Black Orchids

Gillian Slovo

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Extract

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Ceylon

When Evelyn looked at the toddy tapper, he looked away.

With her wavy blonde hair, pale skin and height, Evelyn was used to being stared at by Ceylonese men. Her sister always maintained that she somehow must encourage this attention. But she didn't. Absolutely not. It stopped her from looking as she would want to. And yet, as the toddy tapper's lids flickered up once more to set her in his sights, she conceded the point to Marjorie. If the attention were to end, she might miss it. She smiled.

The man did not smile back.

Embarrassed, Evelyn looked beyond him.

A rising wind had begun to sway the branches of the coconut palm and to send clouds scudding across a darkening stretch of sky. The warm, cloying damp air pressed against her.

'Must you always stray?' Evelyn's sister, Marjorie, often addressed her as if she were one of the three dogs their mother kept and an undisciplined member of the pack at that who never would respond to any bidding.

Marjorie was standing at the red-brown sanded verge of the narrow road. Having, as ever, refused to remove a single item of clothing including her white cotton jacket that was

buttoned up over her long-sleeved yellow frock, she was so hot her mouse-brown hair made dark clumped tracks down her thin neck. Her face was also reddened by the heat and by the ignominy of having to wait in front of all these natives, a circumstance that, since she never could bring herself to criticise the fiancé whose car had broken down, she now attempted to take out on Evelyn. 'And must you stare so?'

Sighing, Evelyn looked across the road. There railway tracks led in one direction to Colombo and, in the other, to the island's southernmost tip. Two sari-clad women were walking down the middle of the tracks, closely followed by a Buddhist monk in saffron robes, his upheld umbrella shielding his shaven head as he daintily over-stepped the timbers on which the rails rested. Such a peaceful sight. Evelyn was seized by an impulse to cross the road and the railway tracks and keep on going until she got to the rubber trees beyond, there to dig a groove and watch the oozing out of that thick, white mucus which, hitting air, would congeal elastic. But if she did, she'd miss the moment she'd been awaiting.

Having agreed to chaperon Marjorie and Gordon on their day trip down south, Evelyn had wished and wished that they would pass this knot of palms in time for the toddy tapping, and wished again (because she knew Marjorie would say no) that they could stop and watch. And then just as they were passing, Gordon's Austin had snorted and banged, emitting acrid fumes, and had ground to a stop and, by the look of the growing cluster of men, their heads tucked under the raised bonnet, there was not going to be any quick way of getting the car back on the road. Evelyn was in luck.

She was exhilarated. It happened increasingly these days.

She would be possessed by an excitement whose source she did not quite understand. Her mother said it was her age, her sister that it was her way of getting attention, and her ayah that it was all the changes about to take place. But Evelyn thought there was something much more mysterious at play. A premonition; no, it wasn't just a premonition it was more a certainty that something good was about to happen.

That early morning as she had lain in bed listening to the rhythmic thwack of the ceiling fan beating its giant arms through the muggy thickness of the air, she had been possessed by this same certainty. Still dark although the household would soon begin to stir. First the kitchen staff rising and washing themselves outside before putting on the pots to boil. Then the sound that had run right through Evelyn's childhood, the rhythmic scraping of a grater against coconut to produce tiny flakes to thicken and add taste to sambols and curries beloved of the staff (and Evelyn as well). These along with the moist squares of kiri bath rice or paper-thin scooped hoppers were exotic accompaniment to the boarders' English breakfast.

Evelyn had been bursting with expectation of the day to come and gripped by a conviction that her life, directionless since she had left school, was about to open up even if she didn't know how.

Her wooden shutters were propped half open. There was no glass to stop her peering out beyond the intricate iron fretwork to breathe in the egg-yolk closeness of the pre-dawn dark. A neighbour's dog began to bark, setting off another. In the garden her mother's latest rescued stray lifted up his head to sniff the air.

