood in pools on the gravel paths. The sea broke in a long line in the rain and slipped back down the beach to come up and break again in a long line in the rain. The motor cars were gone from the square by the war monument. Across the square in the doorway of the cafe a waiter stood looking out at the empty square.

The American wife stood at the window looking out. Outside right under their window a cat was crouched under one of the dripping green tables. The cat was trying to make herself so compact that she would not be dripped on.

“I’m going down and get that kitty,” the American wife said.

“I’ll do it,” her husband offered from the bed.

“No, I’ll get it. The poor kitty out trying to keep dry under a table.”

The husband went on reading, lying propped up with the two pillows at the foot of the bed.

“Don’t get wet,” he said.

The wife went downstairs and the hotel owner stood up and bowed to her as she passed the office. His desk was at the far end of the office. He was an old man and very tall.

“Il piove,” the wife said. She liked the hotel-keeper.

“Si, Si, Signora, brutto tempo. It is very bad weather.”

He stood behind his desk in the far end of the dim room. The wife liked him. She liked the deadly serious way he received any complaints. She liked his dignity. She liked the way he wanted to serve her. She liked the way he felt about being a hotel-keeper. She liked his old, heavy face and big hands.

Liking him she opened the door and looked out. It was raining harder. A man in a rubber cape was crossing the empty square to the cafe. The cat would be around to the right. Perhaps she could go along under the eaves. As she stood in the doorway an umbrella opened behind her. It was the maid who looked after their room.

“You must not get wet,” she smiled, speaking Italian. Of course, the hotel-keeper had sent her.

With the maid holding the umbrella over her, she walked along the gravel path until she was under their window. The table was there, washed bright green in the rain, but the cat was gone. She was suddenly disappointed. The maid looked up at her.

“Ha perduto qualche cosa, Signora?”

“There was a cat,” said the American girl.

“A cat?”

“Si, il gatto.”

“A cat?” the maid laughed. “A cat in the rain?”

“Yes,- ” she said, “under the table.” Then, “Oh, I wanted it so much. I wanted a kitty.”

When she talked English the maid’s face tightened.

“Come, Signora,” she said. “We must get back inside. You will be wet.”

“I suppose so”, said the American girl.

They went back along the gravel path and passed in the door. The maid stayed outside to close the umbrella. As the American girl passed the office, the padrone bowed from his desk. Something felt very small and tight inside the girl. The padrone made her feel very small and at the same time really important. She had a momentary feeling of being of supreme importance. She went on up the stairs. She opened the door of the room. George was on the bed, reading.

“Did you get the cat?” he asked, putting the book down.

“It was gone.”

“Wonder where it went to,” he said, resting his eyes from reading.

She sat down on the bed.

“I wanted it so much,” she said. “I don’t know why I wanted it so much. I wanted that poor kitty. It isn’t any fun to be a poor kitty out in the rain.”

George was reading again.

She went over and sat in front of the mirror of the dressing table looking at herself with the hand glass. She studied her profile, first one side and then the other. Then she studied the back of her head and her neck.

“Don’t you think it would be a good idea if I let my hair grow out?” she asked, looking at her profile again.

George looked up and saw the back of her neck, clipped close like a boy’s.

“I like it the way it is.”

“I get so tired of it,” she said. “I get so tired of looking like a boy.”

George shifted his position in the bed. He hadn’t looked away from her since she started to speak.

“You look pretty darn nice,” he said.

She laid the mirror down on the dresser and went over to the window and looked out. It was getting dark.

“I want to pull my hair back tight and smooth and make a big knot at the back that I can feel,” she said. “I want to have a kitty to sit on my lap and purr when I stroke her.”

“Yeah?” George said from the bed.

“And I want to eat at a table with my own silver and I want candles. And I want it to be spring and I want to brush my hair out in front of a mirror and I want a kitty and I want some new clothes.”

“Oh, shut up and get something to read.,” George said. He was reading again.

His wife was looking out of the window. It was quite dark now and still raining in the palm trees.

“Anyway, I want a cat,” she said, “I want a cat. I want a cat now. If I can’t have long hair or any fun, I can have a cat.”

George was not listening. He was reading his book. His wife looked out of the window where the light had come on in the square.

Someone knocked at the door.

“Avanti,” George said. He looked up from his book.

In the doorway stood the maid. She held a big tortoise-shell cat pressed tight against her and swung down against her body.

“Excuse me,” she said, “the padrone asked me to bring this for the Signora.”

“ Everday Use □ □

by Alice Walker

I will wait for her in the yard that Maggie and I made so clean and wavy yesterday afternoon. A yard like this is more comfortable than most people know. It is not just a yard. It is like an extended living room. When the hard clay is swept clean as a floor and the fine sand around the edges lined with tiny, irregular grooves, anyone can come and sit and look up into the elm tree and wait for the breezes that never come inside the house.

Maggie will be nervous until after her sister goes: she will stand hopelessly in corners, homely and ashamed of the burn scars down her arms and legs, eying her sister with a mixture of envy and awe. She thinks her sister has held life always in the palm of one hand, that "no" is a word the world never learned to say to her.

You've no doubt seen those TV shows where the child who has "made it" is confronted, as a surprise, by her own mother and father, tottering in weakly from backstage. (A pleasant surprise, of course: What would they do if parent and child came on the show only to curse out and insult each other?) On TV mother and child embrace and smile into each other's faces. Sometimes the mother and father weep, the child wraps them in her arms and leans across the table to tell how she would not have made it without their help. I have seen these programs.

Sometimes I dream a dream in which Dee and I are suddenly brought together on a TV program of this sort. Out of a dark and soft seated limousine I am ushered into a bright room filled with many people. There I meet a smiling, gray, sporty man like Johnny Carson who shakes my hand and tells me what a fine girl I have. Then we are on the stage and Dee is embracing me with tears in her eyes. She pins on my dress a large orchid, even though she has told me once that she thinks orchids are tacky flowers.

In real life I am a large, big boned woman with rough, man-working hands. In the winter I wear flannel nightgowns to bed and overalls during the day. I can kill and clean a hog as mercilessly as a man. My fat keeps me hot in zero weather. I can work outside all day, breaking ice to get water for washing; I can eat pork liver cooked over the open fire minutes after it comes steaming from the hog. One winter I knocked a bull calf straight in the brain between the eyes with a sledge hammer and had the meat hung up to chill before nightfall. But of course all this does not show on television. I am the way my daughter would want me to be: a hundred pounds lighter, my skin like an uncooked barley pancake. My hair glistens in the hot bright lights. Johnny Carson has much to do to keep up with my quick and witty tongue.

But that is a mistake. I know even before I wake up. Who ever knew a Johnson with a quick tongue? Who can even imagine me looking a strange white man in the eye? It seems to me I have talked to them always with one foot raised in flight, with my head fumed in whichever

way is farthest from them. Dee, though. She would always look anyone in the eye. Hesitation was no part of her nature.

"How do I look, Mama?" Maggie says, showing just enough of her thin body enveloped in pink skirt and red blouse for me to know she's there, almost hidden by the door.

"Come out into the yard," I say. Have you ever seen a lame animal, perhaps a dog run over by some careless person rich enough to own a car, sidle up to someone who is ignorant enough to be kind to him? That is the way my Maggie walks. She has been like this, chin on chest, eyes on ground, feet in shuffle, ever since the fire that burned the other house to the ground.

Dee is lighter than Maggie, with nicer hair and a fuller figure. She's a woman now, though sometimes I forget, How long ago was it that the other house burned? Ten, twelve years? Sometimes I can still hear the flames and feel Maggie's arms sticking to me, her hair smoking and her dress falling off her in little black papery flakes. Her eyes seemed stretched open, blazed open by the flames reflected in them. And Dee. I see her standing off under the sweet gum tree she used to dig gum out of; a look of concentration on her face as she watched the last dingy gray board of the house fall in toward the red hot brick chimney. Why don't you do a dance around the ashes? I'd wanted to ask her. She had hated the house that much.

I used to think she hated Maggie, too. But that was before we raised money, the church and me, to send her to Augusta to school. She used to read to us without pity; forcing words, lies, other folks' habits, whole lives upon us two, sitting trapped and ignorant underneath her voice. She washed us in a river of make believe, burned us with a lot of knowledge we didn't necessarily need to know. Pressed us to her with the serious way she read, to shove us away at just the moment, like dimwits, we seemed about to understand.

Dee wanted nice things. A yellow organdy dress to wear to her graduation from high school; black pumps to match a green suit she'd made from an old suit somebody gave me. She was determined to stare down any disaster in her efforts. Her eyelids would not flicker for minutes at a time. Often I fought off the temptation to shake her. At sixteen she had a style of her own: and knew what style was.

I never had an education myself. After second grade the school was closed down. Don't ask me why: in 1927 colored asked fewer questions than they do now. Sometimes Maggie reads to me. She stumbles along good naturedly but can't see well. She knows she is not bright. Like good looks and money, quickness passes her by. She will marry John Thomas (who has mossy teeth in an earnest face) and then I'll be free to sit here and I guess just sing church songs to myself. Although I never was a good singer. Never could carry a tune. I was always better at a man's job. I used to love to milk till I was hooked in the side in '49. Cows are soothing and slow and don't bother you, unless you try to milk them the wrong way.

I have deliberately turned my back on the house. It is three rooms, just like the one that burned, except the roof is tin; they don't make shingle roofs any more. There are no real

windows, just some holes cut in the sides, like the portholes in a ship, but not round and not square, with rawhide holding the shutters up on the outside. This house is in a pasture, too, like the other one. No doubt when Dee sees it she will want to tear it down. She wrote me once that no matter where we "choose" to live, she will manage to come see us. But she will never bring her friends. Maggie and I thought about this and Maggie asked me, "Mama, when did Dee ever have any friends?"

She had a few. Furtive boys in pink shirts hanging about on washday after school. Nervous girls who never laughed. Impressed with her they worshiped the well turned phrase, the cute shape, the scalding humor that erupted like bubbles in lye. She read to them.

When she was courting Jimmy T she didn't have much time to pay to us, but turned all her faultfinding power on him. He flew to marry a cheap city girl from a family of ignorant flashy people. She hardly had time to recompose herself.

When she comes I will meet—but there they are!

Maggie attempts to make a dash for the house, in her shuffling way, but I stay her with my hand. "Come back here, " I say. And she stops and tries to dig a well in the sand with her toe.

It is hard to see them clearly through the strong sun. But even the first glimpse of leg out of the car tells me it is Dee. Her feet were always neat looking, as if God himself had shaped them with a certain style. From the other side of the car comes a short, stocky man. Hair is all over his head a foot long and hanging from his chin like a kinky mule tail. I hear Maggie suck in her breath. □□ Uhnneh□□ is what it sounds like. Like when you see the wriggling end of a snake just in front of your foot on the road. □□ Uhnneh□□

Dee next. A dress down to the ground, in this hot weather. A dress so loud it hurts my eyes. There are yellows and oranges enough to throw back the light of the sun. I feel my whole face warming from the heat waves it throws out. Earrings, too, gold, and hanging down to her shoulders. Bracelets dangling and making noises when she moves her arm up to shake the folds of the dress out of her armpits. The dress is loose and flows, and as she walks closer, I like it. I hear Maggie go "Uhnneh" again. It is her sister's hair. It stands straight up like the wool on a sheep. It is black as night and around the edges are two long pigtails that rope about like small lizards disappearing behind her ears.

"Wa.su.zo.Tean.o!" she says, coming on in that gliding way the dress makes her move. The short stocky fellow with the hair to his navel is all grinning and he follows up with "Asalamalakim, my mother and sister!" He moves to hug Maggie but she falls back, right up against the back of my chair. I feel her trembling there and when I look up I see the perspiration falling off her chin.

"Don't get up," says Dee. Since I am stout it takes something of a push. You can see me trying to move a second or two before I make it. She turns, showing white heels through her sandals,

and goes back to the car. Out she peeks next with a Polaroid. She stoops down quickly and lines up picture after picture of me sitting there in front of the house with Maggie cowering behind me. She never takes a shot without making sure the house is included. When a cow comes nibbling around the edge of the yard she snaps it and me and Maggie and the house. Then she puts the Polaroid in the back seat of the car, and comes up and kisses me on the forehead.

Meanwhile Asalamalakim is going through motions with Maggie's hand. Maggie's hand is as limp as a fish, and probably as cold, despite the sweat, and she keeps trying to pull it back. It looks like Asalamalakim wants to shake hands but wants to do it fancy. Or maybe he don't know how people shake hands. Anyhow, he soon gives up on Maggie.

"Well," I say. "Dee."

"No, Mama," she says. "Not 'Dee,' Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo!"

"What happened to 'Dee'?" I wanted to know. "She's dead," Wangero said. "I couldn't bear it any longer, being named after the people who oppress me."

"You know as well as me you was named after your aunt Dicie," I said. Dicie is my sister. She named Dee. We called her "Big Dee" after Dee was born.

"But who was she named after?" asked Wangero.

"I guess after Grandma Dee," I said.

"And who was she named after?" asked Wangero.

"Her mother," I said, and saw Wangero was getting tired. "That's about as far back as I can trace it," I said. Though, in fact, I probably could have carried it back beyond the Civil War through the branches.

"Well," said Asalamalakim, "there you are."

"Uhhnnh," I heard Maggie say.

"There I was not, □□ I said, □□ before □Dicie□ cropped up in our family, so why should I try to trace it that far back?□□

He just stood there grinning, looking down on me like somebody inspecting a Model A car. Every once in a while he and Wangero sent eye signals over my head.

"How do you pronounce this name?" I asked.

"You don't have to call me by it if you don't want to," said Wangero.

"Why shouldn't I?" I asked. "If that's what you want us to call you, we'll call you."

"I know it might sound awkward at first," said Wangero.

"I'll get used to it," I said. "Ream it out again."

Well, soon we got the name out of the way. Asalamalakim had a name twice as long and three times as hard. After I tripped over it two or three times he told me to just call him Hakim.a.barber. I wanted to ask him was he a barber, but I didn't really think he was, so I didn't ask.

