

Mosquito

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Extract

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. . . they are places that don't belong to geography but to time.

SAUL STEINBERG, *Reflections and Shadows*

1

THE CATAMARAN, ITS BLUE-PATCHED SAILS no longer flapping, its nets full of glistening catch, came in after the night's fishing. The breeze had died down, the air had cooled, and the fishermen's sarongs slapped wet against their legs as they swung the boat above the water, to and fro, and up and along the empty beach, scoring a dark, deep ridge in the sand. Often, before the monsoon broke, the sea was like a mirror. The sky appeared joined to it with barely a seam, there was a faint vibration of thunder and along the shoreline the air hung in hazy folds, suspended between land, and sea, and sky. In a few hours the heat would spread insidiously, hovering with the mosquitoes and the spiders that waited motionless and lethargic, trapped by their own clammy inertia. But still there was no storm. Every year it was like this, before the monsoon, for three or four days, sometimes even longer. Every year, around the third week in June, a yellowing stickiness, a blistering oppression clung everywhere, so that even the bougainvillea lost its radiance.

Theo Samarajeeva walked back from the beach with fresh fish for lunch. It was still early. The manservant, Sugi, had brought

breakfast out on to the veranda. A black-and-gold lacquered tray with a white cloth was placed on the cane table. There was a silver teapot, a jug of boiled milk, one cup and a saucer. There was some freshly cut pineapple and some curd and roti.

'You had better get the lime juice ready, Sugi,' said Theo Samarajeeva wryly, hearing the gate click shut. The manservant grinned and went inside.

'You see, by a process of elimination I knew you would be coming here,' Theo said, turning towards the gate by way of greeting.

'How?' asked Nulani Mendis, appearing, sitting down opposite him, and helping herself to the glass the manservant held out to her. Theo Samarajeeva watched as she drank. He watched her gasp as the cool, sharp liquid caught in her throat. He noticed that her fingernails had small slivers of paint under them. She wore a green skirt wrapped tightly around her waist, and a soft faded white blouse of some thin opaque fabric. The skirt was old, and almost exactly the colour of the lime juice.

'How did you know I would come today?' she demanded again when she had finished drinking.

'Well,' said Theo, 'I saw you walking on the beach earlier, and as I hadn't seen you for at least twenty-four hours I told Sugi: Ah! Miss Nulani will be here later so don't forget her lime.'

Nulani smiled guiltily, remembering she was meant to go straight home.

'So, poor Mrs Mendis still waits for her daughter, no?' he guessed.

Inside, in the dark interior of the house, music was playing on the radiogram. It floated out through the open windows, tripping effortlessly down the steps from the veranda before dispersing into the trees.

'I've been drawing,' said Nulani, taking out a small notebook from her satchel. 'Look!'

She moved her chair closer to his, giving him the book. Images rose out of it, they fell hither and thither, marvellously, on to his knees. A man sat under a tamarind tree, another squatted in the narrow spit of shade afforded by a house. A woman stretched out on a makeshift bed staring at the rough edges of a palm roof through the bars of the window. Someone, a middle-aged man, lean legs stretched in front of him, was writing, head bent at a table. He had a cigarette in his left hand and behind him was the blur of tropical trees.

'This is me, no? When did you do this one?'

'Yesterday,' said Nulani, laughing. 'I was hiding over there, you didn't see me.'

'You little pest! Why didn't you make yourself known? Sugi had made a fine red mullet curry. You could have eaten with me.'

'You are not angry?'

'I feel the bushes have eyes,' he teased her. 'I shall have to watch everything from now on. No talking to myself any more! But seriously, these are good. Are you going to use them in a painting?'

'I don't know,' said Nulani, frowning. 'Do you really like them?' And boldly, 'I want to paint you. But . . .'

Theo considered her. For a moment he felt lost for words. Nulani Mendis had been visiting him for nearly three months now. It had begun when he had first moved to this part of the island. The convent school had invited him to give a talk on his latest book. He had not long been back from the UK, some perversity making him give up the modest success he enjoyed there. People thought him mad. The Liberation Tigers had been demanding a separate Tamil state for years with no success. Civil unrest grew daily. Then, after Singhala was made the national language, discrimination against the Tamils became commonplace. A potential guerrilla war was simmering. Why did he want to go back to that hell? they asked. Was he off his

head? An established writer, with a comfortable life in London, his own flat, his work, what could he want with Colombo? Was it not enough writing books on the impending violence, did he want to *live* it too? But, he had no ties. Perhaps it was sentimentality in early middle age? Perhaps the terrible events from the past had finally got to him, they said.