It was already airless and stifling hot. Going through the curtain that separated her bedroom from the corridor, Evelyn had come upon Minrada stretched out on her bedroll. Although Minrada, always a light sleeper, must have known that Evelyn was there, she had kept her eyes tight shut even when Evelyn had leaned down to whisper in her ear, 'I'm only going out for air.' She tucked a stray strand of Minrada's still glossy black hair behind her ear before kissing the old woman gently on the forehead and moving on.

Down the long teak-lined corridor, her passing stirring up the curtains that served as partition to her mother's bedroom and her sister's, the rustle of this fabric a gentle counterpoint to the snores that penetrated the doors behind which the lodgers upstairs lay.

Evelyn had picked her way past the lounge's three-piece suite that, bequeathed by her mother's mother, was jammed up against the rattan chairs and love seats that had come with the house.

She had been happy, on the point of singing out. How wonderful to have possession of this place without the hindrance of its daytime bustle, scrubbings and gratings and washings and cookings, the monotonous cycle of a household that survived by renting out rooms to English ex-servicemen who administered this soon to be cast off colony.

The other servants would all still be asleep in the back room that adjoined the kitchen. Evelyn left the house, as she rarely did, through the front door. She stepped out to air thick with moisture. Pulling the door shut, she had considered walking along the veranda that ran the whole length of

this front part of the house. But as this might wake her mother and Marjorie, she had climbed down the wooden steps and into the garden.

A half-suppressed yip from the new dog. The other two merely had sniffed and licked her outstretched hand before slumping back down, conserving their energy for the day.

Standing, waiting for the darkness to differentiate, Evelyn had begun to see the outlines of the wide stretch of lawn and beyond it, the high bushes that lined the garden fence. That moment before dawn was filled with sounds that her bedroom fan had filtered out, the rustling of frogs and palm squirrels in the undergrowth, the trundle of a rickshaw on the dirt street, the clop of a horse-drawn cart and, spiking above these, the percussive chatter of fruit bats coming in to roost on the branches of the towering tree next door. The high snarling of the already settled rose up into the fading night, escalating to an abrasive screech as they were jolted by the crash landings of clumsy newcomers.

By dawn the bats would all have roosted, soft tattered lumps of dark cloth clinging with their feet to the topmost branches, their long finger wings furled around their bodies and occasionally fanning out. And if the bats were almost all back, then somewhere soon the red fireball of the sun would rise. Not that Evelyn would be able to watch the sunrise, their rented house having been constructed in such a way that day followed night and night day without any of the fireworks that should attend them.

Which, Evelyn had thought, said much about their life, and their place, in this Ceylon.

'Dreaming again?'

For once Evelyn had reason to be grateful for her sister's scolding. It would not do to miss the first moment of the climb. As Marjorie, having distributed another morsel of her considerable reserves of spite, moved off, Evelyn looked back to the knot of palm trees.

The toddy tapper was double-hitching up his sarong and tying it at the waist so as to free himself of restraint. His shirt gaped open. She could see the outline of shadowed ribs beneath.

Behind him and running up the serrated trunk of the palm was a succession of knotted pieces of rope that were to be his ladder. The tree had been bent by years of driving winds so that even as it stretched up into the changeable sky it leaned towards the ocean. Such a giant of strength with its long trunk, drooping fronds and thick high spray burst of orange coconut flowers. A tree to match the ingenuity of its human allies, the tappers who, high up, had attached three rope guide-lines – two for the legs, and one for the hands – running them through the air to a second tree some ten feet away and on again on to the next to

produce, between these seven differently sized palms, a roped gangway.

The tapper took up his thick leather working belt and slung it low around his waist. Into the deep, dark brown wooden box that hung off the belt he slotted a flat-bladed knife for the cutting away of branches, a broad, curved knife for the slashing open of coconut flowers and a bulb-shaped wooden tapping tool. He moved the box until he could easily stretch back his long arm and pull out any implement. He bent again, this time to pick up a rope which he coiled, so fast she could barely catch the movement of his hands, before securing it to his belt. Lastly, he tied on the bowl that was the kernel of a browned and dried labu fruit.

