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Opening Extract from...

Small Circle of Beings

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ONE

1

He falls ill on a day like any other. He comes to me where I sit in the high arched window, looking down the valley. He points to his stomach, lifting up his shirt.

'I have a pain,' he says.

I look at his smooth white skin. I bend my head and kiss him there, next to the wrinkled hole of his belly button. He smells of sand.

'There,' I say. 'It'll go away now.'

But it doesn't. It's the very next day that he comes back to me – I forget where I am sitting, perhaps in the same place at the window, or at the kitchen table, peeling onions – and says:

'It's still there.'

He's such a little boy. At times when I look at him while he's busy with other things, I can see in his face the clues of inheritance: my father's frown, my mother's smile. Stephen's mouth. But I cannot, for some reason, catch a glimpse of myself in him, in his narrow dark head, his round pale eyes a little too far apart.

'David,' I say. 'It'll go away.'

'It doesn't,' he says. 'I wait, but it doesn't go.'

'Do you want some medicine?'

'Yes,' he says. 'Medicine.'

I give him a Disprin to take away the pain. And for a few hours it seems to help. I can see him from the window where I sit, as he plays alone on the lawn outside. There's a strong wind blowing and leaves go skimming across the grass.

This is where we live. There is David and myself, and there is Stephen, who is my husband. We have lived here for ten years now, in this stone-walled house with its roof of thatch. (It is the stones I love most, round and grey as bubbles.) The house is far out of town, at the end of the dust road that goes up into the mountains. There are other houses farther down the valley, but the nearest is two kilometres away. From the window where I like to sit there's a view only of slopes covered in forest. On clear days you can see the dam in the distance, silver and still. But usually the days aren't clear; the air is thick with heat or mist. In summer it rains.

We grow fruit and vegetables in the cleared acre below the house. I like to stand there with the round shapes of avocados swelling in the air above my head. There are carrots too, and lettuce. Farther down the hill are tomatoes, beetroot, onion. There are grapefruit trees. The planted rows, hacked out of the earth, go winding round the hill. I stand and survey them from the top of the slope. Scents rise to my nose, leaking out of fissures in the ground. Berries. Petals.

It's a wild land, this. At the edges of the tamed space a dense wall of jungle rises, woven with leaves so that it seems impenetrable. But this is not the case: there are paths that lead into the forest, if you know where to look. I've walked most of them by now. Often, without conscious reason, I find myself on a narrow track leading off under the trees and am compelled to follow. Below the house, a few hours' walk, is a lake much smaller than the dam I can see from the window. Above the house the forest continues in successive tiers, building in dark layers toward the stony crests of the hills. I haven't been far that way; there is something truly primitive in the vegetation here. The earth

too is black and secret, boiling with roots like the surface of a deep, infested sea.

It's from up here, from its occult sources in the tops of the mountains, that the bad weather comes. It rolls down towards us in a thick white cloud, absolutely silent, tumbling in perfect slow motion across the carpet of trees. In half an hour the mist is sliding all about the house. Stranded and afloat, we are freed from our moorings on the ground for a little time.

If you wander off to the right of the house, the forest is fairly thin. There are pine trees here, so no undergrowth grows to catch the feet. But the needles also lie in deep brown drifts, covering over the path like snow. It is possible to walk for a long way in the gloomy green light, under a dark roof upheld by the trunks of trees. If you go far enough, however, the trees do come to an end, and you will find yourself at the edge of a scrubby field that leads down to plantations of trees far larger than ours. Our territory ends here and the neighbouring farm begins. It's a pleasant place to stand, giving a view of cultivated lands arranged in patterns discernible only from here, so high. Labourers work there among the trees, picking the fruit as if to feed an endless hunger. But it isn't theirs.