Theo could not explain. He himself barely understood this sudden compulsion, this urgency to go home. It was a time when everyone who could was escaping. Perhaps simply because he no longer had anything to escape from, going back was not a problem. So he told his agent he would work better if he had some sun and, putting his flat on the market, he left. The agent said nothing, thinking privately that what Theo really needed was some distraction, danger even. Do him good, thought the agent; add richness to this next book. Other men might have given up writing altogether after what he had been through, but Theo had carried on. He probably needed a complete change of scene, needed to put the past finally behind him. So, with this in mind, the agent encouraged him to go back, for a time at least.

It was 1996. While he had been away Sri Lanka had changed. The change confused Theo. He found himself remembering the liberal atmosphere of his youth. Where was it? In England, whatever corruption there was, was kept discreetly out of sight. Or maybe he was less critical because the British were not his own people. It was a different matter in Colombo where every small injustice, every appalling act of violence seemed a personal affront. The civil unrest he had predicted in his books, the beginnings of rage seemed to have been nurtured in his absence, and spread, like a newly germinated paddy field. He left Colombo, moved to a backwater, and began writing his fourth novel. His second book was being made into a film and an article about him appeared in one of the papers. The local schools, having

noticed it and having registered his arrival in the town, asked him to speak to the pupils. At first he had hesitated, worrying. But what was there worth worrying about in these troubled times? People had been garrotted for less outspoken views, so why did he care? His life would go on for as long as it would, or it simply would cease. Why worry? He was no longer a Buddhist, but Buddhism had worked on him like milk and honey nonetheless. He agreed to give two talks, one at the boys' school and the other at the convent. Nulani Mendis had been one of the students. She had held her hand up and asked him several questions.

'The girl hardly speaks,' the teacher had told him afterwards. 'Since her father was murdered she has become silent. The mother has given up trying to make her talk. All she does is draw, draw, draw.'

But on that day she had spoken to Theo and later, on one of his early-evening walks along the narrow strip of beach behind the house, he saw her again. He had smiled slightly, registering her good looks, and remembering the story of her father, he waved. But she seemed to vanish into the darkness. After that he kept seeing her and he guessed she lived nearby. Then Sugi caught her in the garden. She was drawing his stone lions. Sugi began complaining loudly.

'Sir, sir, these local children are pests. They've started coming into the garden again. We need to get rid of them or they will multiply!'

Surprised, Theo came out and, recognising her, asked her name. Then he invited her, in spite of Sugi's protest, to come over at any time and draw. This had been nearly three months ago. She never called him anything except Mr Samarajeeva. He supposed, wryly, that this was out of a sense of respect for his age. But she came back, again and again, and, if she did not appear for a few days, he became inclined to drift into bad temper.

‘Can I go now?’ she asked, breaking into his reverie. ‘I want to draw the house from over there.’

She had been with him since breakfast.

‘Won’t you be late for school?’ he asked. ‘Does your mother know you are here?’

‘No,’ she said, disappearing around the side of the house. Her voice reached him from another part of the garden, vague and indistinct. ‘No, she’s out. And I’ve finished the jobs she gave me so I can go straight to school from here.’

Theo shook his head, amused in spite of himself. The manservant gave him a look that said clearly, ‘I told you, these local children are pests.’ But she’s different, thought Theo.

At first she came only once a week, barely speaking, staying further back in the garden. But as she grew bolder she seemed to be there all the time. Then, one day, out of the blue, she showed him her notebook for the first time. The sketches were all of him, delicate, and with a clear unwavering likeness. Startled, he took down his book of Picasso drawings and talked to her about the artist. After that she began to talk to him.

‘I will be seventeen in three months,’ she said.

On another afternoon she told him about her brother Jim. He was only eighteen months younger. She told him, they were not close.

‘It is our karma,’ she said solemnly. ‘We have brought it into this life.’