Then across his lined face, thin to match his wiry body, there passed an expression she couldn't quite decipher. Doubt, she thought, as the expression settled – he has forgotten something. As if in confirmation, his bony hands dropped to his belt, his tapered fingers checking what he had. Finding everything in place, however, he did not start his climb. He moved, instead, over to another man and they began an earnest conversation, their heads almost touching except for the moments when one or other of them would look up, suddenly, at the sky.

She was too far away to hear what they were saying and even if she had been closer her rudimentary Sinhala would have let her down. But she knew they were worried about the wind.

She also looked up. It wasn't going to rain, she was convinced of it. It was only threatening to. And it wasn't even that windy.

Her luck, her magic, had brought them to this place specifically so she could watch him climbing. That's how it should work. What she, Evelyn Elizabeth Dorothy Williams wished for, is what she should get. And yes, she saw him nodding, and then she saw him waiting as the barrel man rolled some shredded tobacco mixed with limestone paste into a betel leaf. He handed the pellet to the toddy tapper, who chewed for a moment before letting out a stream of red spit and then moving back to the tree.

Victory. He was going to climb. An exhilaration, similar to the one that had visited her that early morning, returned.

But the toddy tapper seemed once more to hesitate. Go on, she willed, go on. He turned, suddenly, to look in her direction.

His gaze was straight and clear, unusual coming as it did from a Sinhalese stranger. And something else, something shivering underneath this inspection. Not curiosity at this white missie who had come to watch his prowess. Not derision either. Something deeper, darker and sadder. Resignation, that was what she was looking at and with this realisation there came a thought – that he was going to fall.

The man wiggled his head in that Ceylonese way, his neck moving from side to side as he gave a small elliptical nod, his recognition of her interest acknowledged and topped by a sudden smile. As his expression cleared, she read in his face the truth of what Marjorie was always telling her she did – dramatising situations to suit her own needs. The toddy tapper was mocking her.

He turned and began to climb. His knees he kept bent and open as he glided up the trunk. He was fast and he was light,

a thing seemingly constructed not from skin and bones and muscles but from air. Having reached the point, way above her, where the first branch joined the trunk he hauled himself up and there, for a moment, stood. A tall man, he looked tiny on the crest of that enormous tree whose branches were waving in the wind.

A dark bird, a black crow, flew past the tree, so close that, from Evelyn's point of view, it seemed to graze his head. Taking no notice of the bird, the toddy tapper shifted closer to the place where the branch joined the trunk. There spathes gave way to a mass of flower buds from which was hung a second bowl. He poured its liquid contents into the bowl on his belt before using his broad knife to chop at the point where a spray of palm flowers was bound, cutting through the sheath to expose a fresh surface of buds.

Now Evelyn must step away or else be hit by fragments of coconut cork that came spinning through the air, catching the light as they fell, landing on the hard and dusty ground and scattering. She picked up one small, round, faded yellow piece. Held it to her nose, breathing in that faint damp of coconut and bark, a foretaste of the thick, sweet and slightly soured toddy that would be the first product of its fermentation.

The man was already on the move. Both hands circled the top rope and pushed forward as his feet, out-turned like a ballet dancer's, glided along the two lower ropes. Even in motion he was half crouched, his knees angled, the sinews of his legs straining against the ropes that bent a little to his weight. Such an odd posture. Despite the flexion he achieved he looked less like a ballet dancer than a man-sized praying mantis, those long toes gripping and sliding along the

tightrope, moving him upwards (the next tree in the sequence being higher) until, securely on that trunk, he poured more gathered liquid into his pot.