"You must belong to those beef - cattle peoples down the road," I said. They said "Asalamalakim" when they met you, too, but they didn't shake hands. Always too busy: feeding the cattle, fixing the fences, putting up salt lick shelters, throwing down hay. When the white folks poisoned some of the herd the men stayed up all night with rifles in their hands. I walked a mile and a half just to see the sight.

Hakim.a.barber said, "I accept some of their doctrines, but farming and raising cattle is not my style." (They didn't tell me, and I didn't ask, whether Wangero (Dee) had really gone and married him.)

We sat down to eat and right away he said he didn't eat collards and pork was unclean. Wangero, though, went on through the chitlins and com bread, the greens and everything else. She talked a blue streak over the sweet potatoes. Everything delighted her. Even the fact that we still used the benches her daddy made for the table when we couldn't effort to buy chairs.

"Oh, Mama!" she cried. Then turned to Hakim.a.barber. "I never knew how lovely these benches are. You can feel the rump prints," she said, running her hands underneath her and along the bench. Then she gave a sigh and her hand closed over Grandma Dee's butter dish. "That's it!" she said. "I knew there was something I wanted to ask you if I could have." She jumped up from the table and went over in the corner where the churn stood, the milk in it clabber by now. She looked at the churn and looked at it.

"This churn top is what I need," she said. "Didn't Uncle Buddy whittle it out of a tree you all used to have?"

"Yes," I said.

"Un huh," she said happily. "And I want the dasher, too."

"Uncle Buddy whittle that, too?" asked the barber.

Dee (Wangero) looked up at me.

"Aunt Dee's first husband whittled the dash," said Maggie so low you almost couldn't hear her. "His name was Henry, but they called him Stash."

"Maggie's brain is like an elephant's," Wangero said, laughing. "I can use the churn top as a centerpiece for the alcove table," she said, sliding a plate over the churn, "and I'll think of something artistic to do with the dasher."

When she finished wrapping the dasher the handle stuck out. I took it for a moment in my hands. You didn't even have to look close to see where hands pushing the dasher up and down to make butter had left a kind of sink in the wood. In fact, there were a lot of small sinks; you could see where thumbs and fingers had sunk into the wood. It was beautiful light yellow wood, from a tree that grew in the yard where Big Dee and Stash had lived.

After dinner Dee (Wangero) went to the trunk at the foot of my bed and started rifling through it. Maggie hung back in the kitchen over the dishpan. Out came Wangero with two quilts. They had been pieced by Grandma Dee and then Big Dee and me had hung them on the quilt frames on the front porch and quilted them. One was in the Lone star pattern. The other was Walk Around the Mountain. In both of them were scraps of dresses Grandma Dee had worn fifty and more years ago. Bits and pieces of Grandpa Jarrell's Paisley shirts. And one teeny faded blue piece, about the piece of a penny matchbox, that was from Great Grandpa Ezra's uniform that he wore in the Civil War.

"Mama," Wangero said sweet as a bird. "Can I have these old quilts?"

I heard something fall in the kitchen, and a minute later the kitchen door slammed.

"Why don't you take one or two of the others?" I asked. "These old things was just done by me and Big Dee from some tops your grandma pieced before she died."

"No," said Wangero. "I don't want those. They are stitched around the borders by machine."

"That'll make them last better," I said.

"That's not the point," said Wangero. "These are all pieces of dresses Grandma used to wear. She did all this stitching by hand. Imagine!" She held the quilts securely in her arms, stroking them.

"Some of the pieces, like those lavender ones, come from old clothes her mother handed down to her," I said, moving up to touch the quilts. Dee (Wangero) moved back just enough so that I couldn't reach the quilts. They already belonged to her.

"Imagine!" she breathed again, clutching them closely to her bosom.

"The truth is," I said, "I promised to give them quilts to Maggie, for when she marries John Thomas."

She gasped like a bee had stung her.

"Maggie can't appreciate these quilts!" she said. "She'd probably be backward enough to put them to everyday use."

"I reckon she would," I said. "God knows I been saving 'em for long enough with nobody using 'em. I hope she will!" I didn't want to bring up how I had offered Dee (Wangero) a quilt when she went away to college. Then she had told they were old~fashioned, out of style.

"But they're priceless!" she was saying now, furiously; for she has a temper. "Maggie would put them on the bed and in five years they'd be in rags. Less than that!"

"She can always make some more," I said. "Maggie knows how to quilt."

Dee (Wangero) looked at me with hatred. "You just will not understand. The point is these quilts, *these* quilts!"

"Well," I said, stumped. "What would *you* do with them?"

"Hang them," she said. As if that was the only thing you *could* do with quilts.

Maggie by now was standing in the door. I could almost hear the sound her feet made as they scraped over each other.

"She can have them, Mama," she said, like somebody used to never winning anything, or having anything reserved for her. "I can 'member Grandma Dee without the quilts."

I looked at her hard. She had filled her bottom lip with checkerberry snuff and gave her face a kind of dopey, hangdog look. It was Grandma Dee and Big Dee who taught her how to quilt herself. She stood there with her scarred hands hidden in the folds of her skirt. She looked at her sister with something like fear but she wasn't mad at her. This was Maggie's portion. This was the way she knew God to work.

When I looked at her like that something hit me in the top of my head and ran down to the soles of my feet. Just like when I'm in church and the spirit of God touches me and I get happy and shout. I did something I never done before: hugged Maggie to me, then dragged her on into the room, snatched the quilts out of Miss Wangero's hands and dumped them into Maggie's lap. Maggie just sat there on my bed with her mouth open.

"Take one or two of the others," I said to Dee.

But she turned without a word and went out to Hakim- a- barber.

"You just don't understand," she said, as Maggie and I came out to the car.

"What don't I understand?" I wanted to know.

"Your heritage," she said, And then she turned to Maggie, kissed her, and said, "You ought to try to make something of yourself, too, Maggie. It's really a new day for us. But from the way you and Mama still live you'd never know it."

She put on some sunglasses that hid everything above the tip of her nose and chin.

Maggie smiled; maybe at the sunglasses. But a real smile, not scared. After we watched the car dust settle I asked Maggie to bring me a dip of snuff. And then the two of us sat there just enjoying, until it was time to go in the house and go to bed.

Interpreter of Maladies

AT THE TEA STALL Mr. and Mrs. Das bickered about who should take Tina to the toilet. Eventually Mrs. Das relented when Mr. Das pointed out that he had given the girl her bath the night before. In the rearview mirror Mr. Kapasi watched as Mrs. Das emerged slowly from his bulky white Ambassador, dragging her shaved, largely bare legs across the back seat. She did not hold the little girl's hand as they walked to the rest room.

They were on their way to see the Sun Temple at Konarak. It was a dry, bright Saturday, the mid-July heat tempered by a steady ocean breeze, ideal weather for sightseeing. Ordinarily Mr. Kapasi would not have stopped so soon along the way, but less than five minutes after he'd picked up the family that morning in front of Hotel Sandy Villa, the little girl had complained. The first thing Mr. Kapasi had noticed when he saw Mr. and Mrs. Das, standing with their children under the portico of the hotel, was that they were very young, perhaps not even thirty. In addition to Tina they had two boys, Ronny and Bobby, who appeared very close in age and had teeth covered in a network of flashing silver wires. The family looked Indian but dressed as foreigners did, the children in stiff, brightly colored clothing and caps with translucent visors. Mr. Kapasi was accustomed to foreign tourists; he was assigned to them regularly because he could speak English. Yesterday he had driven an elderly couple from Scotland, both with spotted faces and fluffy white hair so thin it exposed their sunburnt scalps. In comparison, the tanned, youthful faces of Mr. and Mrs. Das were all the more striking. When he'd introduced himself, Mr. Kapasi had pressed his palms together in greeting, but Mr. Das squeezed hands like an American so that Mr. Kapasi felt it in his elbow. Mrs. Das, for her part, had flexed one side of her mouth, smiling dutifully at Mr. Kapasi, without displaying any interest in him.

As they waited at the tea stall, Ronny, who looked like the older of the two boys, clambered suddenly out of the back seat, intrigued by a goat tied to a stake in the ground.

"Don't touch it," Mr. Das said. He glanced up from his paperback tour book, which said "INDIA" in yellow letters and looked as if it had been published abroad. His voice, somehow tentative and a little shrill, sounded as though it had not yet settled into maturity.

"I want to give it a piece of gum," the boy called back as he trotted ahead.

Mr. Das stepped out of the car and stretched his legs by squatting briefly to the ground. A clean-shaven man, he looked exactly like a magnified version of Ronny. He had a sapphire blue visor, and was dressed in shorts, sneakers, and a T-shirt. The camera slung around his neck, with an impressive telephoto lens and numerous buttons and markings, was the only complicated thing he wore. He frowned, watching as Ronny

rushed toward the goat, but appeared to have no intention of intervening. “Bobby, make sure that your brother doesn’t do anything stupid.”

“I don’t feel like it,” Bobby said, not moving. He was sitting in the front seat beside Mr. Kapasi, studying a picture of the elephant god taped to the glove compartment.

“No need to worry,” Mr. Kapasi said. “They are quite tame.” Mr. Kapasi was forty-six years old, with receding hair that had gone completely silver, but his butterscotch complexion and his unlined brow, which he treated in spare moments to dabs of lotus-oil balm, made it easy to imagine what he must have looked like at an earlier age. He wore gray trousers and a matching jacket-style shirt, tapered at the waist, with short sleeves and a large pointed collar, made of a thin but durable synthetic material. He had specified both the cut and the fabric to his tailor—it was his preferred uniform for giving tours because it did not get crushed during his long hours behind the wheel. Through the windshield he watched as Ronny circled around the goat, touched it quickly on its side, then trotted back to the car.

“You left India as a child?” Mr. Kapasi asked when Mr. Das had settled once again into the passenger seat.

“Oh, Mina and I were both born in America,” Mr. Das announced with an air of sudden confidence. “Born and raised. Our parents live here now, in Assansol. They retired. We visit them

every couple years.” He turned to watch as the little girl ran toward the car, the wide purple bows of her sundress flopping on her narrow brown shoulders. She was holding to her chest a doll with yellow hair that looked as if it had been chopped, as a punitive measure, with a pair of dull scissors. “This is Tina’s first trip to India, isn’t it, Tina?”

“I don’t have to go to the bathroom anymore,” Tina announced.

“Where’s Mina?” Mr. Das asked.

Mr. Kapasi found it strange that Mr. Das should refer to his wife by her first name when speaking to the little girl. Tina pointed to where Mrs. Das was purchasing something from one of the shirtless men who worked at the tea stall. Mr. Kapasi heard one of the shirtless men sing a phrase from a popular Hindi love song as Mrs. Das walked back to the car, but she did not appear to understand the words of the song, for she did not express irritation, or embarrassment, or react in any other way to the man’s declarations.

He observed her. She wore a red-and-white-checkered skirt that stopped above her knees, slip-on shoes with a square wooden heel, and a close-fitting blouse styled like a man’s undershirt. The blouse was decorated at chest-level with a calico appliqué in the shape of a strawberry. She was a short woman, with small hands like paws, her frosty

pink fingernails painted to match her lips, and was slightly plump in her figure. Her hair, shorn only a little longer than her husband's, was parted far to one side. She was wearing large dark brown sunglasses with a pinkish tint to them, and carried a big straw bag, almost as big as her torso, shaped like a bowl, with a water bottle poking out of it. She walked slowly, carrying some puffed rice tossed with peanuts and chili peppers in a large packet made from newspapers. Mr. Kapasi turned to Mr. Das.

“Where in America do you live?”

“New Brunswick, New Jersey.”

“Next to New York?”

“Exactly. I teach middle school there.”

“What subject?”

“Science. In fact, every year I take my students on a trip to the Museum of Natural History in New York City. In a way we have a lot in common, you could say, you and I. How long have you been a tour guide, Mr. Kapasi?”

“Five years.”

Mrs. Das reached the car. “How long's the trip?” she asked, shutting the door.

“About two and a half hours,” Mr. Kapasi replied.

At this Mrs. Das gave an impatient sigh, as if she had been traveling her whole life without pause. She fanned herself with a folded Bombay film magazine written in English.

“I thought that the Sun Temple is only eighteen miles north of Puri,” Mr. Das said, tapping on the tour book.

“The roads to Konarak are poor. Actually it is a distance of fifty-two miles,” Mr. Kapasi explained.

Mr. Das nodded, readjusting the camera strap where it had begun to chafe the back of his neck.

Before starting the ignition, Mr. Kapasi reached back to make sure the cranklike locks on the inside of each of the back doors were secured. As soon as the car began to move the little girl began to play with the lock on her side, clicking it with some effort forward and backward, but Mrs. Das said nothing to stop her. She sat a bit slouched at one

end of the back seat, not offering her puffed rice to anyone. Ronny and Tina sat on either side of her, both snapping bright green gum.

“Look,” Bobby said as the car began to gather speed. He pointed with his finger to the tall trees that lined the road. “Look.”

“Monkeys!” Ronny shrieked. “Wow!”

They were seated in groups along the branches, with shining black faces, silver bodies, horizontal eyebrows, and crested heads. Their long gray tails dangled like a series of ropes among the leaves. A few scratched themselves with black leathery hands, or swung their feet, staring as the car passed.

“We call them the hanuman,” Mr. Kapasi said. “They are quite common in the area.”

As soon as he spoke, one of the monkeys leaped into the middle of the road, causing Mr. Kapasi to brake suddenly. Another bounced onto the hood of the car, then sprang away. Mr. Kapasi beeped his horn. The children began to get excited, sucking in their breath and covering their faces partly with their hands. They had never seen monkeys outside of a zoo, Mr. Das explained. He asked Mr. Kapasi to stop the car so that he could take a picture.

While Mr. Das adjusted his telephoto lens, Mrs. Das reached into her straw bag and pulled out a bottle of colorless nail polish, which she proceeded to stroke on the tip of her index finger.