To the left of the house, the path goes only a little way. Then you come to a cluster of huts, daubed with paint and thatched with grass. A community lives there, but one I do not understand. There are men, women and a great many children. There are chickens and goats. A continual clamour rises from this place: a noise of shouting, singing, clucking and banging. On certain nights there is a radio playing, but the music is harsh and strange. I can hear it from the house, from the open window where I like to sit. There have been nights when the sound of this music has pierced me like a

chill, so that I have to rub myself to stay warm. I've been only seldom to the huts, though they are closer to me in distance than any of the real neighbours I have. I don't like it there and the people look at me strangely. They are as odd as their dwellings, with their flat bony faces and shiny black skin. They speak a different language. They do not like me.

When *they* are ill, they consult a doctor who lives alone in the jungle above the house. Or so I am told. I think of this man, this hermit, who inhabits, I imagine, a cave of some sort, a recess in the rock. Although I have never seen him, I dare to picture him in my head: tall and thin, hung about with beads and skins. His nails are long. When he looks at me (which he does in dreams, I must confess), his eyes are luminous and large. Too large. They look into me and see all that I would try to hide from such a gaze as this: my willingness, above all, to believe in his magic.

There is something in me that finds all this attractive. Yes. From the first, before David falls ill, I respond to the power of herbs, of fire, of spells cast in the dark. There is that in me which sees a logic in the tossing of bones, the patterns of entrails on the ground. But I know, too, that this is shameful and absurd. No white woman, no matter how far out of town she may live, can have respect for the rituals of these inscrutable dark people. It is better by far to be afraid of them.

So I avoid the cluster of huts. My only contact with them for over a year now has been in the fact that my servants live there. But they are only two out of a great many. Each morning, promptly at eight, half an hour after Stephen has disappeared down the road in his car, they appear from the leaves at the edge of the grass that surrounds the house. They walk one behind the other, not talking or touching.

That is their way. Salome and Moses. Nothing like their biblical fellows, this pair is old and dour. They wear torn clothes with no regard for colour or appearance. They put on overalls to protect themselves from dirt as they work. I give them their tasks. Salome's domain is inside, within the walls. I set her to polishing, to sweeping, to scrubbing. Usually I supervise her in her labour, but there are days when I join her. In a rush of energy I roll up my sleeves and fall to my knees. Alongside her, so close that our flanks are touching, I help to scrub the floor. It's at times like these, in the friction of bristles on the boards, or the sudden accidental collision of our hips, that I feel closest to her. She has, on such an occasion, smiled at me.

For the most part, though, she seems not to like me much. She is polite enough, dipping her head and cupping her hands in thanks when I give her a gift. This happens at Christmas or at Easter, the holidays we like to observe. There are other times, though, when I will give her a present out of sheer impulsive charity. Out of, I sometimes suspect, a need to exact something more from her than this reserved deference, this dipping of her head. I give her old clothes. I give her money. Once, in a fit of absurd generosity, I pressed into her hands a book. She looked at me then: a glance of direct surprise. But she did not yield up her gratitude. She merely, as usual, bent her head and accepted the token with those same cupped hands, muttering acknowledgement as if I had presented her with something utterly worthless.

Which perhaps I had.

Moses is, if anything, less pleasant than she. He is a short fat man, whose tight curly hair is turning grey on top. He hardly ever speaks, responding to the orders I give him with a small, compressed blinking of his eyes. He never

looks directly at me, but turns his gaze out sideways, focusing on something beyond my sight, behind and to the left of me. I don't like Moses. There is something menacing in his quietness. Or perhaps it is in the size of his hands, which are as large as steaks. His nails are broad. I watch him sometimes from my seat in the high arched window as he tends to the garden. For this is his place of work: the cultivated moat of green around the house that separates us from the encroaching jungle beyond. There are flowerbeds here. I have planted daisies, lilies, carpets of poppies. At the verge of the bottom lawn there is a wide deep bed. Roses are planted here. They give off a scent: a raw but elegant smell that drifts on the air like invisible colour.