The pot now being full, he let drop one end of his long rope. After it had touched ground, he tied the pot to the other end. He let go, the unencumbered end rising up as mirror to the falling of the heavy pot that twisted and spun its way down until it could be caught by the man on the ground. She could see the clouded grey liquid topped by a thick white foam from which there issued a pungent smell that grew more rank as the man poured it into the barrel.

Having reeled up the empty pot, the toddy tapper hacked out another opening before turning towards the third of the seven trees. It was higher than the one he was on so he must swing his leg over a branch in order to put out a foot. As he did, the wind picked up. It moved the ropes laterally so that he had one foot on the trunk and the other heading down to the place where a rope should have been but wasn't.

He is . . . Evelyn thought, holding her breath, seeing him floundering in space, trying to make contact with a rope that a fresh gust of wind swung even further away . . . he is going to fall; this thought seemingly occurring to the man, who darted back his head. But the ropes behind him were also wildly swinging. Still holding firmly to the trunk he turned to face frontward. He drew himself up.

Don't, she thought.

The man was tall and he was strong. And so alive, she thought. She spoke to herself in Marjorie's sensible voice. He won't fall, is what she told herself. He knows that danger. He'll be careful.

His foot stretched out to lock in the rope as simultaneously he took hold of the guide-line and then he was safely on both ropes, pushing down in the wind so that he bounced a little as if on a trampoline, that strong stick insect of a man moving through space as three things happened.

The first, the return of the bird, or one just like it, flying close to him, registered its jarring caw as she heard a second sound. A train – she could hear its throaty whistle. She turned briefly to see a steam engine pulling four dark red carriages. Back again and up she looked. Which was when there came the third intrusion. Another new arrival. Someone driving full throttle on a motorcycle. All these events Evelyn registered and was to remember registering for all her life, those three unrelated happenings stuck in memory because of what happened next.

The toddy tapper was moving over the last few inches of the rope. One hand holding on to the rope, he reached with the other for the trunk. The wind was swinging him but no more violently than before. And then there came the bird, the train and the motorcycle, none of which he probably noticed, and none he would probably ever notice again, for he was already falling.

From the moment he had lost his grip he must have known that he was lost. And yet, arms flailing, he grappled for a rope that was no longer in grappling distance. A gust of wind sent a cloud skittering away, and the sun shining, bright on that thin and blackened figure as it fell. That thin, double-jointed scarecrow of a man tumbling down to earth. Legs furiously pedalling at hard angles to each other as if, should he exert himself enough, he might fly up, and this even as he

was twisted down, agonisingly slowly to the beating of her heart, and far too fast for the ending of his life which came, she was sure it had, when his body hit.

And there at the red point of the spat-out betel leaf lay a jumble of fragmented skin, and bones that once had been a man.

Evelyn could hear, but distantly, the sound of Marjorie's screaming. I should go to her, she thought. She looked across at the toddy tapper's partner, equally motionless by the barrel. Somebody must, she thought . . . somebody must . . . and then somebody did.

A man striding past. Without breaking pace his hand plucking something off his head and flinging it away. She could not bring herself to look down and see what it was. Her eyes were too concentrated on the stranger as he came abreast of the fallen man and crouched down and reached out and, without hesitation, touched the dead.

The heap moved and it groaned.

The stranger turned. For a moment he seemed to be looking in her direction and in that moment she thought, he knows that it's my fault. He knows I willed this into being. But his gaze had already shifted past her as he barked out some instructions.

He was a man clearly accustomed to being obeyed. Wheels cracked over stones as a rickshaw was dragged up. Then men picked up their injured comrade and laid him in the rickshaw and hauled him off.

The stranger rose and kicked the ground. Covering the

blood, she thought. He turned and this time there was no denying that she was the focus of his scrutiny.

He sees – her thought – he sees what I have done.

The thought filled her with shame. And something, some sense of excitement, that embarrassed her.

She forced herself to meet his gaze full on. She saw a slight, wiry man with delicate features, brown eyes so dark they were almost black, thick black eyelashes and smooth honey brown skin. She also saw the strength of his resolve, an assessment reinforced by his refusal to turn away. She was the one to flinch and to blink and to look down.