Their father, she said, had known most of this long before the astrologer came to visit. He told their mother, soon after the birth of Jim, he had seen it in a dream; the children would never be close. He could see it written on their faces, he had said, the girl child, and his infant son. Their mother, hearing this pronouncement, had begun wailing. After all her labours was this the future? But their father told his wife sternly to stop

her noise. Be thankful, he said, for the fact that both children were healthy. After puberty, he suspected, after they came of age, they would cross a great expanse of water, leave Sri Lanka. Go to mainland India even. It would be a good thing, he had said, for peace in this country was always uncertain. Thus had her father predicted, long before the astrologer came to plot their horoscopes, walking up the steps of the house. With his saffron robes and his sandals dusty with beach sand, and his black umbrella faded with the heat. Their father, not foreseeing his own death in the riots of the following June, felt the future of his children grow large in his own mind.

How long was it before she realised the strange masculine world inhabited by her brother was not for her, wondered Theo. Was it when she was still small? Did her understanding come, as all unshakeable beliefs do, not at any given moment but slowly, like seawater seeping into a hole dug on a beach? Lucky Jim could pace his domain freely, marking his undisputed territory, certain of his own image of the future. But what of Nulani?

Sometimes while her brother slept, before the father's unpredicted death, when they were younger, Nulani told Theo, she would bend over Jim and smell the sugar-sweet baby scent of greenness on his skin, run her finger across an old scar that straddled the rounded grubbiness of his brown leg. Later when she was older, she told Theo, she stole a box of Venus B pencils (Made in Great Britain) from the house of their English neighbour, to draw her sleeping brother. But the neighbour found out and demanded she be punished for stealing. She returned the pencils; two of them were used and broken.

'All right, Mrs Mendis,' the neighbour, the Englishman, told her mother angrily, 'I know it must be hard for you, with your husband dead. But "render unto Caesar" and all that!'

He had laughed, without rhythm. Nulani had wondered if

that was how the English laughed. She knew she would not be allowed into the Englishman's house again. She would not be able to play with his daughter Carol any more; she would never be able to touch her shining golden hair.

'Why did you take them?' her brother had demanded. 'Render unto Caesar,' he had said, sounding like the Englishman.

Nulani's uncle came. Because her father was no longer alive, it was his duty to beat her with an *ekel* stick.

'Render unto Caesar,' he had said. They were ashamed of her. The whole family avoided the neighbours now, eyes cast down whenever the jeep drove them about, into the city, to the beach, shopping.

'See what you've done to us.'

Nulani could see. She stopped drawing her brother when he slept. She just looked at him. Her little brother. She was his *loku akka*, his big sister. Her father had said they would not be close. But no one, she told Mr Samarajeeva, not even the astrologer, had said she would not love him.

And now she came here to draw. Arriving early, leaving late. Always talking. Transformed.

'Child,' Theo said suddenly now, drifting back from his thoughts and realising the time, 'you'll be late for school.'

When there was no answer he went to look for her at the back of the garden, but then he heard the gate click again.

'I'm late,' she called, grinning at him, hurrying off. 'But I'm coming back!'

And she disappeared up the hill with a wave of her hand.

They swarmed so thickly that they might easily have been mistaken for smoke. Rising swiftly from the water-filled holes dug by the gem miners in their search for sapphire, the mosquitoes seemed suspended in reflected light. For a moment the holes appeared as

mirrored surfaces, blue as the sky. Further out towards the coast the rainwater filled the upturned coconut shells, as they lay scattered across the groves. Here the beautiful female anopheles mosquitoes, graceful wings glinting in the sun, landed lightly and prepared to create a canoe of death for their cargo of eggs. The Ministry of Health sprayed the coconut groves with DDT to prevent outbreaks of malaria. The metallic smell drifted and mixed heavily with the scent of frangipani and hibiscus. There had been no epidemic for nearly five years.

Theo liked to spend the morning writing, but lately it had been difficult to concentrate with the girl present. She sat against a wall, almost in the bushes, drawing him. He had tried to make her come inside but she was stubborn and stayed where she was, far back along the veranda, crouching beside the lilies and the ferns.

‘How can you draw like this? You can’t see me,’ he had protested. ‘Why do you want to crouch so low?’

