Bel Canto

THERE ARE POLICE EVERYWHERE. From a distance it is the first thing he sees. Even before he hears the noise of sirens, the screams. Even before the BBC team appears. Acid-green jackets move grimly about, directing the traffic, securing blue-and-white tape, herding people away. That's what he sees. A red, double-decker bus stands parked at an odd angle, black smoke pouring out of its windows. There is glass everywhere. His feet crunch on it and he notices shards glinting dangerously in the light. His first thought is, Someone might cut themselves; his second is, There must have been a fire.

'Move along, please, clear the path,' the policeman shouts, roughly.

He pushes several people back with the palms of his hands. Then he speaks into his radio. There is a smell of sweat and rubber. And explosives.

'We need another ambulance over at checkpoint four,' the policeman says. 'Quickly. They're bringing more out. Have all the hospitals been alerted?'

'We need the reinforcements, now!'

'Yes. They're on their way.'

'What happened?' Simon asks, urgently. 'Was it a fire?'

His voice is hoarse; his throat has tightened up. There is an even tighter constriction across his chest. He has been running. All the way over Lambeth Bridge, along Horseferry Road, up Park Lane towards

Edgware Road. He wanted to go in the opposite direction, towards the Oval and the house named Brixton Beach. For a moment he had wavered, wanting to call at the house, knock on its blue-fronted door, but then he had carried on running. There are no taxis to be had. The traffic is gridlocked. It will be gridlocked for hours. He should be at work, he should be at his post, standing by waiting for the admissions, triaging the flood of casualties, but he has fled, unthinkingly. Never in the whole of his professional career has he behaved in this irresponsible way. Panic chokes his voice; fear grips his limbs as he scans the faces in front of him.

'Clear the path, please.'

The noise of yet another ambulance siren deafens him. He isn't used to hearing the sirens from the outside. He is used to the calm of the operating theatre, the controlled energy of work. Scalpels placed where they are always placed, nurses ready to second-guess his moves. He is not used to chaos.

'Oh my God! Oh God! Look! Look!' a woman screams.

Her voice goes on and on screaming, making sounds but no sense. It is only then Simon glances up and sees the bus. Its top has been completely blown off. Roof, seats, windows, people. Half a bus really, standing motionless save for the thin wisps of smoke sailing lazily out, upwards like a kite; into a sky of startling blue. A man in rags with blackened face and arms walks past holding on to a young boy. Tears furrow his face leaving rivulets of white flesh. Two new ambulances edge their way slowly forwards, sirens blasting, driving the onlookers aside, clearing a path, deafening in intensity, removing all possibility of speech. Three policewomen stand forming a barrier with their arms stretched out, faces braced for what they are about to receive. In a moment the ambulances are swallowed up in the crowd. Simon can smell burning. As the sirens grow fainter he begins to hear other, human sounds and he struggles to move forward.

'Jesus! What is it? What's happened?'

'Does anybody know?'

'Don't touch them … for God's sake!'

'Oh my God!'

'Mummy!'

A child's voice with its upwardly rising intonations, distinct and pure above the cacophony of cries, drifts towards him. The blood pounds in his head, blurring his eyes, making him nauseous. He was hot from running, now he is shivering. A motion of a different kind grips his whole body.

'Let me through,' he says. 'I'm a doctor.'

Inside the blasted double-decker bus, as his eyes focus, he sees that trapped bodies are burning. Some of them are simply torsos without heads.

'I'm a doctor,' he shouts. 'Let me through.'

'I'm sorry, sir, can I see your ID, please?'

The ambulancemen are moving a stretcher and two blood-covered individuals are helped inside. Simon reaches for his doctor's pass then realises he has left the meeting without his jacket. He has nothing. No ID, no mobile phone, no wallet. If she were trying to reach him she would not be able to. He has rushed out, knowing … knowing what? That he couldn't wait? That he needs to see for himself?

'Could you move back, please,' the policeman says.