There was a sprinkling of red-brown dust on her wedged brown pumps and the line of one of her nylons was twisted above the shoe. I should straighten it, she thought, but not in public, and then she thought that she would far rather take off the nylons and her shoes as well, and walk barefoot into the sea, immersing herself, and that way obliterate the image of the man who kept spinning down in memory just as the cork he had hacked out had spun.

The new arrival was suddenly close to her and bending down. For a moment she thought he might have come to straighten her nylons but instead he picked up the goggles he had earlier discarded and smiled at her. It must have been his motorcycle, she thought, remembering the sound.

There was something so familiar in his smile. She looked away, quickly, and as she did she also seemed to hear his voice; *Nice ankles* is what she seemed to hear him saying.

Surely not. A man had fallen, had almost certainly lost his life and she was thinking about this stranger's admiration for her ankles. She was appalled by her own callousness.

'Come.' One of his hands holding hers, and the other under her elbow. 'Come.' She could feel the heat of him as he half carried her over to a tree stump where he helped her sit. She closed her eyes. She felt his hand again, this time on the back of her head – pressure, although gentle, she could not resist.

'Wait until the dizziness passes.'

He was right, she was terribly dizzy, and her head so heavy. She let it drop. And there she sat, and sitting, didn't move.

She was conscious of the pressure of his hand and of a roaring sound. Not the vengeful sea but her blood pumping furiously in her ears, this noise gradually diminishing, until other things – the beat of the hot sun and the wind picking up, the cry of a bird and the rustling of palm branches, and, underpinning these, the thundering call of the waves – began to claim her attention.

'Better?' He was kneeling.

She nodded. And yes, truly she was better.

'Take your time.'

She felt her breath constrict.

'The wind was too strong. He should not have risked it. These people,' he shrugged, 'have their minds too focused on their next meal. Yesterday it rained so they didn't climb. Today, it appears, that foolish toddy tapper was determined. Or else his master was.'

Of course. It hadn't been her fault. She said, 'Will he . . . ?'

'He was fortunate. Some bones broken but with luck he will survive.' And she, despite her memory of the tumbled and bloodied heap, wanted to believe him. He's that kind of man, she thought, who makes you want to believe.

'Evelyn.' Marjorie's voice.

'My sister . . .'

'Is over there by the car. Are you strong enough to walk to her?'

A whirlwind of charm and confidence, the stranger introduced himself as Emil. So sure was he of being accepted that he had little trouble overcoming Marjorie's suspicions when he asked, and obtained, her gracious permission for him to send someone from his estate (of course, Evelyn thought, the fact that he was Sinhalese ruling class, and rich, and educated was evident in the precision of his English, his shining motorbike, and his brisk air of command) who would see to Gordon's Austin. And after that, he said, they could continue on their way.

He's going to get back on his motorcycle, Evelyn thought, and drive off, and without a further thought, found herself saying, 'I want to go home.'

'Yes.' This from Marjorie. 'Weren't you listening? We will go home. As soon as the car is mended.'

'I want to go home.' Feeling his curious gaze on her. 'I want to go now.'

Which is how she ended up riding pillion.

He steadied her as she sat side saddle before, as per instruction, swinging one leg over and swivelling to face frontward. She felt the motorcycle shake as he hefted himself on. His hands went up to his head, straightening the goggles until they lay flat across his black hair, and then he turned to tell her where to place her feet. As she rested them on the

chrome bars, she couldn't help noticing him looking at them.

'Hold me tight around the waist.' He turned away.

She wrapped her arms against the hard flat of a stomach that contracted as he kicked down. A roar and they were off.

Her first time on a motorcycle and she loved it. She loved that glorious sensation of freedom and of speed, the wind pulling back on her hair as she nestled close up to his billowing white shirt. She could feel his muscular back, hard against her, a strange feeling that she made herself swallow down.