She had refused his invitation and in the end he had just shrugged, leaving her alone, going back to his typewriter in the cool of his study. It was hot. For some reason the fans had all stopped working. Perhaps the generator had broken down again. He would have to get Sugi to look at it. Every now and then as he worked he would look up and catch a glimpse of her faded lime-green skirt translucent against the extraordinary light of the untamed garden. She folded and rearranged herself until from where he sat she was a smudge of green and white and black. He could not see her face; it was hidden by her dark hair. He found her presence disturbing. How was he supposed to work? Surely it must be lunchtime? He half hoped she would stay to eat with him. Sometimes she did; at other times, although she hesitated, an inner tempo seemed to call her, guilt perhaps,

a sudden memory of an uncompleted errand for her long-suffering mother. Every time Theo asked her to stay for lunch. He waited, unaware that his breath was bated, for her reply, knowing only his irrational disappointment if she went home.

He had decided then, the best thing to do was to commission her to paint him. It was clear that, once voiced, she would not give up the idea, so one evening he strolled over to Mrs Mendis with the suggestion. Mrs Mendis welcomed him with some *aluva* and coffee. He told her he wanted to commission Nulani to paint his portrait. He would like to pay her if Mrs Mendis did not mind. Mrs Mendis did not mind. Mr Samarajeeva was extremely kind. She just hoped Nulani would do a proper job.

‘The girl is a dreamer,’ said Mrs Mendis. ‘She does not talk much and she is stubborn. If you can get her to do anything it will be a miracle. Most of the time, if there is any work to be done, she disappears. She won’t help in the house or with any of my sewing. How am I to make a living, with no one to help me?’

Having started her complaints, Mrs Mendis found it curiously difficult to stop. Her thin, high voice rose like the smoke from a mosquito coil.

‘I am a widow,’ she said. ‘Has Nulani told you? Has she told you my husband was set fire to during the rioting in the seventies? They threw a petrol bomb at him. Aiyo, we watched as he went screaming down the Old Tissa Road. Fear kept all the people hidden behind closed doors.’ Mrs Mendis waved her hands about in distress. ‘Everyone watched through the shutters of their houses,’ she said. ‘But no one came to help.’

Harsh sunlight had pressed itself on the edges of the house and then Mrs Mendis had run screaming into the street, chasing hopelessly after her husband, but it was too late. He lay blackened and burnt; clear liquid oozing out from his staring eyes, his body charred, the stench of flesh filling her open-mouthed screams.

‘The neighbours came out of the houses then and pulled me away,’ she said.

They had been fearful she might throw herself on to the flames. By the time the ambulance came he was beyond help.

‘Luckily,’ said Mrs Mendis, lowering her voice, ‘my son Jim was somewhere else and did not see his father’s life as it left this world.’

Lucky Jim. ‘He had been so close to his father,’ she said. ‘The shock is still with him.’

Only the girl had been at home. Mrs Mendis wasn’t sure how much she had seen. Always quiet, she became mute after that.

‘She’s difficult,’ said Mrs Mendis, ‘obstinate and odd.’

Theo Samarajeeva, who had not meant to stay for long, looked around for escape. There was no sign of Nulani, but something about the stillness of the air made him certain she was listening.

Walking home he turned several times, convinced he was being followed. But the road was empty. The air was choked with the heavy scent of frangipani. As he entered his house he noticed Sugi had lit some oil lamps. Theo could see him fixing a few cheap Chinese lanterns to the trees. He poured himself a whisky, and was still listening to the ice crackling in the glass when he saw her. Standing in his doorway holding out a branch of blossom, the rich scent filling the room, her smile wide, her eyes as bright as the new moon.

She came almost daily after that, before school, after her evening meal, at odd unexpected hours, nearly every weekend. A notebook was filling up with small studies of him. Sometimes she showed him what she had done. She seemed to be trying to record every slight movement of his face, he thought, amused. Such was the minute detail of the drawings. He was astonished by her perception. Thin pencils, stubs of charcoal, delicate brushstrokes,

whatever she used, all had the same fluid quality, the same effortless logic as they moved across the page. Each time she showed him what she had done, he was astonished all over again.

‘Nulani,’ he asked once, after looking at these drawings for a long time. ‘Why me? Why draw me? Why not someone younger, your brother’s friends perhaps?’

He was genuinely puzzled. But she had only laughed.

‘Wait till you see the painting!’ she promised.

Now he watched her as she drew him from the corner of the veranda.

‘Why don’t you sit somewhere better, child?’ he asked again. ‘You can’t possibly see me clearly from where you are!’

‘I don’t want to see you, Mr Samarajeeva. I’m learning to draw you from memory.’

‘Will you please stop calling me Mr Samarajeeva.’