The little girl stuck out a hand. “Mine too. Mommy, do mine too.”

“Leave me alone,” Mrs. Das said, blowing on her nail and turning her body slightly. “You’re making me mess up.”

The little girl occupied herself by buttoning and unbuttoning a pinafore on the doll’s plastic body.

“All set,” Mr. Das said, replacing the lens cap.

The car rattled considerably as it raced along the dusty road, causing them all to pop up from their seats every now and then, but Mrs. Das continued to polish her nails. Mr. Kapasi eased up on the accelerator, hoping to produce a smoother ride. When he reached for the gearshift the boy in front accommodated him by swinging his hairless knees out of the way. Mr. Kapasi noted that this boy was slightly paler than the other children. “Daddy, why is the driver sitting on the wrong side in this car, too?” the boy asked.

“They all do that here, dummy,” Ronny said.

“Don’t call your brother a dummy,” Mr. Das said. He turned to Mr. Kapasi. “In America, you know ... it confuses them.”

“Oh yes, I am well aware,” Mr. Kapasi said. As delicately as he could, he shifted gears again, accelerating as they approached a hill in the road. “I see it on *Dallas*, the steering wheels are on the left-hand side.”

“What’s *Dallas*? ” Tina asked, banging her now naked doll on the seat behind Mr. Kapasi.

“It went off the air,” Mr. Das explained. “It’s a television show.”

They were all like siblings, Mr. Kapasi thought as they passed a row of date trees. Mr. and Mrs. Das behaved like an older brother and sister, not parents. It seemed that they were in charge of the children only for the day; it was hard to believe they were regularly responsible for anything other than themselves. Mr. Das tapped on his lens cap, and his tour book, dragging his thumbnail occasionally across the pages so that they made a scraping sound. Mrs. Das continued to polish her nails. She had still not removed her sunglasses. Every now and then Tina renewed her plea that she wanted her nails done, too, and so at one point Mrs. Das flicked a drop of polish on the little girl’s finger before depositing the bottle back inside her straw bag.

“Isn’t this an air-conditioned car?” she asked, still blowing on her hand. The window on Tina’s side was broken and could not be rolled down.

“Quit complaining,” Mr. Das said. “It isn’t so hot.”

“I told you to get a car with air-conditioning,” Mrs. Das continued. “Why do you do this, Raj, just to save a few stupid rupees. What are you saving us, fifty cents?”

Their accents sounded just like the ones Mr. Kapasi heard on American television programs, though not like the ones on *Dallas*.

“Doesn’t it get tiresome, Mr. Kapasi, showing people the same thing every day?” Mr. Das asked, rolling down his own window all the way. “Hey, do you mind stopping the car. I just want to get a shot of this guy.”

Mr. Kapasi pulled over to the side of the road as Mr. Das took a picture of a barefoot man, his head wrapped in a dirty turban, seated on top of a cart of grain sacks pulled by a pair of bullocks. Both the man and the bullocks were emaciated. In the back seat Mrs.

Das gazed out another window, at the sky, where nearly transparent clouds passed quickly in front of one another.

“I look forward to it, actually,” Mr. Kapasi said as they continued on their way. “The Sun Temple is one of my favorite places. In that way it is a reward for me. I give tours on Fridays and Saturdays only. I have another job during the week.”

“Oh? Where?” Mr. Das asked.

“I work in a doctor’s office.”

“You’re a doctor?”

“I am not a doctor. I work with one. As an interpreter.”

“What does a doctor need an interpreter for?”

“He has a number of Gujarati patients. My father was Gujarati, but many people do not speak Gujarati in this area, including the doctor. And so the doctor asked me to work in his office, interpreting what the patients say.”

“Interesting. I’ve never heard of anything like that,” Mr. Das said.

Mr. Kapasi shrugged. “It is a job like any other.”

“But so romantic,” Mrs. Das said dreamily, breaking her extended silence. She lifted her pinkish brown sunglasses and arranged them on top of her head like a tiara. For the first time, her eyes met Mr. Kapasi’s in the rearview mirror: pale, a bit small, their gaze fixed but drowsy.

Mr. Das craned to look at her. “What’s so romantic about it?”

“I don’t know. Something.” She shrugged, knitting her brows together for an instant. “Would you like a piece of gum, Mr. Kapasi?” she asked brightly. She reached into her straw bag and handed him a small square wrapped in green-and-white-striped paper. As soon as Mr. Kapasi put the gum in his mouth a thick sweet liquid burst onto his tongue.

“Tell us more about your job, Mr. Kapasi,” Mrs. Das said.

“What would you like to know, madame?”

“I don’t know,” she shrugged, munching on some puffed rice and licking the mustard oil from the corners of her mouth. “Tell us a typical situation.” She settled back

in her seat, her head tilted in a patch of sun, and closed her eyes. “I want to picture what happens.”

“Very well. The other day a man came in with a pain in his throat.”

“Did he smoke cigarettes?”

“No. It was very curious. He complained that he felt as if there were long pieces of straw stuck in his throat. When I told the doctor he was able to prescribe the proper medication.”

“That’s so neat.”

“Yes,” Mr. Kapasi agreed after some hesitation.

“So these patients are totally dependent on you,” Mrs. Das said. She spoke slowly, as if she were thinking aloud. “In a way, more dependent on you than the doctor.”

“How do you mean? How could it be?”

“Well, for example, you could tell the doctor that the pain felt like a burning, not straw. The patient would never know what you had told the doctor, and the doctor wouldn’t know that you had told the wrong thing. It’s a big responsibility.”

“Yes, a big responsibility you have there, Mr. Kapasi,” Mr. Das agreed.

Mr. Kapasi had never thought of his job in such complimentary terms. To him it was a thankless occupation. He found nothing noble in interpreting people’s maladies, assiduously translating the symptoms of so many swollen bones, countless cramps of bellies and bowels, spots on people’s palms that changed color, shape, or size. The doctor, nearly half his age, had an affinity for bell-bottom trousers and made humorless jokes about the Congress party. Together they worked in a stale little infirmary where Mr. Kapasi’s smartly tailored clothes clung to him in the heat, in spite of the blackened blades of a ceiling fan churning over their heads.

The job was a sign of his failings. In his youth he’d been a devoted scholar of foreign languages, the owner of an impressive collection of dictionaries. He had dreamed of being an interpreter for diplomats and dignitaries, resolving conflicts between people and nations, settling disputes of which he alone could understand both sides. He was a self-educated man. In a series of notebooks, in the evenings before his parents settled his marriage, he had listed the common etymologies of words, and at one point in his life he was confident that he could converse, if given the opportunity, in English, French, Russian, Portuguese, and Italian, not to mention Hindi, Bengali, Orissi, and Gujarati. Now only a handful of European phrases remained in his memory, scattered words for

things like saucers and chairs. English was the only non-Indian language he spoke fluently anymore. Mr. Kapasi knew it was not a remarkable talent. Sometimes he feared that his children knew better English than he did, just from watching television. Still, it came in handy for the tours.

He had taken the job as an interpreter after his first son, at the age of seven, contracted typhoid—that was how he had first made the acquaintance of the doctor. At the time Mr. Kapasi had been teaching English in a grammar school, and he bartered his skills as an interpreter to pay the increasingly exorbitant medical bills. In the end the boy had died one evening in his mother's arms, his limbs burning with fever, but then there was the funeral to pay for, and the other children who were born soon enough, and the newer, bigger house, and the good schools and tutors, and the fine shoes and the television, and the countless other ways he tried to console his wife and to keep her from crying in her sleep, and so when the doctor offered to pay him twice as much as he earned at the grammar school, he accepted. Mr. Kapasi knew that his wife had little regard for his career as an interpreter. He knew it reminded her of the son she'd lost, and that she resented the other lives he helped, in his own small way, to save. If ever she referred to his position, she used the phrase "doctor's assistant," as if the process of interpretation were equal to taking someone's temperature, or changing a bedpan. She never asked him about the patients who came to the doctor's office, or said that his job was a big responsibility.

For this reason it flattered Mr. Kapasi that Mrs. Das was so intrigued by his job. Unlike his wife, she had reminded him of its intellectual challenges. She had also used the word "romantic." She did not behave in a romantic way toward her husband, and yet she had used the word to describe him. He wondered if Mr. and Mrs. Das were a bad match, just as he and his wife were. Perhaps they, too, had little in common apart from three children and a decade of their lives. The signs he recognized from his own marriage were there—the bickering, the indifference, the protracted silences. Her sudden interest in him, an interest she did not express in either her husband or her children, was mildly intoxicating. When Mr. Kapasi thought once again about how she had said "romantic," the feeling of intoxication grew.

He began to check his reflection in the rearview mirror as he drove, feeling grateful that he had chosen the gray suit that morning and not the brown one, which tended to sag a little in the knees. From time to time he glanced through the mirror at Mrs. Das. In addition to glancing at her face he glanced at the strawberry between her breasts, and the golden brown hollow in her throat. He decided to tell Mrs. Das about another patient, and another: the young woman who had complained of a sensation of raindrops in her spine, the gentleman whose birthmark had begun to sprout hairs. Mrs. Das listened attentively, stroking her hair with a small plastic brush that resembled an oval bed of nails, asking more questions, for yet another example. The children were quiet, intent on spotting more monkeys in the trees, and Mr. Das was absorbed by his tour book, so it seemed like a private conversation between Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Das. In this manner

the next half hour passed, and when they stopped for lunch at a roadside restaurant that sold fritters and omelette sandwiches, usually something Mr. Kapasi looked forward to on his tours so that he could sit in peace and enjoy some hot tea, he was disappointed. As the Das family settled together under a magenta umbrella fringed with white and orange tassels, and placed their orders with one of the waiters who marched about in tricornered caps, Mr. Kapasi reluctantly headed toward a neighboring table.

“Mr. Kapasi, wait. There’s room here,” Mrs. Das called out. She gathered Tina onto her lap, insisting that he accompany them. And so, together, they had bottled mango juice and sandwiches and plates of onions and potatoes deep-fried in graham-flour batter. After finishing two omelette sandwiches Mr. Das took more pictures of the group as they ate.

“How much longer?” he asked Mr. Kapasi as he paused to load a new roll of film in the camera.

“About half an hour more.”

By now the children had gotten up from the table to look at more monkeys perched in a nearby tree, so there was a considerable space between Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi. Mr. Das placed the camera to his face and squeezed one eye shut, his tongue exposed at one corner of his mouth. “This looks funny. Mina, you need to lean in closer to Mr. Kapasi.”

She did. He could smell a scent on her skin, like a mixture of whiskey and rosewater. He worried suddenly that she could smell his perspiration, which he knew had collected beneath the synthetic material of his shirt. He polished off his mango juice in one gulp and smoothed his silver hair with his hands. A bit of the juice dripped onto his chin. He wondered if Mrs. Das had noticed.

She had not. “What’s your address, Mr. Kapasi?” she inquired, fishing for something inside her straw bag.

“You would like my address?”

“So we can send you copies,” she said. “Of the pictures.” She handed him a scrap of paper which she had hastily ripped from a page of her film magazine. The blank portion was limited, for the narrow strip was crowded by lines of text and a tiny picture of a hero and heroine embracing under a eucalyptus tree.

The paper curled as Mr. Kapasi wrote his address in clear, careful letters. She would write to him, asking about his days interpreting at the doctor’s office, and he would respond eloquently, choosing only the most entertaining anecdotes, ones that would make her laugh out loud as she read them in her house in New Jersey. In time she

would reveal the disappointment of her marriage, and he his. In this way their friendship would grow, and flourish. He would possess a picture of the two of them, eating fried onions under a magenta umbrella, which he would keep, he decided, safely tucked between the pages of his Russian grammar. As his mind raced, Mr. Kapasi experienced a mild and pleasant shock. It was similar to a feeling he used to experience long ago when, after months of translating with the aid of a dictionary, he would finally read a passage from a French novel, or an Italian sonnet, and understand the words, one after another, unencumbered by his own efforts. In those moments Mr. Kapasi used to believe that all was right with the world, that all struggles were rewarded, that all of life's mistakes made sense in the end. The promise that he would hear from Mrs. Das now filled him with the same belief.

When he finished writing his address Mr. Kapasi handed her the paper, but as soon as he did so he worried that he had either misspelled his name, or accidentally reversed the numbers of his postal code. He dreaded the possibility of a lost letter, the photograph never reaching him, hovering somewhere in Orissa, close but ultimately unattainable. He thought of asking for the slip of paper again, just to make sure he had written his address accurately, but Mrs. Das had already dropped it into the jumble of her bag.

They reached Konarak at two-thirty. The temple, made of sandstone, was a massive pyramid-like structure in the shape of a chariot. It was dedicated to the great master of life, the sun, which struck three sides of the edifice as it made its journey each day across the sky. Twenty-four giant wheels were carved on the north and south sides of the plinth. The whole thing was drawn by a team of seven horses, speeding as if through the heavens. As they approached, Mr. Kapasi explained that the temple had been built between A.D. 1243 and 1255, with the efforts of twelve hundred artisans, by the great ruler of the Ganga dynasty, King Narasimhadeva the First, to commemorate his victory against the Muslim army.

“It says the temple occupies about a hundred and seventy acres of land,” Mr. Das said, reading from his book.

“It’s like a desert,” Ronny said, his eyes wandering across the sand that stretched on all sides beyond the temple.

“The Chandrabhaga River once flowed one mile north of here. It is dry now,” Mr. Kapasi said, turning off the engine.

They got out and walked toward the temple, posing first for pictures by the pair of lions that flanked the steps. Mr. Kapasi led them next to one of the wheels of the chariot, higher than any human being, nine feet in diameter.

“The wheels are supposed to symbolize the wheel of life,” Mr. Das read. “They depict

the cycle of creation, preservation, and achievement of realization.’ Cool.” He turned the page of his book. “Each wheel is divided into eight thick and thin spokes, dividing the day into eight equal parts. The rims are carved with designs of birds and animals, whereas the medallions in the spokes are carved with women in luxurious poses, largely erotic in nature. ”

What he referred to were the countless friezes of entwined naked bodies, making love in various positions, women clinging to the necks of men, their knees wrapped eternally around their lovers’ thighs. In addition to these were assorted scenes from daily life, of hunting and trading, of deer being killed with bows and arrows and marching warriors holding swords in their hands.