His voice is edged with panic, bewildered and with a threat underlying the calmness in it. The glint of metal on his belt is the firearm he is prepared to use in case of necessity. Sweat pours down his face as he answers his radio. He is young, mid-twenties, and what has just happened is overwhelming him. It will mark him forever.

'We don't know what's going on, sir. We've only been told there's been a series of explosions. In the underground. Yes, sir.'

But the bus?

'Al-Qaeda?' asks another voice, uncertain, shaky, on the verge of hysteria. A woman's voice. 'Oh my God no! Not *here,* not in Britain?'

'Don't know, madam. Not at this stage. Sorry.'

Simon feels weak. He *has* to get to the entrance of the tube station; he *has* to find out what's actually happened. He needs a mobile phone desperately. Then he remembers, of course, all his phone numbers are in his own phone. He can't remember any of them. So he pushes his way across the crowds that are gathering and crosses the road, weaving through the stationary traffic. Another policeman stops him.

'Sorry, sir, could you step aside, please. This area has been closed off to the public.'

'I'm a doctor,' he says again, his voice barely above a whisper.

'Can I see your ID, then, sir?'

But of course he hasn't any. Helplessly he is shepherded across the road, along with a few other onlookers. The sun is exceptionally strong. There isn't even a small breeze. It is a morning of tropical intensity, a day for spending on the beach, perhaps. There are more sounds as another fleet of ambulances rushes past. The sirens have hardly stopped since Simon arrived.

'Must be sending them out from several hospitals, I reckon,' the man beside him remarks.

'It means a lot of people are involved,' adds a woman nearby. 'My mobile isn't working.'

'Nor mine.'

'The network is blocked,' someone else informs them. 'Or they've been reserved for the emergency services.'

Voices cut across each other, conversations interlock. A woman with a pushchair is crying helplessly.

'My daughter was going on a school trip today but she had a tummy bug so she stayed at home.'

'Really?'

'Yes. They would have come to Leicester Square and gone across to the National Gallery.'

'Some poor parents must be going mad.'

There is another wave of wailing ambulances, louder than before, nearer. How many more are needed? One stops on the wrong side of the now deserted road, flagged down by two police officers who have parked their car diagonally across the kerb. Sniffer dogs prowl at their feet. Simon runs towards the paramedics stepping out of one of the vehicles.

'John,' he cries, before the policemen can stop him. 'John!'

The sniffer dog bares his teeth. Overhead a plane flies slowly through the sky. It is so low that everyone looks up, startled. The moment is frozen, trapped within a bubble of terror. Held steadily.

The plane, it has a blue and yellow tail, glides smoothly above the trees and disappears between two tall buildings.

'Dr Swann,' the paramedic says in surprise, and the policeman hesitates.

'I was in the area,' Simon says quickly and with deathly calm. 'Can I help?'

'They're on standby, sir. At Tommy's. And at Charing Cross. It's okay,' John tells the policeman, who discreetly lowers his gun. 'He's one of ours, off duty.'

And he nods, grimly, as though he has already braced himself for the sight they are expecting.

'I think it's a big one, sir, judging by the fuss. Everyone's on the highest alert. Top priority. Must be bad.'

He shakes his head. He has just been called away from a pile-up on the slip road to the motorway. How many miracles are they supposed to perform in a day?

'Let me come with you, John,' Simon pleads as they move off together towards the tube station.

At the entrance to the underground a shudder runs through him. It travels from his feet upwards towards his head. The scene before him is of biblical proportions. A man, or is it a woman, head swathed in a makeshift bandage cut from a shirt, is being helped across to the emergency post recently set up on the grass verge. For a moment the figure hovers, stumbles, its veiled face catching the light. A photographer clicks his camera. This image of a bandaged face will become iconic, one of the images of the year, the decade, even. Someone somewhere loves the face under these bandages. Simon moves towards the emergency post. A waiter has brought chairs for the walking wounded; the lucky ones. There are others not so lucky.