‘OK, Mr Samarajeeva.’

He never knew if she was teasing him. He had a feeling she could read his mind, that she liked to make him feel older than he felt already, because it amused her, because in fact his age made no difference whatsoever to her.

‘I want to be able to draw you from memory, with my eyes closed,’ she said, ‘so I will never forget you.’

Startled, he stood up. Sugi came in to announce lunch was ready. Lunch was some fresh *thora-malu*, seer fish, from today’s catch.

‘When will you start painting?’ he asked while they ate. A small beam of sunlight fell on her face. Her skin glowed with a sheen of youthfulness. Through the curtain of thick hair her eyes were as bright as a pair of black cherries. He thought of all the years of living that lay between them, as heavy and as sweet as a piece of sugared coconut jaggery, irreplaceable, unexchangeable, for ever between them.

'I have already started the painting, but I must draw more. Can I come here and paint?'

Theo laughed. 'At this rate you will always be here. What will your mother say? She won't be happy with that idea. She must want to see her daughter *sometimes*.'

'I want to be here all the time,' she said.

Theo looked at her. The beam of sunlight had moved and rested on the top of her head. Her hair was a sleek smoky black; it reminded him of the blue-black cat he and Anna had once had, in that other life. But all he said was: 'I have to go to Colombo tomorrow, is there anything you need? Any paints I can try to get you?'

He did not tell her that he had done no work since she had been drawing him; he did not tell her that her presence in his house, like a beautiful injured bird, was distraction enough without the drawing. London seemed far away.

'Has your mother seen the painting?'

'No. Amma, my mother, worries too much all the time. She doesn't have time to look.' She seemed to hesitate. 'Her worry is because she hopes.'

'She hopes?'

'She hopes things will not get worse than they already are. She hopes my brother does not leave, go to England. But she also hopes he *does* go because he will have a better life there. She hopes she will never see the things she saw once. So she does not look.'

It was the first time she had made reference to her father's murder.

'We are not like you,' she said.

'But you paint,' said Theo, '*you* still look.' And he thought how it was, that this beautiful place, with its idyllic landscape of sea and sky and glorious weather, had lost its way. Both through the lack of human intervention and, also, because of

it. How many generations did it take before all the wondrous things of the island could be described again? Twenty years? Fifty years? Would a whole generation have to grow and be replaced before that could happen?

‘You must never stop looking,’ he said firmly. ‘Never. Even when it becomes hard you must never stop. Also, you are a woman. It is important for women to do something about what they see. Only then will there be change. My wife was like that, she would have loved your drawings.’

‘Your wife? Where is she?’

‘She’s dead,’ said Theo.

He kept his voice steady; surprisingly he did not feel the usual sharp stab of bitterness. The beam of sunlight had moved and now shone against the edge of the huge mirror that stood above the Dutch sideboard, reflecting the fine golden sea dust that foxed its surface. Sugi came in with some mangoes. The afternoon heat, dazzling and yellow, was at its worst. It stood in abeyance outside the open door.

‘What was her name?’ asked Nulani, after Sugi had gone.

‘She was called Anna.’

He noticed they had both slipped into their native Singhalese. Was pain easier to deal with in one’s mother tongue? Nulani was thinking too.

‘My brother has a long scar on his leg,’ she said.

When he cut it he had cried. She could remember how his leg had bled, she told Theo. The blood had poured out like rain.

‘There was no blood when Father died. After the ambulance took him away to the mortuary I went back to look at the road. I wanted to see the black dust. It was his dust, his body dust. That was all there was of him.’

She had rubbed the palm of her hand in it, she told Theo, until someone, some neighbour, had pulled her away. She still

knew the exact spot where it was. There was a traffic island there now. It was her father's headstone. It was her scar.

'You have a scar, no?' she said. 'While I have been drawing you I have felt it. It is all over you, no?' She traced the shape of his spine in the air. 'It is under your skin, between the back-bones,' she said.

'It was a long time ago now.'

'Is that why you came back?'

'No, yes . . . partly.'

'It will get better here,' said Nulani softly.

She was too young to give him firm comfort but her certainty, though fragile, comforted him anyway. He was twenty-eight years older than her. Mango juice ran down her arm as she ate. Her lips were moist. Anna would have loved a child, he thought. Her generosity would have rushed in like waves, enveloping Nulani. Why had they never come here when Anna was still with him? Fleeting, he thought of his old home in London, with its books and rugs and old French mirrors that filled the apartment with the light that was always in short supply. How different it was now, where they shuttered out the light instead.