It was no longer possible to enter the temple, for it had filled with rubble years ago, but they admired the exterior, as did all the tourists Mr. Kapasi brought there, slowly strolling along each of its sides. Mr. Das trailed behind, taking pictures. The children ran ahead, pointing to figures of naked people, intrigued in particular by the Nagamithunas, the half-human, half-serpentine couples who were said, Mr. Kapasi told them, to live in the deepest waters of the sea. Mr. Kapasi was pleased that they liked the temple, pleased especially that it appealed to Mrs. Das. She stopped every three or four paces, staring silently at the carved lovers, and the processions of elephants, and the topless female musicians beating on two-sided drums.

Though Mr. Kapasi had been to the temple countless times, it occurred to him, as he, too, gazed at the topless women, that he had never seen his own wife fully naked. Even when they had made love she kept the panels of her blouse hooked together, the string of her petticoat knotted around her waist. He had never admired the backs of his wife’s legs the way he now admired those of Mrs. Das, walking as if for his benefit alone. He had, of course, seen plenty of bare limbs before, belonging to the American and European ladies who took his tours. But Mrs. Das was different. Unlike the other women, who had an interest only in the temple, and kept their noses buried in a guidebook, or their eyes behind the lens of a camera, Mrs. Das had taken an interest in him.

Mr. Kapasi was anxious to be alone with her, to continue their private conversation, yet he felt nervous to walk at her side. She was lost behind her sunglasses, ignoring her husband’s requests that she pose for another picture, walking past her children as if they were strangers. Worried that he might disturb her, Mr. Kapasi walked ahead, to admire, as he always did, the three life-sized bronze avatars of Surya, the sun god, each emerging from its own niche on the temple facade to greet the sun at dawn, noon, and evening. They wore elaborate headdresses, their languid, elongated eyes closed, their bare chests draped with carved chains and amulets. Hibiscus petals, offerings from previous visitors, were strewn at their gray-green feet. The last statue, on the northern wall of the temple, was Mr. Kapasi’s favorite. This Surya had a tired expression, weary after a hard day of work, sitting astride a horse with folded legs. Even his horse’s eyes

were drowsy. Around his body were smaller sculptures of women in pairs, their hips thrust to one side.

“Who’s that?” Mrs. Das asked. He was startled to see that she was standing beside him.

“He is the Astachala-Surya,” Mr. Kapasi said. “The setting sun.”

“So in a couple of hours the sun will set right here?” She slipped a foot out of one of her square-heeled shoes, rubbed her toes on the back of her other leg.

“That is correct.”

She raised her sunglasses for a moment, then put them back on again. “Neat.”

Mr. Kapasi was not certain exactly what the word suggested, but he had a feeling it was a favorable response. He hoped that Mrs. Das had understood Surya’s beauty, his power. Perhaps they would discuss it further in their letters. He would explain things to her, things about India, and she would explain things to him about America. In its own way this correspondence would fulfill his dream, of serving as an interpreter between nations. He looked at her straw bag, delighted that his address lay nestled among its contents. When he pictured her so many thousands of miles away he plummeted, so much so that he had an overwhelming urge to wrap his arms around her, to freeze with her, even for an instant, in an embrace witnessed by his favorite Surya. But Mrs. Das had already started walking.

“When do you return to America?” he asked, trying to sound placid.

“In ten days.”

He calculated: A week to settle in, a week to develop the pictures, a few days to compose her letter, two weeks to get to India by air. According to his schedule, allowing room for delays, he would hear from Mrs. Das in approximately six weeks’ time.

The family was silent as Mr. Kapasi drove them back, a little past four-thirty, to Hotel Sandy Villa. The children had bought miniature granite versions of the chariot’s wheels at a souvenir stand, and they turned them round in their hands. Mr. Das continued to read his book. Mrs. Das untangled Tina’s hair with her brush and divided it into two little ponytails.

Mr. Kapasi was beginning to dread the thought of dropping them off. He was not prepared to begin his six-week wait to hear from Mrs. Das. As he stole glances at her in the rearview mirror, wrapping elastic bands around Tina’s hair, he wondered how he might make the tour last a little longer. Ordinarily he sped back to Puri using a shortcut, eager to return home, scrub his feet and hands with sandalwood soap, and enjoy the

evening newspaper and a cup of tea that his wife would serve him in silence. The thought of that silence, something to which he'd long been resigned, now oppressed him. It was then that he suggested visiting the hills at Udayagiri and Khandagiri, where a number of monastic dwellings were hewn out of the ground, facing one another across a defile. It was some miles away, but well worth seeing, Mr. Kapasi told them.

"Oh yeah, there's something mentioned about it in this book," Mr. Das said. "Built by a Jain king or something."

"Shall we go then?" Mr. Kapasi asked. He paused at a turn in the road. "It's to the left."

Mr. Das turned to look at Mrs. Das. Both of them shrugged. "Left, left," the children chanted.

Mr. Kapasi turned the wheel, almost delirious with relief. He did not know what he would do or say to Mrs. Das once they arrived at the hills. Perhaps he would tell her what a pleasing smile she had. Perhaps he would compliment her strawberry shirt, which he found irresistibly becoming. Perhaps, when Mr. Das was busy taking a picture, he would take her hand.

He did not have to worry. When they got to the hills, divided by a steep path thick with trees, Mrs. Das refused to get out of the car. All along the path, dozens of monkeys were seated on stones, as well as on the branches of the trees. Their hind legs were stretched out in front and raised to shoulder level, their arms resting on their knees.

"My legs are tired," she said, sinking low in her seat. "I'll stay here."

"Why did you have to wear those stupid shoes?" Mr. Das said. "You won't be in the pictures."

"Pretend I'm there."

"But we could use one of these pictures for our Christmas card this year. We didn't get one of all five of us at the Sun Temple. Mr. Kapasi could take it."

"I'm not coming. Anyway, those monkeys give me the creeps."

"But they're harmless," Mr. Das said. He turned to Mr. Kapasi. "Aren't they?"

"They are more hungry than dangerous," Mr. Kapasi said. "Do not provoke them with food, and they will not bother you."

Mr. Das headed up the defile with the children, the boys at his side, the little girl on his shoulders. Mr. Kapasi watched as they crossed paths with a Japanese man and woman, the only other tourists there, who paused for a final photograph, then stepped

into a nearby car and drove away. As the car disappeared out of view some of the monkeys called out, emitting soft whooping sounds, and then walked on their flat black hands and feet up the path. At one point a group of them formed a little ring around Mr. Das and the children. Tina screamed in delight. Ronny ran in circles around his father. Bobby bent down and picked up a fat stick on the ground. When he extended it, one of the monkeys approached him and snatched it, then briefly beat the ground.

“I’ll join them,” Mr. Kapasi said, unlocking the door on his side. “There is much to explain about the caves.”

“No. Stay a minute,” Mrs. Das said. She got out of the back seat and slipped in beside Mr. Kapasi. “Raj has his dumb book anyway.” Together, through the windshield, Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi watched as Bobby and the monkey passed the stick back and forth between them.

“A brave little boy,” Mr. Kapasi commented.

“It’s not so surprising,” Mrs. Das said.

“No?”

“He’s not his.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Raj’s. He’s not Raj’s son.”

Mr. Kapasi felt a prickle on his skin. He reached into his shirt pocket for the small tin of lotus-oil balm he carried with him at all times, and applied it to three spots on his forehead. He knew that Mrs. Das was watching him, but he did not turn to face her. Instead he watched as the figures of Mr. Das and the children grew smaller, climbing up the steep path, pausing every now and then for a picture, surrounded by a growing number of monkeys.

“Are you surprised?” The way she put it made him choose his words with care.

“It’s not the type of thing one assumes,” Mr. Kapasi replied slowly. He put the tin of lotus-oil balm back in his pocket.

“No, of course not. And no one knows, of course. No one at all. I’ve kept it a secret for eight whole years.” She looked at Mr. Kapasi, tilting her chin as if to gain a fresh perspective. “But now I’ve told you.”

Mr. Kapasi nodded. He felt suddenly parched, and his forehead was warm and slightly

numb from the balm. He considered asking Mrs. Das for a sip of water, then decided against it.

“We met when we were very young,” she said. She reached into her straw bag in search of something, then pulled out a packet of puffed rice. “Want some?”

“No, thank you.”

She put a fistful in her mouth, sank into the seat a little, and looked away from Mr. Kapasi, out the window on her side of the car. “We married when we were still in college. We were in high school when he proposed. We went to the same college, of course. Back then we couldn’t stand the thought of being separated, not for a day, not for a minute. Our parents were best friends who lived in the same town. My entire life I saw him every weekend, either at our house or theirs. We were sent upstairs to play together while our parents joked about our marriage. Imagine! They never caught us at anything, though in a way I think it was all more or less a setup. The things we did those Friday and Saturday nights, while our parents sat downstairs drinking tea ... I could tell you stories, Mr. Kapasi.”

As a result of spending all her time in college with Raj, she continued, she did not make many close friends. There was no one to confide in about him at the end of a difficult day, or to share a passing thought or a worry. Her parents now lived on the other side of the world, but she had never been very close to them, anyway. After marrying so young she was overwhelmed by it all, having a child so quickly, and nursing, and warming up bottles of milk and testing their temperature against her wrist while Raj was at work, dressed in sweaters and corduroy pants, teaching his students about rocks and dinosaurs. Raj never looked cross or harried, or plump as she had become after the first baby.

Always tired, she declined invitations from her one or two college girlfriends, to have lunch or shop in Manhattan. Eventually the friends stopped calling her, so that she was left at home all day with the baby, surrounded by toys that made her trip when she walked or wince when she sat, always cross and tired. Only occasionally did they go out after Ronny was born, and even more rarely did they entertain. Raj didn’t mind; he looked forward to coming home from teaching and watching television and bouncing Ronny on his knee. She had been outraged when Raj told her that a Punjabi friend, someone whom she had once met but did not remember, would be staying with them for a week for some job interviews in the New Brunswick area.

Bobby was conceived in the afternoon, on a sofa littered with rubber teething toys, after the friend learned that a London pharmaceutical company had hired him, while Ronny cried to be freed from his playpen. She made no protest when the friend touched the small of her back as she was about to make a pot of coffee, then pulled her against his crisp navy suit. He made love to her swiftly, in silence, with an expertise she had

never known, without the meaningful expressions and smiles Raj always insisted on afterward. The next day Raj drove the friend to JFK. He was married now, to a Punjabi girl, and they lived in London still, and every year they exchanged Christmas cards with Raj and Mina, each couple tucking photos of their families into the envelopes. He did not know that he was Bobby's father. He never would.

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Das, but why have you told me this information?" Mr. Kapasi asked when she had finally finished speaking, and had turned to face him once again.

"For God's sake, stop calling me Mrs. Das. I'm twenty-eight. You probably have children my age."

"Not quite." It disturbed Mr. Kapasi to learn that she thought of him as a parent. The feeling he had had toward her, that had made him check his reflection in the rearview mirror as they drove, evaporated a little.

"I told you because of your talents." She put the packet of puffed rice back into her bag without folding over the top.

"I don't understand," Mr. Kapasi said.

"Don't you see? For eight years I haven't been able to express this to anybody, not to friends, certainly not to Raj. He doesn't even suspect it. He thinks I'm still in love with him. Well, don't you have anything to say?"

"About what?"

"About what I've just told you. About my secret, and about how terrible it makes me feel. I feel terrible looking at my children, and at Raj, always terrible. I have terrible urges, Mr. Kapasi, to throw things away. One day I had the urge to throw everything I own out the window, the television, the children, everything. Don't you think it's unhealthy?"

He was silent.

"Mr. Kapasi, don't you have anything to say? I thought that was your job."

"My job is to give tours, Mrs. Das."

"Not that. Your other job. As an interpreter."

"But we do not face a language barrier. What need is there for an interpreter?"

"That's not what I mean. I would never have told you otherwise. Don't you realize what it means for me to tell you?"

“What does it mean?”

“It means that I’m tired of feeling so terrible all the time. Eight years, Mr. Kapasi, I’ve been in pain eight years. I was hoping you could help me feel better, say the right thing. Suggest some kind of remedy.”

He looked at her, in her red plaid skirt and strawberry T-shirt, a woman not yet thirty, who loved neither her husband nor her children, who had already fallen out of love with life. Her confession depressed him, depressed him all the more when he thought of Mr. Das at the top of the path, Tina clinging to his shoulders, taking pictures of ancient monastic cells cut into the hills to show his students in America, unsuspecting and unaware that one of his sons was not his own. Mr. Kapasi felt insulted that Mrs. Das should ask him to interpret her common, trivial little secret. She did not resemble the patients in the doctor’s office, those who came glassy-eyed and desperate, unable to sleep or breathe or urinate with ease, unable, above all, to give words to their pains. Still, Mr. Kapasi believed it was his duty to assist Mrs. Das. Perhaps he ought to tell her to confess the truth to Mr. Das. He would explain that honesty was the best policy. Honesty, surely, would help her feel better, as she’d put it. Perhaps he would offer to preside over the discussion, as a mediator. He decided to begin with the most obvious question, to get to the heart of the matter, and so he asked, “Is it really pain you feel, Mrs. Das, or is it guilt?”

She turned to him and glared, mustard oil thick on her frosty pink lips. She opened her mouth to say something, but as she glared at Mr. Kapasi some certain knowledge seemed to pass before her eyes, and she stopped. It crushed him; he knew at that moment that he was not even important enough to be properly insulted. She opened the car door and began walking up the path, wobbling a little on her square wooden heels, reaching into her straw bag to eat handfuls of puffed rice. It fell through her fingers, leaving a zigzagging trail, causing a monkey to leap down from a tree and devour the little white grains. In search of more, the monkey began to follow Mrs. Das. Others joined him, so that she was soon being followed by about half a dozen of them, their velvety tails dragging behind.