Firemen are bringing out stretcher after stretcher of wounded, mutilated bodies. Cries fill his ears. A charred body, indistinguishable in every way except for a bracelet on a blackened arm, lies motionless. A man, lying face up, stares at nothing, unaware his guts are exposed to the summer breeze. A woman, legs gone from the knees downward, sliced clean, unconscious but still breathing, waits to be whisked off in

an ambulance. Two paramedics are already triaging the arrivals. Some to ambulances, some to be treated first for minor injuries, others, with a sheet over them, to be identified later. A cameraman is recording the scene silently. Picasso's *Guernica*, thinks Simon, before he can stop himself. And something else, too, he thinks. He sees a room, lit from above, as though with searchlights, and a cupboard that opens out to reveal the hull of a boat. He hears voices. *Searching for Lost Time.* A figure lies before him, long dark hair, caked with blood, eyes closed. He has seen so much blood in his life. Blood and its seepage has been the thing he deals with best. But this blood, this flesh is different. He cannot bear it. All around the drenching terrible smell of burning flesh and soot fill the bright blue sky. Scorched limbs, voices pleading with him, voices giving out instructions.

'Help me, help me!'

'This one's lost a deal of blood …'

'This one for Tommy's …'

He is working on autopilot, going through the routines, but all the time he's looking, looking. Every face, every limb, searching for what he dreads finding, but looking anyway. His heart is crying, he should not have come; he should have stayed in the hospital. Waited. But he is here now and he will not leave until he knows. One way or another. Perhaps, he thinks, the thought forming into words, springing into life, perhaps she's in the tunnel. Suddenly all his strength deserts him and he feels the ground heave up towards him.

'I'm sorry,' he mumbles, but no one hears him.

Perhaps if he goes back she'll ring. Perhaps she is still at Brixton Beach. Safe, trying to get hold of him. Wildly he looks around, not knowing what to do, and in this fraction of a second a woman dies in front of him. The colours of death, he thinks. Why is he thinking this now?

'Who has done this terrible thing?' a voice cries. 'Who could want to hurt us this much?'

'The people of London …' the BBC journalist says into the microphone. He has been the first of the media presenters to arrive on the scene, the first to file copy; sensitive, sharp, precise.

'Bastards! What have they done?'

The cry of rage reaching his ears is an ancient one, repeated from time immemorial. Arms rise heavenwards as though in prayer. Humanity's unanswered question asked on this ghost of a morning in July. Helplessly, Simon turns towards the speaker, a man old enough to have seen the sands of Dunkirk, a man old enough to have witnessed the Battle of Britain. For on this beautiful day, even as Big Ben strikes the hour and swallows fill the summer skies, a lesser God descends. Fraught with terrible intent. Here, in the very heart of London.

Paradiso

1

ONLY THE YOUNG CAN FEEL THIS WAY. Unaware of time's passage, only they can be so trusting. It is their good fortune to live without question, storing up memories for that later day when middle age allows them to re-visit the past. Time of course will change things; time will mould and distort, lie and trick them with all its inconsistencies. But in the brief interlude, suspended between dreaming and waking, before the low door of childhood swings shut behind them forever, the young, with luck, can experience complete happiness.

On the night before Alice Fonseka's ninth birthday her father Stanley brought home two bright red apples. Stanley worked at a factory that imported all the foreign fruit for the rich Cinnamon Gardens Singhalese who could afford to live like the English.

'Apples are a luxury,' Stanley told her. 'But because it's your ninth birthday, you must experience the taste of luxury!'

He smiled without joy, being preoccupied with things other than his daughter's birthday. Tomorrow, Alice's mother Sita planned to take Alice up the coast after school to stay with her grandparents for the weekend. The baby Sita was expecting was due in a month and Alice's trip to her parents was partly to give Sita a chance to rest.

'But you can only stay for two nights,' she warned Alice, peeling the apple and cutting it into segments.

The flesh was pale and spongy. Alice ate it reluctantly.

'Why?' she demanded. 'Why can't I stay longer?'