The sun had moved away from the glass as they finished their meal and Theo lit a cigar. Nulani was fidgeting, wanting to get on. She remembered she had to go home. Her uncle, her mother's brother, was coming to see how his niece and nephew were. He was all they had for a father these days.

'Sugi will clear the space at the back for you to paint,' said Theo finally. 'You can come any time you like, but I shall be in Colombo tomorrow.'

He waved, watching her walk away, the dust from the garden washing brown against her open-toed sandals.

* * *

After he had cleared the room Sugi polished the floor with coconut scrapings. He rubbed as hard as he could, using first his left and then his right foot until the house smelt of it and the floor shone like marble. Then he went outside into the backyard and chopped open a *thambili*, an orange king coconut, and drank from it. After that he went back to work. There were several jobs he hoped to finish before Mr Samarajeeva returned from Colombo. He liked to surprise him with some small task or other well done. Last time it had been the fixing of the stone lions to the garden wall. The time before that he had painted the shutters.

Mr Samarajeeva was always weary when he returned from Colombo. He looked as he did when Sugi had first seen him, on the day he came to live here, walking from the station with his bags, a piece of paper in his hand, the address of the beach house on it. He had asked for directions and Sugi had brought him to the house, and stayed ever since. At the time he thought Mr Samarajeeva was a foreigner, in his fine tropical suit, with his leather suitcases and his hat. But then Theo had spoken to him in their mother tongue with such fluency that Sugi had grinned.

‘I have been away a long time,’ said Mr Samarajeeva. ‘But my Singhala isn’t bad, is it?’

He had wanted Sugi to work with him, help him set up his life here in the house. He would need some cooking, some domestic chores and some house maintenance. Could Sugi manage all that? Sugi could. As there was no one else to talk to, Mr Samarajeeva talked to Sugi. When his things arrived from London he unpacked them with Sugi and talked about his life there. He unpacked several framed photographs. They were of the same woman, blonde, curly-haired, smiling at the camera.

‘My wife Anna,’ he told Sugi.

Then he unpacked his books. There seemed to be hundreds

of books. There were other things from his old life. Later Sugi found out more about his wife. He tried to imagine the type of woman who had collected all these things. The mirrors, the plates, the cutlery. She must have been a fine woman, thought Sugi. When he found out Mr Samarajeeva was famous, the books he had written, and soon the film, he felt it his duty to warn him. These were troubled times. Envy and poverty went hand in hand with the ravaged land, he said. Even though he was a Singhalese, Mr Samarajeeva should be careful. His sympathy for the Tamil children was too well known. The house should be made more secure. Locks were needed for the shutters and the doors. The garden wall needed to be repaired in order to keep intruders out. Sugi made a list. Theo smiled lazily. He did not stop Sugi but he did not care much either.

‘Sir,’ said Sugi genuinely puzzled, ‘you don’t understand. There can be sudden outbreaks of trouble here. When you least expect it. You must be careful. People know who you are and they talk too much in these parts. It’s not as you remember, no?’

All this was before the Mendis girl started visiting. Sugi knew the family.

‘The boy is the only son, Sir,’ he said. ‘He is arrogant, and clever. There is talk of him getting a British Council scholarship in spite of what happened to the father. The father was warned several times, you know. Before they killed him, they warned him. But he was a fearless man who spoke out against the injustice done to the Tamils long ago. So, even though he was warned, he ignored the warnings.’

He paused, remembering.

‘He was an educated man, too. He wasn’t a fool. But in the end it did him no good. He was very handsome, and he had strong principles. Always campaigning for the Tamil underdog. What they did to him was a terrible thing. But you know, Sir,

he should have been more careful. Someone should have advised him. That silly wife of his, someone.'

'And the girl?' asked Theo.

'Oh, the girl looks just like him,' said Sugi, misunderstanding. 'But you know the whole family is being watched now. They were never popular. And the boy is very selfish. He is only interested in himself.'

It was clear Mr Samarajeeva was not interested in the boy, thought Sugi, disapproving of the girl's visits.

'She comes here too often, Sir, now,' he warned. 'There are certain people in this town who are very interested in that family.'