Mr. Kapasi stepped out of the car. He wanted to holler, to alert her in some way, but he worried that if she knew they were behind her, she would grow nervous. Perhaps she would lose her balance. Perhaps they would pull at her bag or her hair. He began to jog up the path, taking a fallen branch in his hand to scare away the monkeys. Mrs. Das continued walking, oblivious, trailing grains of puffed rice. Near the top of the incline, before a group of cells fronted by a row of squat stone pillars, Mr. Das was kneeling on the ground, focusing the lens of his camera. The children stood under the arcade, now hiding, now emerging from view.

“Wait for me,” Mrs. Das called out. “I’m coming.”

Tina jumped up and down. “Here comes Mommy!”

“Great,” Mr. Das said without looking up. “Just in time. We’ll get Mr. Kapasi to take a picture of the five of us.”

Mr. Kapasi quickened his pace, waving his branch so that the monkeys scampered away, distracted, in another direction.

“Where’s Bobby?” Mrs. Das asked when she stopped.

Mr. Das looked up from the camera. “I don’t know. Ronny, where’s Bobby?”

Ronny shrugged. “I thought he was right here.”

“Where is he?” Mrs. Das repeated sharply. “What’s wrong with all of you?”

They began calling his name, wandering up and down the path a bit. Because they were calling, they did not initially hear the boy’s screams. When they found him, a little farther down the path under a tree, he was surrounded by a group of monkeys, over a dozen of them, pulling at his T-shirt with their long black fingers. The puffed rice Mrs. Das had spilled was scattered at his feet, raked over by the monkeys’ hands. The boy was silent, his body frozen, swift tears running down his startled face. His bare legs were dusty and red with welts from where one of the monkeys struck him repeatedly with the stick he had given to it earlier.

“Daddy, the monkey’s hurting Bobby,” Tina said.

Mr. Das wiped his palms on the front of his shorts. In his nervousness he accidentally pressed the shutter on his camera; the whirring noise of the advancing film excited the monkeys, and the one with the stick began to beat Bobby more intently. “What are we supposed to do? What if they start attacking?”

“Mr. Kapasi,” Mrs. Das shrieked, noticing him standing to one side. “Do something, for God’s sake, do something!”

Mr. Kapasi took his branch and shooed them away, hissing at the ones that remained, stomping his feet to scare them. The animals retreated slowly, with a measured gait, obedient but unintimidated. Mr. Kapasi gathered Bobby in his arms and brought him back to where his parents and siblings were standing. As he carried him he was tempted to whisper a secret into the boy’s ear. But Bobby was stunned, and shivering with fright, his legs bleeding slightly where the stick had broken the skin. When Mr. Kapasi delivered him to his parents, Mr. Das brushed some dirt off the boy’s T-shirt and put the visor on him the right way. Mrs. Das reached into her straw bag to find a

bandage which she taped over the cut on his knee. Ronny offered his brother a fresh piece of gum. "He's fine. Just a little scared, right, Bobby?" Mr. Das said, patting the top of his head.

"God, let's get out of here," Mrs. Das said. She folded her arms across the strawberry on her chest. "This place gives me the creeps."

"Yeah. Back to the hotel, definitely," Mr. Das agreed.

"Poor Bobby, " Mrs. Das said. "Come here a second. Let Mommy fix your hair." Again she reached into her straw bag, this time for her hairbrush, and began to run it around the edges of the translucent visor. When she whipped out the hairbrush, the slip of paper with Mr. Kapasi's address on it fluttered away in the wind. No one but Mr. Kapasi noticed. He watched as it rose, carried higher and higher by the breeze, into the trees where the monkeys now sat, solemnly observing the scene below. Mr. Kapasi observed it too, knowing that this was the picture of the Das family he would preserve forever in his mind.

THE THING AROUND YOUR NECK

You thought everybody in America had a car and a gun; your uncles and aunts and cousins thought so, too. Right after you won the American visa lottery, they told you: In a month, you will have a big car. Soon, a big house. But don't buy a gun like those Americans.

They trooped into the room in Lagos where you lived with your father and mother and three siblings, leaning against the unpainted walls because there weren't enough chairs to go round, to say goodbye in loud voices and tell you with lowered voices what they wanted you to send them. In comparison to the big car and house (and possibly gun), the things they wanted were minor—handbags and shoes and perfumes and clothes. You said okay, no problem.

Your uncle in America, who had put in the names of all your family members for the American visa lottery, said you could live with him until you got on your feet. He picked you up at the airport and bought you a big hot dog with yellow mustard that nauseated you. Introduction to America, he said with a laugh. He lived in a small white town in Maine, in a thirty-year-old house by a lake. He told you that the company he worked for had offered him a few thousand more than the average salary plus stock options because they were desperately trying to look diverse. They included a photo of him in every brochure, even those that had nothing to do with his unit. He laughed and said the job was good, was worth living in an all-white town even though his wife had to drive an hour to find a hair salon that did black hair. The trick was to understand America, to know that America was give-and-take. You gave up a lot but you gained a lot, too.

He showed you how to apply for a cashier job in the gas station on Main Street and he enrolled you in a community college, where the girls had thick thighs and wore bright-red nail polish, and self-tanner that made them look orange. They asked where you learned to speak English and if you had real houses back in Africa and if you'd seen a car before you came to America. They gawped at your hair. Does it stand up or fall down when you take out the braids? They wanted to know. All of it stands up? How? Why? Do you use a comb? You smiled tightly when they asked those questions. Your uncle told you to expect it; a mixture of ignorance and arrogance, he called it. Then he told you how the neighbors said, a few months after he moved into his house, that the squirrels had started to disappear. They had heard that Africans ate all kinds of wild animals.

You laughed with your uncle and you felt at home in his house; his wife called you *nwanne*, sister, and his two school-age children called you Aunty. They spoke Igbo and ate *garri* for lunch and it was like home. Until your uncle came into the cramped basement where you slept with old boxes and cartons and pulled you forcefully to him, squeezing your buttocks, moaning. He wasn't really your uncle; he was actually a brother of your father's sister's husband, not related by blood. After you pushed him away, he sat on your bed—it was his house, after all—and smiled and said you were no longer a child at twenty-two. If you let him, he would do many things for you. Smart women did it all the time. How did you think

those women back home in Lagos with well-paying jobs made it? Even women in New York City?

You locked yourself in the bathroom until he went back upstairs, and the next morning, you left, walking the long windy road, smelling the baby fish in the lake. You saw him drive past—he had always dropped you off at Main Street—and he didn't honk. You wondered what he would tell his wife, why you had left. And you remembered what he said, that America was give-and-take.

You ended up in Connecticut, in another little town, because it was the last stop of the Greyhound bus you got on. You walked into the restaurant with the bright, clean awning and said you would work for two dollars less than the other waitresses. The manager, Juan, had inky-black hair and smiled to show a gold tooth. He said he had never had a Nigerian employee but all immigrants worked hard. He knew, he'd been there. He'd pay you a dollar less, but under the table; he didn't like all the taxes they were making him pay.

You could not afford to go to school, because now you paid rent for the tiny room with the stained carpet. Besides, the small Connecticut town didn't have a community college and credits at the state university cost too much. So you went to the public library, you looked up course syllabi on school Web sites and read some of the books. Sometimes you sat on the lumpy mattress of your twin bed and thought about home—your aunts who hawked dried fish and plantains, cajoling customers to buy and then shouting insults when they didn't; your uncles who drank local gin and crammed their families and lives into single rooms; your friends who had come out to say goodbye before you left, to rejoice because you won the American visa lottery, to confess their envy; your parents who often held hands as they walked to church on Sunday mornings, the neighbors from the next room laughing and teasing them; your father who brought back his boss's old newspapers from work and made your brothers read them; your mother whose salary was barely enough to pay your brothers' school fees at the secondary school where teachers gave an A when someone slipped them a brown envelope.

You had never needed to pay for an A, never slipped a brown envelope to a teacher in secondary school. Still, you chose long brown envelopes to send half your month's earnings to your parents at the address of the parastatal where your mother was a cleaner; you always used the dollar notes that Juan gave you because those were crisp, unlike the tips. Every month. You wrapped the money carefully in white paper but you didn't write a letter. There was nothing to write about.

In later weeks, though, you wanted to write because you had stories to tell. You wanted to write about the surprising openness of people in America, how eagerly they told you about their mother fighting cancer, about their sister-in-law's preemie, the kinds of things that one should hide or should reveal only to the family members who wished them well. You wanted to write about the way people left so much food on their plates and crumpled a few dollar bills down, as though it was an offering, expiation for the wasted food. You wanted to write about the child who started to cry and pull at her blond hair and push the menus off the

table and instead of the parents making her shut up, they pleaded with her, a child of perhaps five years old, and then they all got up and left. You wanted to write about the rich people who wore shabby clothes and tattered sneakers, who looked like the night watchmen in front of the large compounds in Lagos. You wanted to write that rich Americans were thin and poor Americans were fat and that many did not have a big house and car; you still were not sure about the guns, though, because they might have them inside their pockets.

It wasn't just to your parents you wanted to write, it was also to your friends, and cousins and aunts and uncles. But you could never afford enough perfumes and clothes and handbags and shoes to go around and still pay your rent on what you earned at the waitressing job, so you wrote nobody.

Nobody knew where you were, because you told no one. Sometimes you felt invisible and tried to walk through your room wall into the hallway, and when you bumped into the wall, it left bruises on your arms. Once, Juan asked if you had a man that hit you because he would take care of him and you laughed a mysterious laugh.

At night, something would wrap itself around your neck, something that very nearly choked you before you fell asleep.

Many people at the restaurant asked when you had come from Jamaica, because they thought that every black person with a foreign accent was Jamaican. Or some who guessed that you were African told you that they loved elephants and wanted to go on a safari.

So when he asked you, in the dimness of the restaurant after you recited the daily specials, what African country you were from, you said Nigeria and expected him to say that he had donated money to fight AIDS in Botswana. But he asked if you were Yoruba or Igbo, because you didn't have a Fulani face. You were surprised—you thought he must be a professor of anthropology at the state university, a little young in his late twenties or so, but who was to say? Igbo, you said. He asked your name and said Akunna was pretty. He did not ask what it meant, fortunately, because you were sick of how people said, "Father's Wealth"? You mean, like, your father will actually sell you to a husband?"

He told you he had been to Ghana and Uganda and Tanzania, loved the poetry of Okotp'Bitek and the novels of Amos Tutuola and had read a lot about sub-Saharan African countries, their histories, their complexities. You wanted to feel disdain, to show it as you brought his order, because white people who liked Africa too much and those who liked Africa too little were the same—condescending. But he didn't shake his head in the superior way that Professor Cobbledick back in the Maine community college did during a class discussion on decolonization in Africa. He didn't have that expression of Professor Cobbledick's, that expression of a person who thought himself better than the people he knew about. He came in the next day and sat at the same table and when you asked if the chicken was okay, he asked if you had grown up in Lagos. He came in the third day and began talking before he ordered, about how he had visited Bombay and now wanted to visit Lagos, to see

how real people lived, like in the shantytowns, because he never did any of the silly tourist stuff when he was abroad. He talked and talked and you had to tell him it was against restaurant policy. He brushed your hand when you set the glass of water down. The fourth day, when you saw him arrive, you told Juan you didn't want that table anymore. After your shift that night, he was waiting outside, earphones stuck in his ears, asking you to go out with him because your name rhymed with *hakunamatata* and *The Lion King* was the only maudlin movie he'd ever liked. You didn't know what *The Lion King* was. You looked at him in the bright light and noticed that his eyes were the color of extra-virgin olive oil, a greenish gold. Extra-virgin olive oil was the only thing you loved, truly loved, in America.

He was a senior at the state university. He told you how old he was and you asked why he had not graduated yet. This was America, after all, it was not like back home, where universities closed so often that people added three years to their normal course of study and lecturers went on strike after strike and still were not paid. He said he had taken a couple of years off to discover himself and travel, mostly to Africa and Asia. You asked him where he ended up finding himself and he laughed. You did not laugh. You did not know that people could simply choose not to go to school, that people could dictate to life. You were used to accepting what life gave, writing down what life dictated.

You said no the following four days to going out with him, because you were uncomfortable with the way he looked at your face, that intense, consuming way he looked at your face that made you say goodbye to him but also made you reluctant to walk away. And then, the fifth night, you panicked when he was not standing at the door after your shift. You prayed for the first time in a long time and when he came up behind you and said hey, you said yes, you would go out with him, even before he asked. You were scared he would not ask again.

The next day, he took you to dinner at Chang's and your fortune cookie had two strips of paper. Both of them were blank.

You knew you had become comfortable when you told him that you watched *Jeopardy* on the restaurant TV and that you rooted for the following, in this order: women of color, black men, and white women, before, finally, white men—which meant you never rooted for white men. He laughed and told you he was used to not being rooted for, his mother taught women's studies.

And you knew you had become close when you told him that your father was really not a schoolteacher in Lagos, that he was a junior driver for a construction company. And you told him about that day in Lagos traffic in the rickety Peugeot 504 your father drove; it was raining and your seat was wet because of the rust-eaten hole in the roof. The traffic was heavy, the traffic was always heavy in Lagos, and when it rained it was chaos. The roads became muddy ponds and cars got stuck and some of your cousins went out and made some money pushing the cars out. The rain, the swampiness, you thought, made your father step on the brakes too late that day. You heard the bump before you felt it. The car your father

rammed into was wide, foreign, and dark green, with golden headlights like the eyes of a leopard. Your father started to cry and beg even before he got out of the car and laid himself flat on the road, causing much blowing of horns. Sorry sir, sorry sir, he chanted. If you sell me and my family, you cannot buy even one tire on your car. Sorry sir.