He drove down the middle of the dirt road swerving expertly to avoid the potholes. Remembering the roar of his arrival (and with that the bird, and train as well) she knew he must be driving more slowly because of her. She couldn't help wishing he'd go faster.

The muscles in his upper arms contracted as he turned the throttle. As the motorcycle shot forward, she felt the increased push of him against her.

Looking up, she watched the flashing past of high cables that ran beside the road and noticed that, hanging off them, were fried and slithered scraps of tattered black. Bats that had been electrocuted, she thought. She remembered the sound of the fruit bats landing that early morning. She swayed.

He braked and stopped. 'Was that too fast?'

She shook her head. 'No, not too fast.' She could feel tears blearing. 'Something in my eye,' she said, hoping he would believe her.

He acted as if he did. Almost. He took out a pressed white handkerchief. For a moment as it lay there in his brown hand she thought he was going to use it as a mother might dab her daughter's eyes. What he did instead was hand the handkerchief to her. She wiped her eyes, before returning it. 'Thank you, that's much better.'

He pulled his goggles off and offered them to her.

'Oh no, I wouldn't hear of it.'

He got off the motorcycle and put them on her, walking then to adjust them at the back. And then he climbed back on and kicked down and they were off.

Soon afterwards, he steered the motorcycle away from the main road. Now she must clasp him tightly as, weaving through a grove of rubber trees, the motorcycle bounced across the rutted dirt. The goggles pressed against her eyes, and his hair against her skin. The hair was thick and sleek and black and it smelt like . . . like an orchid, she thought, although it had not occurred to her until that moment that orchids even had a special scent.

The plantation through which they were passing was peopled, although it took Evelyn a while to spot the men and women collecting sap. She knew that they must long since have registered her presence and, if called upon, would afterwards be able to describe exactly how close to him she had been, as well as the manner in which she had been disarrayed, the skirt of her white frock flaring from her waist. She saw how they nodded at Emil, some of them going as far as to tip their hats, and after they had passed, she felt curious eyes boring into her back.

The undergrowth grew increasingly more dense and the air that was displaced by the surge forward of the motorcycle felt hot and thick. She could see a bright orange festival of flowers, the topmost branches of a jungle fire tree that towered over the dark green under-pull. Were they heading straight into the jungle?

As the engine strained up a long incline, she turned to look back. They were high enough for her to see beyond the rubber plantation to the road that led back to Marjorie and to Gordon and her life. For a moment she was frightened, fear making her loosen her grip.

He instantly responded, pressing one of his hands on top of hers, shouting over his shoulder, 'We don't have far to go.'

And soon, too soon it felt, he made a sharp right hand turn and the jungle seemed magically to retreat. They were out in the open now, careering up a long dirt driveway that led past a clipped and rolling lawn up to a large house. He stopped the bike, swinging himself off.

'I'll go and call the PD.'

She put her feet on the ground but did not climb down. She was too busy staring.

The house was monumental and two storeyed and white and it stood at the apex of a vast, open garden, its long sloping roofs of green tin glimmering in the sunlight. Running along the whole of the first floor was a wide, pillared and segmented balcony. Below this, on ground level, was a gabled and shaded wrap-around veranda. She counted, and counted again to make sure, and yes there were at least ten grand windows on each level at either side of the square

entrance which, marked out by two thick white pillars, was partially concealed by tall bamboo.

A voice sounding in her ear, 'Madam.'

She hadn't noticed two people, a diminutive woman in a sari and a man in a long white shirt and white sarong, approaching. Now, holding her palms up and together and dipping forward in a gesture of respect and welcome, the woman said, 'Madam. My *lamanthani* says that you best be quickly coming in from the sun.'

Looking to the front door, Evelyn saw a second woman, also sari clad, although hers, a soft, pale pink, glittered with fine threads. This must be Emil's mother, she thought, although she couldn't help thinking that the woman, with her dark framed glasses, close-cut black hair and ferocious scowl had little of her son's elegance or his charm. A woman to be reckoned with.