Moses tends the garden. He does so without love, without the slightest indication of interest. I've watched him from my window as he moves between the flowerbeds, trailing in one hand the brutal blades of the shears. His feet are heavy as he walks. Yet there is in his rough hands a kind of tenderness I cannot see. The garden grows. At his hard touch, the flowers burst open like blobs of paint. The leaves jostle and surge. It makes me unhappy to see; I who would do the same, but who cannot understand his secrets. I am gentle with the plants, I mind them carefully. But, under my care, they wilt and die. There is nothing I can do. It is for me to plan the garden, to envisage the arrangements of colour and the shapes of the beds. It is for Moses, squat, untalkative Moses, to watch the seeds.

For all of this, I would be happy to let him go. I am, I think, afraid of him. I believe him capable of things, of deeds I try not to imagine. Though he is married, I believe, to the harmless Salome. (What do they talk about as they lie in bed, I wonder? Is it me? Do their tongues at last break loose and say mocking, malicious things about me, their

ridiculous figure of a mistress, that keep them giggling long into the night?)

But there is another reason, apart from the flowers, that I cannot dispense with this man.

There is, you see, one other person in this place, who inhabits the area with us. It is difficult for me sometimes to regard her as entirely human, despite the evidence of her four limbs and her face. This person is my mother. When I was a little girl, all of thirty years ago, although she stood over me, pale and bloodless as a figure carved from ice, I barely noticed her. Now she is always at the edges of my sight, sidling along the verges of flowerbeds, creeping next to the walls. It is all I can do to ignore her. By some bizarre trick of fate, now that she is truly at the very perimeter of my life, she looms larger in my mind than she ever did before.

My mother is mad. This condition beset her one day, one evening, as she went about her existence with the calm of habit. Or so it seemed to me. Actually – as I was told afterward by the doctor who treated her – her madness advanced on her by the slowest degrees. It took over her mind, the doctor said, bit by bit, but became evident to those around her only when it passed a certain point. That point was reached one evening, when at the supper table she picked up her plate and hurled it with startling force against the far wall. It was still full of food, which sprayed out in intricate patterns across the floor. There were guests present, one of whom was myself (I had left home already and was living alone in town), and we sat in amazed silence and stared at her where she stood, napkin in hand. Oh, she was a beautiful woman, my mother, even then: a serene figure, with a wooden face that belonged on the prow of a ship. She smiled.

'It was poisoned,' she said.

She has lost that beauty since then. For a time she continued to live alone in this too-huge house, managing affairs with reasonable competence. But it became increasingly clear that events had fallen beyond her grasp. When she'd spoken of poison, she was referring not to her food, but to her daily existence in this lonely house on the hill.

People were out to get her, she told me (on my regular visits from my little flat in town). Old friends desired her wealth. Murderers lurked beneath the bed. She wept at night. I knew my duty and I faced it with bitter calm. There was nothing I wanted more than for her to die and vanish. Nevertheless, I packed up my belongings and, in a single day, moved back here, to the home in which I'd grown up and which I'd left for ever just two short years before. I looked after her. I cared for her as completely as I had any of the flowers in the garden outside, and she wilted as quickly at my touch. The madness progressed. I observed its daily triumph as the things on which she'd once prided herself began to go bad. Her frosty, backswept hair went unbrushed and unwashed. Her long, thin nails, painted grey, were bitten to the quick. Her jewellery and dresses, boxes and cupboards of them, were untouched; she wore a single slacksuit, blue at first, but growing darker and darker as it was left dirty. Her body, too, decayed: that skin, with its lustre, its high silver sheen, became cracked and loose, as if it were the covering of some larger mysterious creature beneath that was trying to break out. She smells, I hate to say; when she comes near to me, I have to breathe through my mouth. And, wherever she goes, she is followed by a decrepit, tattered poodle, blind in one eye and lame in two legs, that totters behind her like a diminutive parody. This

dog was once a pampered, powdered beast, tied up with ribbons; it was the object of her most absurd affection. It cannot understand its own demise any more than hers, but limps around in the hope, I suppose, that its day will return.

(There is an irony that does not escape me: all that most angered me about my mother when I was young has decayed now, and is the source of my greatest shame.)