The Big Man seated at the back did not come out, but his driver did, examining the damage, looking at your father's sprawled form from the corner of his eye as though the pleading was like pornography, a performance he was ashamed to admit he enjoyed. At last he let your father go. Waved him away. The other cars' horns blew and drivers cursed. When your father came back into the car, you refused to look at him because he was just like the pigs that wallowed in the marshes around the market. Your father looked like *nsi*. Shit.

After you told him this, he pursed his lips and held your hand and said he understood how you felt. You shook your hand free, suddenly annoyed, because he thought the world was, or ought to be, full of people like him. You told him there was nothing to understand, it was just the way it was.

He found the African store in the Hartford yellow pages and drove you there. Because of the way he walked around with familiarity, tilting the bottle of palm wine to see how much sediment it had, the Ghanaian store owner asked him if he was African, like the white Kenyans or South Africans, and he said yes, but he'd been in America for a long time. He looked pleased that the store owner had believed him. You cooked that evening with the things you had bought, and after he ate *garri* and *onugbu* soup, he threw up in your sink. You didn't mind, though, because now you would be able to cook *onugbu* soup with meat.

He didn't eat meat because he thought it was wrong the way they killed animals; he said they released fear toxins into the animals and the fear toxins made people paranoid. Back home, the meat pieces you ate, when there was meat, were the size of half your finger. But you did not tell him that. You did not tell him either that the *dawadawa* cubes your mother cooked everything with, because curry and thyme were too expensive, had MSG, *were* MSG. He said MSG caused cancer, it was the reason he liked Chang's; Chang didn't cook with MSG.

Once, at Chang's, he told the waiter he had recently visited Shanghai, that he spoke some Mandarin. The waiter warmed up and told him what soup was best and then asked him, "You have girlfriend in Shanghai now?" And he smiled and said nothing.

You lost your appetite, the region deep in your chest felt clogged. That night, you didn't moan when he was inside you, you bit your lips and pretended that you didn't come because you knew he would worry. Later you told him why you were upset, that even though you went to Chang's so often together, even though you had kissed just before the menus came, the Chinese man had assumed you could not possibly be his girlfriend, and he had smiled and said nothing. Before he apologized, he gazed at you blankly and you knew that he did not understand.

He bought you presents and when you objected about the cost, he said his grandfather in Boston had been wealthy but hastily added that the old man had given a lot away and so the trust fund he had wasn't huge. His presents mystified you. A fist-size glass ball that you shook to watch a tiny, shapely doll in pink spin around. A shiny rock whose surface took on the color of whatever touched it. An expensive scarf hand-painted in Mexico. Finally you told him, your voice stretched in irony, that in your life presents were always useful. The rock, for instance, would work if you could grind things with it. He laughed long and hard but you did not laugh. You realized that in his life, he could buy presents that were just presents and nothing else, nothing useful. When he started to buy you shoes and clothes and books, you asked him not to, you didn't want any presents at all. He bought them anyway and you kept them for your cousins and uncles and aunts, for when you would one day be able to visit home, even though you did not know how you could ever afford a ticket *and* your rent. He said he really wanted to see Nigeria and he could pay for you both to go. You did not want him to pay for you to visit home. You did not want him to go to Nigeria, to add it to the list of countries where he went to gawk at the lives of poor people who could never gawk back at *his* life. You told him this on a sunny day, when he took you to see Long Island Sound, and the two of you argued, your voices raised as you walked along the calm water. He said you were wrong to call him self-righteous. You said he was wrong to call only the poor Indians in Bombay the real Indians. Did it mean he wasn't a real American, since he was not like the poor fat people you and he had seen in Hartford? He hurried ahead of you, his upper body bare and pale, his flip-flops raising bits of sand, but then he came back and held out his hand for yours. You made up and made love and ran your hands through each other's hair, his soft and yellow like the swinging tassels of growing corn, yours dark and bouncy like the filling of a pillow. He had got too much sun and his skin turned the color of a ripe watermelon and you kissed his back before you rubbed lotion on it.

The thing that wrapped itself around your neck, that nearly choked you before you fell asleep, started to loosen, to let go.

You knew by people's reactions that you two were abnormal—the way the nasty ones were too nasty and the nice ones too nice. The old white men and women who muttered and glared at him, the black men who shook their heads at you, the black women whose pitying eyes bemoaned your lack of self-esteem, your self-loathing. Or the black women who smiled swift solidarity smiles; the black men who tried too hard to forgive you, saying a too-obvious hi to him; the white men and women who said “What a good-looking pair” too brightly, too loudly, as though to prove their own open-mindedness to themselves.

But his parents were different; they almost made you think it was all normal. His mother told you that he had never brought a girl to meet them, except for his high school prom date, and he grinned stiffly and held your hand. The tablecloth shielded your clasped hands. He squeezed your hand and you squeezed back and wondered why he was so stiff, why his extra-virgin-olive-oil-colored eyes darkened as he spoke to his parents. His mother was delighted when she asked if you'd read Nawal el Saadawi and you said yes. His father asked

how similar Indian food was to Nigerian food and teased you about paying when the check came. You looked at them and felt grateful that they did not examine you like an exotic trophy, an ivory tusk.

Afterwards, he told you about his issues with his parents, how they portioned out love like a birthday cake, how they would give him a bigger slice if only he'd agree to go to law school. You wanted to sympathize. But instead you were angry.

You were angrier when he told you he had refused to go up to Canada with them for a week or two, to their summer cottage in the Quebec countryside. They had even asked him to bring you. He showed you pictures of the cottage and you wondered why it was called a cottage because the buildings that big around your neighborhood back home were banks and churches. You dropped a glass and it shattered on the hardwood of his apartment floor and he asked what was wrong and you said nothing, although you thought a lot was wrong. Later, in the shower, you started to cry. You watched the water dilute your tears and you didn't know why you were crying.

You wrote home finally. A short letter to your parents, slipped in between the crisp dollar bills, and you included your address. You got a reply only days later, by courier. Your mother wrote the letter herself; you knew from the spidery penmanship, from the misspelled words.

Your father was dead; he had slumped over the steering wheel of his company car. Five months now, she wrote. They had used some of the money you sent to give him a good funeral: They killed a goat for the guests and buried him in a good coffin. You curled up in bed, pressed your knees to your chest, and tried to remember what you had been doing when your father died, what you had been doing for all the months when he was already dead. Perhaps your father died on the day your whole body had been covered in goosebumps, hard as uncooked rice, that you could not explain, Juan teasing you about taking over from the chef so that the heat in the kitchen would warm you up. Perhaps your father died on one of the days you took a drive to Mystic or watched a play in Manchester or had dinner at Chang's.

He held you while you cried, smoothed your hair, and offered to buy your ticket, to go with you to see your family. You said no, you needed to go alone. He asked if you would come back and you reminded him that you had a green card and you would lose it if you did not come back in one year. He said you knew what he meant, would you come back, come back?

You turned away and said nothing, and when he drove you to the airport, you hugged him tight for a long, long moment, and then you let go.

Action and Reaction

By Chitra Fernando

In my family every one regarded my father's elder sister as a very good and generous woman. I thought so too: in those days I had great respect for the opinion of my elders. Father said, "Now try to be like Loku Naenda, Mahinda. She's an example to us all," Mother said "Loku Naenda has more *Shradda* than all of us." Loku Naenda never killed anything not even a mosquito. And once, I saw her saving some ants that has fallen into a basin of water; even the most insignificant creature benefited from Loku Naenda's attentions. Loku Naenda never stole; she had a large house and garden a lot of jewellery and a small coconut property in Matara. She had everything she wanted. She never lied. She often said she never did and of course we all believed her. Loku Naenda's conduct was always irreproachable. She was a broad woman, a bit on the shrot side and very dark; her nose and lips were thick, her skin coarse. She had a large mole on the tip of her nose and another with a hair in it on her chin. At the back of her head was a very small *konde*. Unless they were her relations Loku Naenda kept all men at a safe distance; and they kept Loku Naenda at an equally safe distance. She had never married. As for drinking or smoking – even the thought of her doing either of these things made me want to laugh.

Once Punchi Naenda caught Siripala and me sharing a cigarette in the back garden and the first thing she said was "How disappointed Loku Naenda will be, Mahinda. You're only fifteen, but you're already doing all these bad things!" Then she told father about it. Father said, "I will not have smoking. I will not have drinking in this house." And then, he told Loku Naenda about it. Loku Naenda looked at me in silence. She said, "Mahinda, there's no need for me to tell you anything. Why should I say everything? Your own *Karma* will deal with you. Smoke as much as you like. When you get lung cancer, you'll know all about it. This gratification of the senses brings only disease. death and *sansara*. Don't say I didn't warn you!"

Punchi Naenda, who was listening, nodded vigorously and said, "I hope you've taken all this in, Mahinda. No need to look the other way! We're advising you for your own good."

I often wished they were less concerned with my own good but I could say nothing. So I continued to look the other way.

Punchi Naenda was also unmarried and so had no household of her own. But though she was always singing Loku Naenda praises, she had a strange preference for living in our house. At the time of the cigarette-smoking incident, she was always talking about yet another instance of Loku Naenda's generosity and compassion. Loku Naenda's good deeds were uncountable so every one was quite certain that at the very least she could be sure of a place in the Tusitha heaven. But this instance of Loku Naenda's generosity was not an almsgiving; it was not a special *puja*: it was not donating a loudspeaker to the temple for the relay of the

daily *bana* preaching so that all the Payagala townfold could not but benefit from the loudness of Loku Naenda's piety. This was a meritorious deed which was much better. Loku Naenda was going to adopt a little girl from Matarara! Not, of course, as a daughter. No one expected even Loku Naenda to go to such lengths. It was unthinkable that a toddy tapper's child could be Loku Naenda's □□daughter□□ and, therefore, our relative, Loku Naenda had taken much consideration, too much commonsense for that. She was a very practical woman. Kusuma was to come to her house as a servant.

Nangi and I were at Loku Naenda's house the morning she arrived. Kusuma, her father said, was twelve but she looked about nine. She was small and skinny and her huge dark eyes half filled her little face. Lice crawled in her curly black hair. There was a sore on her knee. In the village she had lived in a hut one of eight children half-starved, beaten and bullied. In Loku Naenda's spacious house, there was the comfort of good food, clothes and a suitable wage deposited in a post office saving's account. As Mother said, what more could any sane servant expect! It was, we all felt, the perfect sum total of a servant's happiness.

Father said: □□That girl must have done a lot of merit in her past lives. Just imagine! After living like an animal in that hut to come to a house like Akka's! □□

□□Must be like heaven to her!□□ was Mother's contribution. □□She's not bad looking, and with all the good food she'll be eating she'll soon fill out. I hope she's not going to be greedy and steal. That must be firmly stopped. Right from the start.□□ Punchi Naenda did her best to see that every one observed the second precept.

□□Don't worry. Akka knows how to deal with stealing. She gives her servants so much! For them to misbehave is just raw wickedness, nothing else. As she always says rightly, □□No one can escape the *karmic* Law, '□□ father said firmly.

A week later, Loku Naenda came to our house with Kusuma. Already, we noticed an improvement in her appearance. Her hair was clean and lice-free. When she had arrived, she had been wearing a badly sewn shabby frock. Now she wore a close-fitting white cotton blouse and a pretty flowered red- and white cloth. Every one complimented Loku Naenda on her good work. She looked very satisfied.

□□I know how to treat my servants. That's why they never leave my house. Salpi has been with me for fifteen years now. □□ This was perfectly true. Loku Naenda did treat her servants well. They enjoyed a fair bit of comfort in her house. The full effect of Loku Naenda's generosity to Kusuma appeared in about three months time. In that time she seemed to have grown taller, fairer and certainly very much fuller. Loku Naenda often said there was nothing wrong with her appetite. □□She eats as much as Salpi, and doesn't she love sweets! □□

Punchi Naenda said, □□Now don't spoil her. I hope she won't steal. Have you caught her at it ever? □□

□□No. She's a bit greedy but I give her plenty to eat. So she really has no need to steal. □□

□□If she steals, will you beat her, Loku Naenda? □□ asked Nangi with interest.

□□No, Mala. I don't beat any one. You know that. I'll know what to do. I always follow the *Karmic* law-it's my constant guide. □□

I was sometimes puzzled by Loku Naenda's way of talking about □*the karmic law*□. Of course we all knew about *karma*. I remembered very well what the monks in the temple used to say: everybody had to take the consequences of his actions in one way or another. If you wanted too many things your desires would make you linger in *sansara*; you would be a prisoner of your desires. That's what the monk said. But I wasn't sure that I understood. Because Loku Naenda, who was so wise, seemed to want a lot in return for whatever she did. But in those days I didn't bother too much about such things. I had so many more important things to think about like how to dodge Pali classes, or ways and means of smoking without being caught and lectured to.

Loku Naenda was pleased with Kusuma. She was intelligent and learnt quickly. She soon learnt to be neat and clean. She was very helpful in the house. She dusted the furniture all Loku Naenda's carved ebony chairs and couches in the sitting room. She cleaned all the brass trays, lamps and vases. She was very good at fetching and carrying. Loku Naenda wondered whether she should teach Kusuma to read and write. She thought about it a bit. Then she told us that to teach Kusuma how to crochet would be far more useful. Lace table mats were in great demand and fetched a very good price. Loku Naenda was a very practical woman.

After Kusuma's arrival, Nangi began to visit Loku Naenda almost every day. Kusuma knew very little. So Nangi began to feel very wise, though she knew very little herself. I was, of course, the really wise one among the younger lot. In those days, we all thought ourselves very wise. But every one acknowledged Loku Naenda to be the wisest. This was her own opinion as well-naturally.