'Two nights,' her mother said firmly. 'Finish your apple now and get ready for bed. You've got school in the morning.'

Alice scowled. She was not the slightest bit sleepy.

'I want to stay for a week.'

Visiting her grandparents was the best part of any birthday.

'Will Grandpa Bee meet us at the station?'

'Yes, he will. Now be good and get ready for bed. It will make your birthday come sooner.'

'Oh! I can't wait to see him,' Alice cried, slipping off her chair and running around the satinwood dining table excitedly.

Sita ate the left-over piece of apple. As a small child, Sita had nicknamed her father Bee. She no longer remembered her reasons for this, but the name had stuck and now everyone called him Bee, even his wife Kamala.

The next day when Sita collected Alice after school she brought the remaining apple with her, packed carefully between her daughter's overnight clothes in her blue plastic visiting bag.

'You can share it with Grandpa Bee, if you like,' she said when she met her.

Alice nodded, her eyes shining. She had been too excited to sleep last night, but although she was tired happiness rose in her like the spray from the sea. It was midday. The church clock was striking the hour. Children swarmed out of the school gates dressed in the starched, immaculate white uniforms of St Clare's College; the girls had neatly plaited, coconut-oiled hair, the boys wore gleaming shoes. Only her daughter, it seemed to Sita's critical eye, looked as though she had been rolling in the scrub again.

'*Anay*, Alice, how did you become so filthy? Have you been sitting in the dirt again? And just look at your hair!'

The child's hair, carefully plaited that morning, had come undone. There were bits of twig stuck in it and her uniform was streaked with paint.

'You've been climbing the tree again, haven't you?' Sita asked in exasperation. Her daughter's knees were covered in cuts. Alice hopped from one foot to the other, ignoring her mother.

'I'll never be eight again!' she shouted at some of the children rushing past, waving at them.

She was carrying a paper bag with presents from her classmates.

'Can we go now, Mama?' she cried, dancing about and rubbing her already filthy shoes deeper into the red earth.

Sita sighed. The year was 1973 and with every birthday her daughter seemed to become more of a tomboy.

Mrs Perris the teacher came out to talk to them. She stood in the boiling heat just outside the gate, in the road where the beggars were gathered, close to the women selling spiced ambarella and mango *sambals*, close to the palmist chalking up sherbet-pink marks on the ground. Mrs Perris hardly noticed the noise and the confusion that cartwheeled around her. She was glad to get out of school for a moment, she told Sita. But Alice saw her teacher look nervously over her shoulder as though she expected someone, the headmaster perhaps, to come out and tick her off. Several mothers collecting their children looked curiously in their direction. It was unusual for a member of staff to talk to a parent in this informal way outside the classroom. The tight security since the bomb had gone off made it difficult to be as free and easy as in the old days.

'Alice ought to be very tired,' Mrs Perris said, wagging her finger. 'I have to tell you she hasn't stopped talking today. I couldn't get a single piece of work that was worth anything from her. In fact, I moved her away from Jennifer to sit by herself, didn't I, Alice? Lucky it's a special day, huh, or I might have had to cane you!'

But the teacher was only teasing and Alice grinned, knowing this. She had the feeling Mrs Perris hadn't come out to talk about her.

'Nobody got much sleep last night,' Sita said, absent-mindedly pulling her daughter away from the hole she was digging so energetically with her foot.

Alice gave an exaggerated sigh. Her mother's hair, she thought indignantly, was no better than her own. Strands of it had escaped from its pleat and stuck to her sweaty face. Opening her mouth to comment, she caught Sita's eye and fell silent, sensing instantly and with perfect understanding that her mother was in one of her tricky moods. Sita was tired.

Her tiredness was a constant uneasy presence, a weight as heavy as the humid monsoon-imminent air around them. It was clear to Alice that it was simply the fault of the wretched baby her mother was soon to have. Alice did not want this baby, she had been hating it from the very moment her mother told her the news. What was even worse was that she was absolutely certain no one else wanted it either. Not long ago Alice had overheard a conversation between Aunt May and her grandmother.