'Thank you. That's very kind of your mistress.'

The man unfurled a tasselled parasol that he held up to shield her from the sun. She walked with him on one side and the woman on the other, nervous about meeting Emil's mother (how familiar his name already was), but by the time they got to the front door, the woman had gone.

'This way please, madam.' She was shown through the vast entrance hall into a drawing room whose proportions conjured up for her the contrasting image of the shabby, overcrowded lounge in the house that her mother didn't even own. Below an inlaid teak ceiling was a vast parquet floor dotted by fine woven rugs. Around these were artfully arranged sets of matching upright chairs and sofas, their light, mahogany carved arms and feet a contrast to the dark pol-

ished corner cabinets. Such a stately room, like the calm epicentre of the social whirl of the high caste *goyigama* which, thinking about the estate she had just passed through, it probably was.

'Madam, please to sit.'

She sat where indicated, and chose from the offerings on an ornate silver tray, a glass of wood apple juice. It was thick and sweet and cold. Sipping it, she was cooled by one of the room's many fans.

The maid slipped quietly from the room, leaving Evelyn to its tranquillity. In other rooms, she knew, would be other members of the family, and their guests, and the scores of servants necessary for the preservation of such sedate luxury. But in here not one unnecessary or unwanted sound would ever penetrate.

What it must be to be mistress of the house, she thought, remembering herself and her expectations that early morning. Today, she had thought, today it will begin. By which she had meant that this thing, unnameable and unknowable but that she would surely recognise when it happened, this thing of which her whole nineteen years had been lived in expectation, this moment when she would make the first step into becoming the person that she had always known she would become, would this day unfold. She thought of the impression of Emil's back against her body, his hair against her face, his hand in hers.

'No.' She said the word out loud and shook her head. Marjorie was right. Her daydreaming, when she gave rein to it, always led her into dreadful trouble.

She put down her glass, and with it her dreams, to sit and wait. Patiently at first then with growing irritation.

She was revving up this indignation, when the door opened. She saw him – Emil – standing there. She saw how he was smiling.

'I was wondering where they'd hidden you. I've sent somebody to repair your sister's car. We can be off. Ready?'

She got up thinking yes, she was more than ready.

She had to hurry to keep up as he led her through the entrance hall. He was walking so fast that she wondered whether he might be running away from something. Or from somebody, she thought, and, sure enough, before they reached the door, she heard 'Emil.' She turned to see Emil's mother.

She felt Emil stiffen and she knew (just like her, she thought) that he would rather have ignored the summons. But this woman could not easily be ignored. Short and squat and fierce, she held out her hand. 'Miss Williams, I trust my son took good care of you?'

'Yes.' Evelyn felt how firm was the grip. 'Thank you. And thank you for the cold drink.'

'No need to thank.' A curt smile. 'You are heading off home?' It sounded much more like an instruction than a question.

'Yes I am. Your son has been kind enough to offer me a lift on his motorcycle.'

'I see.' Even from behind the thick lenses of her spectacles, the displeasure she was sending to her son was evident. 'Don't you think that Miss Williams might be more comfortable in the car, Emil?'

A measured pause before Emil, the dutiful son he obviously reluctantly was, turned to Evelyn. 'My mother is right. The car will be more comfortable. Shall I not call the driver?' to which, she knew without a single doubt, there could be only one answer – yes – and one that every young woman in her position would give.

'I would prefer the motorcycle.' Dazzled by her own daring as she looked straight at him: 'if that wouldn't be too great an inconvenience?' seeing out of the corner of her eyes how startled was his mother, but also his expression of delight.

'No inconvenience whatsoever.' He opened the door for her saying 'I'll see you later,' leaving his mother no choice but to nod, grimly, after which her son, grinning, confirmed Evelyn in her conviction that, like her, he did not care what other people thought.