It seemed to me that Nangi liked showing off a bit. She would sit with Kusuma on the verendah steps and tell her all about the wonders of the world. Had Kusuma ever been to Colombo? No. Then she wouldn't ever been in a lift, would she? No. Had she ever been on an escalator? No. Kusuma's ignorance was so satisfying to Nangi! Had she ever been to the Zoo? No. What was a Zoo? Nangi was in her element. She told Kusuma all about the Zoo; the tigers, the lions, the bears, the giraffes, the kangaroos, the zebras, the red-black baboon, the elephants. Kusuma had seen an elephant! Oh! Nangi was quite disappointed. Where had Kusuma seen an elephant? Dragging logs on the road. That wasn't so bad. The Zoo elephants didn't do anything as silly and foolish as dragging logs. They balanced on little stools or skipped round the arena. And then all the people laughed and clapped. Kusuma longed to go

to Colombo to see all those marvels. She asked Nangi a thousand and one questions. Nangi brought her picture books. Kusuma had never held a book in her hands before. She turned over the pages carefully. Nangi lent her the books for a few days. She couldn't read, of course, but she loved looking at the pictures. Then Loku Naenda ordered Nangi to take the books away. Kusuma looked at the pictures too often. That very afternoon she was looking at pictures when she should have been polishing the brass. Of course, Loku Naenda didn't mind Nangi talking to Kusuma. But she must not spoil her. So Nangi took the books away. But Kusuma talked and talked about the animals at the Zoo.

□□The cat is like the tiger, □□ said Kusuma. □□It's a little tiger, □□ and she cuddled the household cat.

□□Yes, □□ I said, □□The cat is kind of a tiger, □□ And I told her all about cats and tigers and leopards. She listened to me with her great black eyes wide open. She had a great longing for information, for knowledge in those days.

The New Year drew closer. We were going to spend the New Year in Colombo with Punchi Amma and all our cousins. Nangi asked, □□Can we take Kusuma too? □□

Mother looked surprised. It was such a – such a new idea! She didn't know what to say.

□□She's never been to Colombo. She's never been in a lift. She's never been on an escalator. And she's never seen a lion or a tiger or a giraffe or a zebra or a kangaroo or a... □□ Nangi had to stop for breath.

□□Loku Naenda..... Loku Naenda..... □□ began Mother.

□□I'll ask her, □□ said Nangi.

I decided Nangi was a lot wiser than I had thought her. We went to Loku Naenda's the next day. Nangi carried a dish in her hand.

□□What's that? □□ I asked.

□□Um... nothinig, □□ said Nangi.

□□Nothing! Let me see, let me see, □□ I lifted the cover of the dish and saw the *varaka* inside. I laughed. I understood all.

□□There's nothing to laugh about, □□ Nangi said a bit huffily.

□□Ah, Mala, what's that? □□ Loku Naenda eyed the dish with great interest.

□□ We had a lot of *varaka* at home. And I said you liked *varaka*. So Amma sent it.
□□

Loku Naenda smiled. She loved getting presents. Nangi said tomorrow she would bring her some mangosteens. Tomorrow Banda would come from Kalutara and he always brought mangosteens at this time of the year. As we were leaving Nangi said, □□ We're going to Colombo for the New Year. Can Kusuma come too? Please, please Loku Naenda, please let her come. I always feel so dull at Punchi Amma's. Everyone's bigger than me and they don't play with me. Please Loku Naenda. □□

Nangi's pleading, almost tearful face, the *varaka* of today, the mangosteens of tomorrow! How could Loku Naenda refuse? She did not refuse. So it was settled. Kusuma would go to Colombo with us. Nangi raced to the back of the house. Kusuma was sweeping the garden.

□□ You're coming with us to Colombo! You're coming with us! □□ Nangi jumped up and down. She was mad with joy. Kusuma stood where was, quite still.

□□ You're coming to Colombo! To Colombo! □□

Kusuma stared. Then all at once she understood. She smiled. A little dimple appeared for a moment. I had never seen that dimple before; I never saw it again. Her teeth were very small like little gleaming grains of polished rice. And all the stars in the sky tumbled right into her great black eyes.

We were to go to Colombo the following week. The day before we left, Nangi and I went over to Loku Naenda's with the two bottles of honey that she had wanted. We were to leave for Colombo by the *Ruhunu Kumari* the next morning. As we stepped on to the verandah, we could hear Loku Naenda's angry voice from inside.

□□ Aren't you thoroughly ashamed, girl? You eat a mountain of rice every day. Yet you steal! Greedy, disgusting, filthy girl! Chi! Chi! □□

Salpi said something but we couldn't hear her very clearly. Thoroughly curious now, we went into the pantry, where all the noise was. The moment Loku Naenda saw us she said angrily, □□ Kusuma is not going to Colombo. She's not going. Don't I give her enough to eat? Do you know what she's been doing? Quietly eating my *kavun*! They were here in this airtight tin. I caught her stealing-caught her red handed! □□

It was true. Kusuma was clutching a *kavun* in her hand. She stared at the floor.

□□ Half the *kavuns* have been eaten! She's been stuffing herself these last two - three days. The greedy thing! Mala, you've been spoiling her with all this talk of Colombo - all these lions and zebras. She's getting quite disobedient. No Colombo for her, no new cloth and

jacket. I give and give and give and this is my reward. This creature steals my *kavun*. Now what shall I do? □□

□□ You can make some more, Loku Naenda, □□ said Nangi timidly. □□ Look, we've brought you some really fine honey. □□ She held out the bottles eagerly.

Loku Naenda ignored the bottles. □□ Make some more! Oh! It's easy for you to talk! Will you make them for me? This fine young lady hopes to go to Colombo. And I'm to sweat over a fire making more *kavuns* to replace those she's gobbled up! Oh, no! The *karmic* law is my constant guide. No Colombo, no zebras and kangaroos for this creature here. She'll stay behind and help to make more *kavuns*! □□

Kusuma didn't look up, didn't utter a word. The *kavun* held tight in her clenched fist crumbled and the bits fell on the floor. Nangi and I left quietly a few minutes later. We could still hear Loku Naenda shouting at Kusuma. Tears of disappointment were streaming down Nangi's cheeks; yet Kusuma hadn't shed even a single tear.

We saw her in the garden the next morning as we walked past Loku Naenda's house to the railway station. Nangi tried to speak to her but she ran inside. Mother said, □□ Now Mala, leave her alone. You'll only make Loku Naenda angrier. It was very wrong of her to steal. She has to be punished. □□

□□ Loku Naenda's always talking about giving but she's not going to give Kusuma even a New Year present. And Kusuma isn't going to get any *kavun* or *kokis* or *aluva*! Loku Naenda is very unkind! □□

□□ Enough. Mala, enough. You talk far too much! Kusuma has stolen. She has to be punished. I agree completely with Loku Naenda, □□ said Father severely.

Nangi pouted. She was glum all the way to Colombo. But when she arrived at Punchi Amma's, we found that our cousin Leela had come down from Kandy and then Nangi forgot all about Kusuma.

After the *kavun* incident Loku Naenda kept Kusuma very busy. She was always cleaning, polishing, sweeping or crocheting. There was little time for play.

In the months that followed I too began to be increasingly busy. At the end of the year, I sat for my first public examination and passed with two distinctions and several credits. After that, I went to live with Punchi Amma in Colombo and went to school there. I was in Payagala only for the holidays. The world, I realized was a very big place. And the world of ideas was even bigger. I passed my University entrance examination and went to live in Kandy. I read a lot, I held forth to my friends, argued with my teachers. The world in those days was a very exciting place. I was right at its centre and a very important person.

I still spent my holidays in Payagala – that small dull town! I remember that last long vacation in my final year at University very well. Loku Naenda was just the same – still full of *shradda*, still busy collecting meritorious acts. But there was now about her an air of relaxation! The air of someone who could rest a bit after a hard life of meritorious toil and labour. Loku Naenda knew that she was still a long way from *nibbana* and she was in no special hurry to get there. She had no objection to remaining in *sansara* for a couple of eons or so, and she was determined to spend those eons as comfortably as possible. She had always been a very practical woman.

A week before my vacation ended we were all invited to a big *pirith* and *dane* at her home. Loku Naenda's *piriths* and *danes* were always a great success. Every one enjoyed themselves. For at least two days before, the house was full of people, bustle, talk, laughter, the smell of food. There was friendliness and good humour everywhere. This *pirith* and *dane* was to be a really grand affair. Twenty-five monks had been invited. Kusuma, who was very artistic, was helping with the decoration of the *pirith mandappe*. I watched her as she worked. She was at this time about nineteen – tall, slender, fair-skinned. Her hair was tied back in a big *konde*. Her face was fuller, rounder but her eyes were as huge and as black as ever. She moved quickly, lightly. And then all at once I realized that Kusuma was a very beautiful woman. So I looked at her often. So did Loku Naenda, but for very different reasons. During a *pirith-dane* there were a lot of young men around. Loku Naenda took her responsibilities very seriously. Seeing that everyone behaved in the proper way was the most serious of those responsibilities. Kusuma, in particular, was a special responsibility.

Kusuma wasn't even in the least bit frivolous. Salpi was quite old now, and Kusuma was beginning to have an increasingly important place in Loku Naenda's household. She valued that importance very much. She moved gracefully but efficiently from kitchen to verandah supervising, organizing, advising. One young man in particular was very willing to obey her instructions and orders. He always managed to find work where she was likely to be. If Kusuma was in the kitchen, he was there too, eager to cut, chop, sift or pound. If she was in the sitting room, now cleared for the *pirith mandappe*, there he was eager to hammer in nails, paste paper, move tables and chairs. Kusuma spoke to him very briskly, sometimes even severely. There was never the slightest softness in her voice or face. But once I saw her look around as if searching for some one. She looked anxious. Then she spotted him among all the other young men and smiled, a quick, tiny smile. Loku Naenda did not see that smile, but I did. I asked Nangi who he was. □□ Ah, that's Piyadasa. He works in Martin Mudalali's *kade*. □□ I looked at him again. He was tall and fair skinned and had a kind face. I liked him.

On the night of the *pirith*, the twenty-five monks arrived in all their yellow-robed splendour, and took their places in the pure white *pirith mandappe*. Its walls were made of cutwork paper; its canopy a dazzling white cloth. If the monks, who were seated inside the *mandappe* looked up, they would have seen that the canopy had little bunches of young coconut leaves hanging from it at intervals. They had been placed there by Kusuma.

We sat around the *mandappe* on mats and listened to the monks chanting *pirith*. I looked around me and noticed Piyadasa seated behind Kusuma. They were right at the back of the room. Loku Naenda, who was the chief *dayaka* and the donor of everything, sat by herself on a special little mat forehead level. She was the picture of perfect *shradda* and we all admired her greatly.

After the *maha piritha*, I went off to bed. Loku Naenda sat listening to the chanting all night, I was told. This was nothing less than we expected. Yet she was the most energetic of us all the next morning. After the morning meal the chief monk preached a short sermon. I still remember the sermon very well. It was on *danaparamita*, the perfection of giving. We had heard lots of Jataka stories on the perfection of giving before; the story of Vessantara, of Sri Sanghabo and of course the story of the little self – sacrificing hare whose image Sakra placed high up in the bright moon for all to see. These stories we all knew. But not the story the chief monk told us that morning; this was new to us.

□□*Pinvethuni*, □□ he began, □□of the ten perfections one perfection is better than another. All these ten equal perfections reside in the *Tathagatha*. Brighter than a thousand suns are the perfections of the *Tathagatha*. Bearing in mind then that all the perfections of the *Tathagatha* shine equal in their splendour, today I shall discourse on the perfection of giving. The perfection of giving shows itself in one key way: it shows itself in generosity. Giving of alms is generosity. And those who seek the Supreme Goal must ceaselessly practise such generosity. Our *pinvath* Payagala Hamine and all you others who have participated in this ceremony have shown your presence here. Yet hard is the way to Enlightenment. Listen to this:

□□Once the Bodisathva was born a king. Manicuda by name. He was compassionate, generous, a giver and donor of all things. Being so, Manicuda wished to perform the great sacrifice, *Nirargada*. Various heretics, brahmins mendicants, beggars, princes gathered for the great sacrifice. The Bodisathva, Manicuda addressed the assembly: Sirs, I wish to perform the great sacrifice, *Nirargada*, at which no doors are closed, no living being killed. Accept with mind full of sympathy these sacrifice gifts.□ And gifts were given to all those who came to suit their desires. Then on the twentieth day at sunrise, Sakra, the lord of all the gods, wishing to test the Bodisathva, took the form of a terrible demon and arose suddenly from the great sacrificial fire. He cried out, □Fortunate and compassionate lord, deliver me who suffer severe pain by a quick gift of food.□

□ Fear not, fear not, dear one, here is as much food as you desire.□

□It is not this kind of food I eat, great king, but the flesh and blood of the newly killed.□

□The kind of food you eat, dear one, cannot be had with out injury to others. I abstain from killing. Therefore, eat my flesh and drink my blood to your content. Today, giving away

my flesh and blood, I shall place my foot on the head of *Mara*. Thus will I delight the whole world that yearns for liberation.□

As the Bodisathva spoke, the whole earth trembled like a boat in the ocean. The gods, the *asuras*, and the *gandharvas* in the sky, hearing of that wonderful gift were spellbound.

Taking a knife, the Bodisathva opened a vein in his brow. The demon drank, quenching his thirst. The Bodisathva filled with delight, next cut off his flesh and gave it to the demon to eat. And he thought, □ My wealth has been fruitful. my flesh, my blood, my life has been fruitful.□

As they read his thoughts, the gods assembled in the air cried out aloud with joy. Sakra assumed his own form saying, □Great King, I am Sakra. What do you wish to gain by this deed, by this most strenuous effort?□

The Bodisathva replied, □Kausika, by this gift I do not wish to be a Sakra, a *Mara* or a Brahma or gain sovereignty over the universe or birth in the heavens. But by this deed may I attain perfect the unconsolated, to liberate the unliberated. This is my wish.□

□□ This *pinvethuni* is *danaparamita*, the perfection of giving.□□

The monk stopped. The sermon was over. For a moment we were all silent. Then people stirred, joints cracked, and Loku Naenda with hand clasped high above her head cried out in a voice trembling with *shradda*. *Sadhu ! Sadhu ! Sadhu !* All who were there took up the cry. The monks bowed their heads and gazed steadfastly at their fans. After giving the people his blessing, the chief monk, followed by the others left.

Loku Naenda, her face beaming, came up to Mother and Punchi Naenda.