'There couldn't be a worse time to bring a child into the world,' Aunt May had said.

Alice, who was expert at eavesdropping, had been taken aback. She had not realised the grown-ups disliked the thought of it too. So why didn't they just get rid of it?

'They cry all night,' her best friend Jennifer had warned her. 'You won't be able to sleep for months and months!'

Jennifer had burst out laughing at the look of horror on Alice's face.

'Well, I'll get rid of it, then,' Alice had said.

She had spoken offhandedly, hiding her unease.

'If it won't behave, no one will want it,' she added with more bravado than she felt.

The other children in the class had asked her what she intended to do.

'Kill it, of course,' she had said without hesitation, making the boys guffaw loudly.

The conversation however had made her a little guilty and she was glad when it was dropped. Then it turned out that Jennifer's mother was expecting a baby too. Alice scratched her leg, thinking about what she had said, brushing away a mosquito. It had surprised her that both mothers were having babies at the same time.

'Must be because they're friends,' she had said.

'Oh, don't be stupid,' Jennifer had scoffed. 'Everyone knows men give them babies.'

Jennifer was the class encyclopaedia.

'How?' demanded Alice. But Jennifer, having reached the extent of her knowledge, pulled a face, refusing to say another word.

After that Alice had been silent, sharing her dark thoughts with no one, not even her grandfather. She simply hoped the baby would die.

'I know,' Mrs Perris was saying in a low voice, moving her head from side to side. 'Ayio! I heard it on the news. Rioting in Wellewatha, for the second time in a month. This is turning into a witch-hunt against the Tamils. I thought of you last night, child. Is your husband okay?'

She glanced towards Alice, who pretended to examine the scab forming on her knee.

'Yes, yes,' Sita said, lowering her voice.

'Thank God he came home before it started, you know.'

There was a pause and both women fell silent. Then Sita looked around nervously.

'Did I tell you our passports have arrived?'

'Really! That's good news, isn't it?' the teacher said encouragingly.

Sita nodded.

'At least now we know for certain we can leave.'

Mrs Perris placed her hand on Sita's arm and squeezed it. Alice looked curiously at them both, not understanding but struck by the look on their faces.

Earlier in the year Mrs Perris had been widowed. The change in her had been shocking. Her husband had been killed in the riots in Jaffna. Everyone agreed he had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Alice had wanted to find out what the wrong place was, but again no one would tell her. She tried asking her father but Stanley told her to go away and stop bothering him, and Sita told her not to talk so much.

'They're all bastards,' she heard her father tell her mother.

He was in one of his bad moods at the time. Alice was aware that her father knew all the bastards in Colombo. Even Grandpa Bee was impressed by this fact.

'Well, Stanley certainly knows a bastard when he sees one,' she had overheard Bee say.

At the time, Alice had been standing behind the door listening intently, wondering if she too would be able to recognise a bastard if she ever saw one. Bee had been speaking quite softly, under his breath, but even from behind the door Alice had detected a curious note of triumph in his voice. Bee had been unaware that Alice was nearby.

It was only her grandmother, being more knowing, who had shushed him sharply.

'Be quiet,' she had scolded. 'The child might be listening.'

At that, Alice, pretending to be a stork standing on one leg, balancing on the ball of a foot, nearly toppled over. It was true she was always eavesdropping. Listening was something that had become second nature to her; straining her eardrums until they nearly burst, standing with her mouth open behind half-closed doors, worrying a piece of information as though she was a dog with a fallen coconut, coaxing it to split open and reveal its secret. Even Jennifer had congratulated her on her skill.

'You do have a nose for scandal,' she had observed.

Alice hadn't known what a scandal was, but she did know that the world was full of unresolved, interesting stories that everyone conspired to keep from her.