She was friendly enough, thought Sugi, but still, she might bring trouble with her. Someone had once told him she had stopped talking after her father died, but from what he could hear she never stopped when she was with Theo. Her drawings, he reluctantly admitted, were another matter. They were good. Sir had them scattered all over the house and now, in this latest development, the girl was going to work on Mr Samarajeeva's portrait in the house. Sugi shook his head. He could not understand how the mother could care so little that she let her daughter wander around in this way. How could a respectable Singhalese woman be so negligent? Rumour was that Mrs Mendis had become unhinged since the tragedy. But then, thought Sugi, going off on another track, everyone is strange nowadays. The things that had happened in this place were turning people mad. It was not possible to have normal lives any longer. It was not possible to walk without looking over your shoulder at all times. Without wondering who was a friend and who a new enemy. Fear and suspicion was the thing they lived off, it was the only diet they had had for years. Almost every family he knew was touched in some way by the troubles, living with the things they were too frightened to talk

about. There was no point, no point to anything. One just waited, hoping. Dodging the curfew. Hoping not to put a foot wrong, thought Sugi, hoping not to tread the rusty barbed wire hidden in the sea sand.

A few nights previously Sugi had cautioned Theo again. Not that it was any use, but he had tried.

'You must not walk on the beach when there is a curfew. The army is watching. Or if they are not, then there are thugs who will watch for them. Believe me, Sir. And another thing, you shouldn't have given your talk about your book at the schools. They won't like that.'

'It is no way to live,' said Theo Samarajeeva frowning. 'No one owns the beach. Sugi, there are many countries all over the world that have trouble like this. We must not give in to the bullies.'

'Ours is a very small country,' Sugi said, shaking his head. 'No one cares about us. Why should they? Only we care about the differences between the Singhalese and the Tamils. No one understands what this fight is about. We hardly understand ourselves any more.'

Theo nodded. He brought out his pipe and began tapping it.

'When the British brought the Tamils here from India, some people thought they brought trouble to this island,' Sugi said.

Theo was trying to light his pipe but the breeze kept whipping the flame so that he had to turn away. Sugi continued to stare into space. When he spoke at last he sounded agitated.

'What is wrong with us that we behave in this way?' He watched as Theo struggled to relight his pipe. 'Isn't it possible for us to solve this thing peacefully?'

'It will take longer than we think,' Theo said. He put his match into the ashtray Sugi handed him. 'Why should the world care, Sugi?' he asked gently. 'We aren't important enough for the British any more. And unlike the Middle East, we have no

oil. So we can kill each other and no one will notice. That's why things will take longer than we think.'

He knew from his life in England, people thought Sri Lanka was a place spiralling into madness; and yes, he thought, it was true, no one cared.

They had taken to having these conversations in the evening when the curfew was on. The girl never came after the curfew. Sugi was thankful that at least her mother had the sense to keep her in at night. So Theo had only Sugi to talk to. Sugi was always careful to keep a respectful distance from Mr Samarajeeva during these discussions. Occasionally he accepted a cigarette or a beer but never anything else. He stood a little away from the chairs; he would never accept a seat. Sometimes he squatted on the step, the end of his cigarette glowing in the dark.

'I would like to see England,' he said one night. 'I think the people there are not like us.'

'No, they're not. But they have their own problems, Sugi, their own battles. Just as pointless in their different ways. And I never really felt I belonged there.'

'Even after all that time, Sir?'

'No,' said Theo with certainty. 'These are my people. *This* is where I belong.'

But Sugi was doubtful.

'Don't mistake our friendliness, Sir. We are Buddhists but these days we have forgotten this,' said Sugi. 'We are quite capable of killing. It isn't like before. When you were last here. Things are complicated now. These days we don't know who we are.'

Theo nodded in agreement. 'They should have known it wouldn't end simply,' he murmured.

'Who? The Tamils?'

'No, Sugi,' Theo said. He sounded sad. 'I mean those who

conquered us. I mean the British. Their presence casts its shadow on this island. Still.

‘Cause and effect, Sir. Just as the Buddha said.’

But Theo was following his own thoughts.

‘Why are we surprised by this war, Sugi? Has there ever been a country that, once colonised, avoided civil war? Africa? India? Burma?’