All this simply to explain: Moses is a servant as old as this house. He worked here when my mother was a child and being raised by *her* mother. There is – how, I do not know, but there is – a pact between Moses and the mad old woman that will defy my wants. I cannot get rid of him. It would break my mother's heart. On the days that he doesn't come in, Sundays or other holidays, she is almost beside herself. She wanders about the lawn, calling to him in a voice as strained and thin as the cry of a bird.

So I endure this man. From the time that he arrives in the morning I have little trouble from my mother, who stays close to him in order to keep an eye. Even when she doesn't follow him around, she hangs about the window of her back room and peers out at him through the curtains. She lives back here, in a separate flatlet once used to house guests. She moved there when I married Stephen, shortly after I returned home. She hates my husband. I think she always did, even before her madness took command. Why I cannot say; he's always been good to her. But he evokes in her an irrational response that leads her to make up extraordinary tales. Often she has taken me aside with an air of grim frenzy, and warned me that Stephen is plotting to kill me. She has seen him, she says, mixing poisons in the kitchen while I'm out. A few times she has seen him paying Salome to stab me.

All of this I hear with amusement, and fear. Her thoughts are insane, but they are based on fact: Stephen mixes drinks in the kitchen, he gives Salome her wages. This is the form of my mother's madness: it distorts the meaning of what she sees.

But I pity her her mind. What terrible visions she must have when the wind moves the leaves outside her window at night. Certain sights appal her. She cannot bear it, for instance, when Moses mows the lawn. For some inexplicable reason, probably least known to herself, Moses pushing the mower causes her great distress. For this I have found a bizarre solution: for the past three years now this chore has been done under cover of darkness. Every few weeks, on a night with a clear moon, Moses mows the lawn. It is, you may well believe, a strange and wonderful sight: the squat black man gliding across the moonlit lawn. While my mother, unsuspecting, sits in her room and dreams.

I did not wish to raise the subject of my mother now, and have discussed her in far greater depth than I intended, but there is another thing that must be said, if only in passing. I have been told by the doctor who treated her that her madness is not entirely explicable. He suspects, however, that it is a hereditary thing. I think at once of my mother's sister, my aunt, whom I did not know well, but who is, I believe, in an institution somewhere. And so confirm this doctor's veiled warning, if only in my own mind: I too shall be mad. There will come a time in my life when, unbeknown to myself, my comprehension of events will begin to change in subtle ways. I will fail to grasp the true significance of words. People will threaten me, will plan my downfall behind my back. The thought of this is terrible to me: I cry. Stephen tries to comfort me, but there is nothing he can

really say. If this will happen, it will happen despite my will.

I have by now, of course, accepted the idea. At times it seems an interesting notion: to endure the shrinking of my brain until my world is an acre of lawn and two dirty rooms. Who will care for me then? Stephen, perhaps? Or David? It's possible even that Moses will relent and take me under his wing. Perhaps I will reach a reconcilia tion with my mother, and we will sit and drink tea together, cackling to ourselves, while the lawn is being mowed outside. At other times the idea repulses me: I think of myself as she is now, and feel ill. I want to wash, I want to change my clothes. I want to be seen as a person with pride.

To protect myself from this eventuality, I guard my thoughts. I constantly test what I believe, asking myself: can this be true?' Is this so? In such a manner do I hope to put off what may be inevitable. But, for now, I am safe.

So there are, in fact, the six of us: Stephen, David, my mother and I. Salome and Moses. Between us we see to the running of the house. We maintain relations. We keep things safe.

This is the way it is.

By the time Stephen gets home in the late afternoon, I have put David to bed. He's been complaining that the pain has returned. The Disprin that I gave him has failed to work. He doesn't feel hot to me, but there is no reason to disbelieve him. I sit by him in the bed and read to him. Later he falls asleep. When I hear the noise of the bakkie outside, I get up and go out.

Stephen stands on the back lawn outside the garage.

'David is ill,' I tell him.

'What's the matter?'

'Nothing,' I say. 'I don't think it's serious. Don't look now, but my mother is watching.'

He does look. She is crouched at her window, staring out from beneath a lifted corner of the curtain. As our eyes meet hers, the curtain falls.

I put my arm about him. Together we go inside.