After the bastards had killed her husband, Mrs Perris had eventually returned to school. The children waited curiously to see how she would behave. Thirty pairs of eyes swivelled silently towards the teacher as she walked into the classroom. She wore a white sari, the Kandyian way. It was meant to make her look more Singhalese, but all it did was make her unfamiliar. Every time anyone spoke to her she looked as though she might burst into tears. Very soon the whole class, which collectively was more cunning than people realised, saw that Mrs Perris was completely changed. Once she had been a woman who loved teaching. Now she appeared not to notice when the children misbehaved. The class, working together, seized the opportunity. Led in part by Jennifer, they became unruly. The noise brought out the teachers from the other classrooms, stampeding like a herd of elephants. Everyone wanted to see what was going on in Mrs Perris's once perfectly behaved class. Some of the teachers tried to stop the noise. Some of them looked at the widow with pitying eyes, as if they were thinking, 'Well, she's done for!' It was as if a gong were sounding in Mrs Perris's head, stultifying her. *I'm finished*, it banged.

'She looks terrible,' Jennifer declared with conviction, 'especially around the eyes.'

Alice disagreed. Jennifer was her best friend, but often Alice felt the role was unsustainable. Being friendly with Jennifer was like taking a ride on the back of a tiger. You held on or got eaten alive.

'My mother said Mrs Perris's husband turned blue when they killed him,' Jennifer told the class with relish. 'As though someone had coloured him with dye!'

In spite of herself Alice was agog, her eyes turning into saucers of amazement. But she liked Mrs Perris and did not want her hurt by gossip, so she decided to challenge Jennifer.

'How does your mother know?' she demanded.

Jennifer scowled, unused to being contradicted.

'She went to look at him, silly,' she said, her face so close that her sugary hot breath from the toffee she was secretly eating poured threateningly over Alice.

'Like this!' And she pinched Alice's arm, hoping to make it blue. 'He was in his coffin, you know, men,' she added, making her voice rise and fall. 'And his lips were swollen, just as if a mosquito had bitten him.'

She narrowed her eyes and stared intently. Was Alice by any chance squeamish? Alice hesitated.

'I don't believe you. Dead people are supposed to look peaceful,' she said finally.

Jennifer snorted.

'You're scared,' she had observed shrewdly, and then in a final insult, 'baby!'

After that she had refused to say any more on the subject. And Alice, whose passionate thirst for knowledge palpitated vainly in her chest, was not prepared to beg for any further information. There was a peculiar sad stillness in Mrs Perris's face that made her appear frail and strangely beautiful. It both puzzled and fascinated Alice. Once or twice she had tried talking to her father, but Stanley just yawned and poured himself another whisky.

'Those bastards get away with everything,' was all he said in his predictable way. 'Sita, can you get me some ice?'

Alice had watched as her mother left the clothes she was sewing for the baby and went to fetch the ice.

'Time for bed, Alice,' she had said, noticing her hovering about.

Still Alice continued to be preoccupied by Mrs Perris. On her last visit to her grandparent's house she brought the subject up with Bee.

'Mrs Perris looks transparent,' she told Bee.

Transparent was a word that interested her.

'It's as if you can see right through her.'

Bee listened gravely. He waited until she finished speaking and then he nodded.

'It's called an afterglow,' he said re-lighting his pipe. 'Like a star as it falls; full of light. Like a blessing. Why don't you try to draw her?'

So Alice had drawn her, and Mrs Perris had asked if she could keep the drawing. Alice wrote her name in wobbly paintbrush writing and gave it to her without a word. Privately she told her grandfather it had not been a good drawing.

'I didn't want to draw her as if she was crying,' she said, 'because she *never* cries.'

Bee had chewed on the end of his pipe.

'Absence is a presence,' was his only comment, but she sensed he understood. There was nothing her grandfather did not understand, thought Alice, her heart overflowing with love for him.

'Enjoy the rest of your birthday, Alice,' her teacher was saying, now.

'I'm taking her to my parents tonight,' Sita murmured. 'To be on the safe side, you know.'

Mrs Perris nodded. Then she planted a spontaneous kiss on Alice's head.

'We'll see you on Monday, no?'