Night flowers appeared everywhere in the garden, blooming in ghostly clusters, their branches pouring scent into the air. Frogs croaked, small bats moved silently in the trees, and here and there, in the dull light of the lamp, silvery insects darted about. On one occasion Sugi shone a torch into the undergrowth, convinced a nest of snakes lurked close by. He advanced with his axe but then the moon had gone behind a cloud and he could not find a single one. At other times, on certain nights, suddenly there were no sounds at all. No drums, no radios, no sirens. Nothing moved in the darkness and at such moments Sugi’s nervousness would increase. The silence, he complained, was worse than all the noise, the atmosphere created by it, terrifying in a different way. Suspense hung heavily in the air; at such moments anything could happen. For in Sugi’s experience, most murders were committed in the lull before the full moon. Whispers alighted as softly as mosquitoes on unsuspecting flesh; whispers of torture. And the smell of death brought the snakes out. Theo listened to Sugi’s fears without speaking. But then, sometimes, on these faceless nights, as they sat talking in the garden, they would catch the unmistakable sigh of the great ocean drifting towards them. They would hear it very clearly, rushing and tugging, to and fro and across, in an endless cycle as it washed and rewashed the bone-white shore. And as always, as they listened, the sound of it comforted them both.

By the time Theo Samarajeeva returned from Colombo the

back room of his house had been cleared, the walls lime-washed, and Nulani Mendis was installed with her canvases, her paints and her cheap thinners. The house smelt of coconuts and linseed oil. He knew she was there even as he approached, even as the bougainvillea cascaded into view over the new garden wall. The light from the mirrors in this hastily devised studio flickered in a dazzling way, casting intermittent reflections on everything in the room. Theo watched through the open window as Nulani crouched on the ground working on the painting. She used rags to mix the paint, and rags to layer it smoothly on to the canvas. All around were her pencil drawings of him. He could not see her face. Slivers of light danced on her hair. He did not know how long he stood watching her. Time stood still.

After a while she moved, placing the painting against the wall beside a chair where the reflections continued to tremble, uninterrupted. There was an old jug made of thin dusty glass nearby on a shelf. Shadows poured endlessly into it where once it must have held liquid. The heat was impossible. Before he could say anything she turned suddenly and saw him. Her instantaneous smile caught them both unawares. It must have been a trick of the light, thought Theo surprised, but the day seemed exceptionally pierced by the sun.

‘So you are back,’ she said. ‘Sugi said you wouldn’t be back till later.’

How to tell her that Colombo seemed unbearably hot and crowded? That what he thought he had needed to look up in the university library had in fact been irrelevant? That he knew, if he hurried, he would be able to catch an earlier train and be back before she went home, thereby seeing her a day sooner? How to tell her all this when he was unable to understand these thoughts himself?

‘I have brought you a present,’ he said instead, handing her a

paper bag. Inside were all the colours she wanted but did not have. Cobalt blue, crimson lake, Venetian red. A bottle of pure turpentine, refined linseed oil. The paints were good-quality pigments, made in England, of the sort she had seen long ago in the English neighbour's house when she had stolen the pencils. The tubes were clean and uncrushed by use. She opened them and watched as traces of oil oozed slowly out; the colour was not far behind. They looked good enough to eat. Her bright red dress was new.

'It's my birthday today,' she said delighted, seeing him look at her dress. 'I was hoping you would come back today.'

'I know!' he said. 'Happy seventeenth birthday!'

Again the day seemed suffused by an inexplicable green lightness, of the kind he remembered in other times, in other places. Maybe there will be rain later, thought Theo, confused.

She had begun to paint him against a curtain of foliage. There were creases in his white shirt, purple shadows along one arm. She had given his eyes a reflective quality that hinted at other colours beyond the darkness of the pupils. Was this him, really? Was this what *she* saw? In the painting he paused as he wrote, looking into the distance. Aspects of him emerged from the canvas, making certain things crystal clear.

'You were looking at *me*,' she said laughing, pointing to one of the drawings.

He did not know what to say. Her directness left him helpless. Perhaps it was this simplicity that he needed in his new book. Once he had been able to deal with all kinds of issues swiftly, cut to the heart of the matter. Now for some reason it seemed impossible for him to think in this way. Had fear and hurt and self-pity done all this to him? Or was this the uncertainty of middle age? Suddenly he felt small and ashamed. He stood looking at the painting and at the girl framed by the curtain of green light, aware vaguely that she was still smiling at him.