□□ This is the most successful *pirith* and *dane* I□ve ever given – everything went off beautifully ! Did you notice how Mrs Welikala was eyeing the *pirith mandappe*? It□s ten times nicer than hers!□□

Punchi Naenda laughed. □□ She asked me who had made it and where we had got all that white paper from. I muttered something but didn't tell.□□

Both Naendas laughed gleefully, almost like little girls.

Two days later, when I arrived home after a sea – bath, I found Loku Naenda, Punchi Naenda, Mother and Nangi all seated on the verandah, talking. It seemed a very serious conversation. Loku Naenda looked agitated, angry.

□□Kusuma wants to marry Piyadasa !□□ Nangi burst out when she saw me.

□□ Good idea!□□

Loku Naenda stared at me as if I had suddenly turned into a serpent. □□ Kusuma to marry Piyadasa!□□ she exploded.

□□What's wrong with that? ! I really couldn't see what all the fuss was about.

□□That's what I thought too,□□ said Nangi boldly. Nangi had just got engaged to our second cousin, Nihal, and felt that every one should be encouraged to marry as quickly as possible.

We both looked at Loku Naenda. In spite of being a final year at the University, I felt a bit afraid. Loku Naenda's chest heaved, her lips trembled, her eyes seemed to shoot sparks of fire.

□□ The selfishness – the ingratitude of – of everybody. After all I've – after all I've done.....□□

Punchi Naenda said, □□ You people – you young people these days don't think of anything serious. Only your own selfish desires matter. Do you ever think of your duty!□□ She spoke very severely.

□□ *Tanha, tanha, tanha*, they're all filled with *tanha*. When I think of what I've done for that girl! She was like a wild animal, when she came to me. Covered with sores and lice! I cleaned her, fed her, clothed her, civilized her.... Piyadase came to me and said he wanted to marry hersaid she was willing. I couldn't believe it..... to do this thing behind my back!□□

Loku Naenda's chest began to heave again.

I said, □□Now, Loku Naenda, don't be angry with me, but they haven't done anything behind your back. Piyadasa came and asked you, didn't he? They haven't run away or anything. As Freud says.....□□

□□Mahinda, what do you know about these things! After you went to that University, your head is stuffed full useless foreign ideas. Who is this Freud, ah? Who is this Marx you're now always trying to talk about? What do these foreigners know about our ancient Sinhala culture? I've given Kusuma so much! I've been like a mother to her. Is it too much to ask for a little gratitude in return!□□

□□It's her duty to stay with Loku Naenda. Loku Naenda didn't bring her up for nothing!□□ said Mother.

□□But she says Piyadasa and she will live close to Loku Naenda. She says she□ll continue to work for Loku Naenda,□□ argued Nangi.

□□I know what those promises are worth! Loku Naenda sounded very sour.

□□Will Kusuma have to live with Loku Naenda forever then?□□ asked Nangi.

□□Why not?□□ snapped Punchi Naenda. □□Much better for her to stay with Loku Naenda than going off with that Piyadasa and having ten children!□□

□□ I□m not selfish. I□ll arrange a marriage for Kusuma to the right person at the right time. But she can't marry Piyadasa.□□ Loku Naenda was very firm about that.

□□Arrange a marriage for her! No wonder she's so selfish. You□ve spoilt her thoroughly, Akka,□□ said Punch Naenda.

□□I'm going to ask Martin Mudalali to send Piyadasa away to his brother's shop in Galle. I've done a lot for Martin Mudalali. That man has a lot of respect for me.□□

□□What if Kusuma runs away? □□ I asked.

□□She'll never do that, □□ said Nangi,□□ She's very loyal to Loku Naenda.□□

□□Loyal! Fine Loyalty!□□ snapped Loku Naenda.

Kusuma did not run away. She continued to live in Loku Naenda's household exactly as before. After a few months, Loku Naenda forgot all about the Piyadasa incident. He eventually married a girl in Galle and, as far as we know, never even visited Payagala again. Kusuma, of course, never married. I never heard Loku Naenda talk about arranging a marriage for her again. But she gave over the running of the house entirely to Kusuma. This left her free to study the Abidhamma. It was Kusuma who arranged for the sale of all garden produce like coconuts and yams. It was Kusuma who bought all the necessities for the household. It was Kusuma who organized all the *pirith* ceremonies and the *Danes*. She became almost as keen as Loku Naenda in the performance of such duties. They seemed to give her an ever increasing pleasure. She talked a lot about how the accumulation of merit would give a person a better life in the future. She often said that she must have been very wicked in a past life and was determined to be better in this her present one. Loku Naenda was very pleased with her. Punchi Naenda began to be almost jealous.

I was in Payagala for a few weeks before leaving to study further at London University. □□Mahinda, □□ said Punchi Naenda, □□ I think Loku Naenda gives Kusuma too much to do in the house. That woman is more the mistress of the house than Loku Naenda herself. You should listen to her talking! I don't like the way she talks to me! She's

turned into a very bossy woman. But Loku Naenda listens to everything she says and does everything the way she wants it done. I don't like it. □□

It was true that Kusuma occupied a very special place in Loku Naenda's household. It was true that she spoke to us all as if she were our equal. There was nothing menial about Kusuma. But I didn't see why she should be menial. And I told Punchi Naenda so.

□□ You understand nothing, Mahinda, inspite of all your book book learning , □□ said Punchi Naenda. She sounded a bit annoyed. But since this is what everybody at home had always been telling me for a long time, I took no notice. I just smiled as I now always did, when they talked to me like that.

It was three years before I retruned again to Sri Lanka. When I went to Payagala, I went as usual to Loku Naenda's. Loku Naenda had streaks of grey in her hair. She stooped a little and two of her front teeth were missing. She wore glasses and spent a lot of time reading the *sutas*. It was only Kusuma who was really busy: preparing *dane* for the monks in the temple, crocheting table mats, making new vegetable beds at the back. Salpi was dead. Kusuma was in the sole charge of Loku Naenda's household now.

□□ Kusuma must be making a lot of money from the sale of her table mats and pillow lace. What does she do with it? □□ I said in the course of conversation.

□□ She is saving it to buy a brass lamp for the temple. One of those big tall ones. She's a good girl- doesn't spend her money on clothes and powder like other young women. Her one aim in life is to do meritorious acts. □□

□□ Because she wants to be born a rich woman in her next life? □□ I asked smiling.

□□ What's wrong with that? We all want to better ourselves. □□

I couldn't argue with that. Loku Naenda had always been a very practical sort of woman.

I went to England again for post – doctoral study three years later. When I returned for a visit after two years overseas I found Loku Naenda older, greyer. She took me to the temple and showed me the magnificent brass lamp Kusuma had donated the year before. She herself had just bought half an acre of land adjoining the temple grounds. She planned to build a new *bana* hall there, when she had enough money. The *vihare*, the shrine room and the wall around the temple were a dazzling white. Kusuma had paid for the whitewashing this time. Loku Naenda had wanted to contribute something towards it but Kusuma had refused very firmly. The merit from this act had to be hers and hers alone; she did not want to share it with anyone.

It was a long time before I returned home again on another visit. Many things had happened during my absence. Loku Naenda had had a stroke which paralysed both her legs. She now used a wheelchair. After Punchi Naenda's death of a heart attack, Mother had sold our house and gone to live with Nangi in Kandy. Nangi urged me to go and see Loku Naenda, who still lived in Payagala. □□Kusuma looks after her very well – Loku Naenda is so lucky to have her – but she's very lonely. I haven't been to Payagala for over a year. I'm tied to the house with all these children. □□

□□Yes, yes, go, Mahinda □□ said Mother. □□I went to see her last year when I was in Colombo, but you know how difficult travelling is these days. The trains are jam packed, the buses are jam packed. And I'm too old to knock about now. Go, Mahinda, she'll be so happy to see you. She's very fond of you. □□

Loku Naenda's house was still the same. The garden looked flourishing. The coconut trees were loaded with nuts, the mango trees with fruit. The orchids just beside the verandah were all blooming. Loku Naenda was in her wheelchair on the verandah. She saw me, tried to speak but couldn't. Her face quivered. I went up to her and took her hand. She held it tightly. Her hair was completely white, the skin of her neck and arms hung down in loose folds. In the years I'd been away she had shrunk into an old, old woman.

□□I thought I'd never see you again, *putha*. □□ she said at last. Her voice was all quavery. □□When did you return? □□

□□About three weeks ago. Payagala is exactly the same. □□

We talked for a bit. I gave her news of Mother and Nangi. Suddenly, I remembered the *bana* hall she had once talked about years before. □□Is it finished now? □□ I asked.

□□Yes, □□ she said quietly. She looked down at her hands. I felt something wrong.

□□Aren't you happy about it, Loku Naenda? □□

□□Yes, yes, I am, Mahinda. It's a great consolation to me to have built the hall before I die. Kusuma – Kusuma is building a new shrine – room. □□

□□Kusuma building a shrine – room! Kusuma! But where does she get the money from? □□ I asked quite thunderstruck.

□□She gets some money from the sale of her table mats and pillow lace. Then there's the coconut money. □□

□□But Loku Naenda the coconuts belong to you? □□

□□I asked her to use – to use the money, □□ said Loku Naenda uncomfortably.

We were silent. I looked around. I could see into the sitting room from where I was. It seemed strangely bare. Something was missing. Suddenly it came to me – Loku Naenda’s antique ebony furniture!

□□What has happened to your ebony furniture? □□

Loku Naenda looked even more uncomfortable. □□I asked Kusuma to sell it – to sell it for the shrine room. □□

□□But Loku Naenda, that – that furniture – you loved that furniture! You said you’d never sell it. □□ In fact, she had always said that the furniture was for me because it had belonged to my grandfather. I wondered whether she remembered. I looked at her. She was twisting her hands nervously. □□Kusuma has been like a daughter to me. She does everything for me. □□

□□Where is Kusuma? □□

□□She’s at the temple. She goes every day to see how the building is going on. Don’t say anything – don’t scold her, Mahinda. She’s like my daughter. Her one desire in life is to build that shrine room. □□

□□But at your expense! Did you really want to sell that furniture? □□

Loku Naenda began to weep. □□That furniture was my father’s. I wanted you to have it. □□

I had never seen Loku Naenda weep before. Great rivers of tears streamed down her shrunken cheeks. I noticed she wasn’t wearing her ruby earrings. I didn’t need to ask what had happened to them. I supposed all Loku Naenda’s jewellery would be gradually sold to pay for the shrine – room and other meritorious acts.

□□I don’t want the furniture. I live in a tiny two – roomed flat in London, the size of your sitting room. What could I do with ebony furniture there? □□

□□I don’t want to cling to my possessions. But that ebony furniture was my father’s. I didn’t want to sell it. □□

□□Never mind, never mind, Loku Naenda. Building a shrine room is a very good thing, a very meritorious act. □□ It seemed strange to be talking like that. But I couldn’t really console Loku Naenda, though she stopped weeping.

It was almost lunch time when Kusuma returned from the temple. She was not at all pleased to see me. I could see that. She was now a middle – aged woman – broad, strong,

determined, hard. Lunch was served almost immediately. I wheeled Loku Naenda's chair to the dining table. Loku Naenda had loved good food in the old days. I looked at the rice, the *pol* sambol and the bit of dried fish on the table. Kusuma stared at me defiantly, as if daring me to criticise. I was silent. Loku Naenda said, □□ If only I'd known you were coming *putha*! I'd somehow have got some seer fish and prawns for you. You used to like them so much!
□□

□□ Now, I like dried fish better than anything else, □□ I said giving her a bright, false smile.

It was a very silent meal. I wondered whether I should tell Mother and Nangi about Loku Naenda's situation. But what good would it do? It was impossible for Loku Naenda to live in Kandy. There was no room for her in Nangi's house. And who would look after her? I just could not see Kusuma living in Nangi's household.

As Kusuma was clearing away the dishes and plates I said, □□ So Kusuma, I hear you're building a shrine room. It must be a very expensive business. □□

Loku Naenda looked at me pleadingly, fearfully.

Kusuma glared at me. □□ I have found the money for it. It's a very meritorious deed. No one should interfere with such good things. □□

□□ When will it be completed? □□

□□ The building will be completed in about a month's time. But I need more money for the image and the wall – paintings inside. My name will be inscribed outside because I am the donor, □□ she said smiling, proudly, for the first time. □□ Would you like to donate something, Mahinda *mahataya*? □□ she asked.

I was surprised. Loku Naenda looked at me appealingly.

I pulled out my purse and gave her fifty rupees. She took it eagerly and put the notes into her purse.

I wheeled Loku Naenda back to the verandah. □□ Tell me about London *putha*. Is it a big city? England must be a very advanced country, no? Who cooks for you? □□

She laughed when I told her that I cooked for myself.

□□ Fine meals you must be cooking! No wonder you look so thin. So why don't you get yourself a wife? Then she can cook for you. □□

I ignored these suggestions and got up saying I had to leave. Her face changed.
□□Aney *putha*, what's the hurry? Stay the night, stay the night. □□

I said I couldn't. I had to be in Colombo for a lecture at the University that evening.
And I promised Mother to be in Kandy the next day.

Loku Naenda gave a little sigh. □□When shall I see you again, *putha*? Next time you
come, I'll be dead. □□

□□Don't talk like that! Next time I see you, you'll be on your feet and running this
house yourself. □□ But neither of us believed in that extravagant lie even for a second.

She tried to smile, then said, □□No, I'll die in this wheelchair. It's my *karma*. But I'm
very lucky to have Kusuma – she's like my own daughter. It's my *karma*, □□ she repeated.

I said goodbye. She clung to my hand and kissed it. □□Come and see me again before
you leave, *putha*. *Tun sarane pihitai!* □□ And she said once again, □□It's my *karma*. □□ A
common place, almost meaningless phrase mouthed by so many. And yet, as I looked back
for one last wave, there seemed to be a truth in it – a truth reflected in that heavy, sullen
woman standing in the doorway and in the other, feebly waving a loose – skinned hand.