'God willing,' Alice's mother answered.

It was a short walk to the station, weaving their way amongst street-sellers, beggars and the roadside shrines that were tucked between the corners of buildings and covered with crude drawings of Gods and demons. All around were small, open-fronted shops stacked high with plastic containers, stalls selling bunches of dirty-green plantains and rambutans, ambarella and piles of mangoes fingered by huge spiders. There were spice shops and sari shops filled with iridescent colours. Sita walked quickly, head bowed, looking neither to left nor right,

holding her breath. Occasionally she turned to Alice, urging her to hurry because she did not want to miss the train.

'Have you brought my water bottle?' Alice asked as they boarded the train.

Even though the compartment was empty her mother looked around nervously.

'Speak in Singhalese,' she said softly.

Alice ignored her, taking her bottle. The water was warm and tasted of hot plastic. When she had finished drinking she turned towards the window and watched the view of the city as it moved slowly past. The train gathered speed. Very soon they had left Colombo with its dirt and overcrowded buildings, and an empty beach stretched for miles before them. Two white gulls with enormous wing spans sailed lazily by. Alice narrowed her eyes to slits against the glare and watched them dive bomb the waves. She swung her legs vigorously, wanting to put them on the seat opposite but knowing she would be scolded if she did. Her thoughts spun like candyfloss in a fairground tub. She had a thousand exciting questions, a million wants swimming in her head.

The day had reached its hottest but a cool sea breeze streamed in though the open windows as the train swung and hooted its way along the coast. The air quivered with expectancy and even as she watched, the view took on a mysterious, luminescent quality that made it almost too painful to behold. In spite of the familiarity that years of travelling this route had given her, she was aware in a dreamlike and fleeting way of some deep and unspoken love for all she saw. It was a sight she had been used to seeing all her life. It was her birthday today and she was coming home to her grandparents. That was enough to make her want to shout with unbridled happiness. In a sudden desire for her mother's approval she remained still, staring out at the sea while the tight drum of blue sky wrapped its feverish brilliance all around, closely mirroring her ecstatic happiness. The train clattered on, past trees that gave off a faint elusive perfume filling the compartment with sweet fragrance. Alice, breathing deeply, her eyes fixed at some spot in the distant blueness, was hardly conscious of where she was. Reality and dreams

mingled with the motion of the train as the sweep of water expanded endlessly like a dazzling blue desert beside her.

The train slowed down, nudging them backwards and forwards, almost, but never quite stopping. Then it speeded up again and they passed through several small villages screened by coconut palms. Scraps of washing flapped on a makeshift line and a slender dark-boned woman pulled water from a well around which a group of semi-naked children played. They passed a level crossing where two Morris Minors waited patiently for the barrier to rise. On and on they went, with glimpses of a lagoon, men chopping wood, other people's lives distanced and therefore enchanting. Alice glanced at her mother, who was fanning herself slowly, staring straight ahead. She looked enormous. I hate the baby, thought Alice again and with a surge of rage. She had forgotten about it for a moment, but it was still here, the one blemish on the day. Her mother wanted a boy.

'Boys are best,' Jennifer had said, quoting her older sister. 'In this country everyone wants sons.'

The train began to curve around the bay hooting a warning to all the children who played on the line. And here we are, thought Alice with another surge of delight, forgetting about babies, for the very best moment of the day was approaching. There in the distance, still only a speck, was the station and the hill where later she would fly her kite. And somewhere amongst the little clutch of white buildings facing the sea was her grandparents' house. Sunlight touched the rooftops. They were drawing closer. Below her the sea broke through the trees, coming into view once more, startlingly close and full of noise. With a shiver of excitement Alice turned to her mother, but Sita had closed her eyes and was breathing heavily, her mouth slightly open, faint beads of perspiration on her brow. The train was slowing down again; the carriage was almost empty. Alice looked worriedly at her mother, wanting to wake her.

'Will Aunty May be there too?' she asked carefully, in perfect Singhalese.

Bee Fonseka stood in the shadows waiting for the train. Beside him were potted ferns and two ornamental rubber plants that grew out

of a hole in the ground. The afternoon was bathed in an intense luminescent light. It fell in low, late slants but because of the breeze gave no hint of its strength. Bee waited, watching, as the turquoise blue Sea Serpent emerged through the thick bank of coconut and plantain trees. He was wearing a pair of trousers that matched his whitening hair. Several people, recognising him, raised their hats and he bowed in acknowledgement but made no move to speak to any of them. There had been no rain for months and the air smelled of salty batter, frying fish and *suduru,* white cumin seed. He had left the house almost half an hour ago. The train had been delayed and Kamala, he knew, would be getting anxious. He had left her fussing over the food, putting the finishing touches to the birthday cake, while the servant woman brought in piles of bread and juggery. Enough to feed an army, Bee had observed wryly. The servant had placed a tall jug of freshly squeezed lime juice on the teapoy and draped a heavily beaded cover over it. Then she had gone to pound the spices in preparation for Alice's favourite evening meal of rice and curry cooked in plantain leaves. How anyone would be able to eat anything after the mountain of cakes and biscuits and patties, Bee had no idea. Normally he would have walked to the station to meet them but because of Sita's condition he had taken the car. Then, as he had been about to leave, Kamala had caught sight of his hands, black from the etching inks he had been using.

'For goodness' sake, clean that ink off before you go to the station!' she had grumbled.

Bee grunted, ignoring her, wishing he had left sooner.

'How can you go to meet them with hands like that?'

'I don't have to clean my hands for Alice,' he said vaguely. 'She's an artist too, she'll understand.'

'Well, think about your daughter at least,' Kamala said, but he had gone. The car door slammed and the next moment he was driving out through the front gate and towards the station.

Now he waited impatiently thinking of the child and the present he had for her, wondering if she would like it. He knew that Sita, although tired, would insist on getting back home to Stanley. At the thought of his son-in-law, Bee's jaw tightened.

Fourteen years ago his eldest daughter had married in secrecy. Bee had not even known of Stanley's existence until then. Sita had travelled to Colombo one morning, pretending she was visiting a school friend, returning a week later a married woman. At first Bee had been too furious to speak. He had no prejudices against the Tamils. Indeed, the few Tamil families that lived near him were courteous and intelligent. They were large, close-knit families who worked hard and mostly did very well at the local school. Still, it was impossible to deny the change that was sweeping across the country. Life would not be easy for Sita. Rumours of violence in the north, in Jaffna and the eastern part of the island were rife. If they were correct, then it would only be a matter of time before prejudice spread down south. None of them, least of all Sita, would be able to predict how things might go. Worried and deeply hurt that she had not trusted him enough to tell him about Stanley, Bee had withdrawn into silence.

When they had finally met, he had found the relationship genuinely puzzling. What was the attraction? he asked Kamala. Kamala had no idea either. Night after night they lay awake discussing their eldest daughter, getting no closer to the truth, for Stanley was a strange, uncommunicative man. Nothing the family could do, not even May's winsome ways, had succeeded in drawing him out or dispersed the coldness that was, they felt, part of his character. Sita, the daughter who had been the closest to Bee as a child, now seemed uncomfortable in her father's presence.

On their first visit to the Sea House the couple had stayed only for the evening. Sita had hardly spoken. It had been an awkward distressing event and the little information they did glean was unsatisfactory. Stanley worked in an office in Colombo. He was a stenographer, he told Bee, working at a firm that imported fruit from abroad.

'Why do we need fruit from the British?' Bee had asked, forgetting to hold his tongue. 'Haven't we enough wonderful fruit of our own?'

His wife and daughters had frowned disapprovingly. But Stanley hadn't seemed to mind.

'Apples,' he had said. 'The British living here miss having things from their homeland. So we get apples for them. After all, we should

encourage them to stay. It's better for the country, safer for the Tamils, anyway.'

Bee made no comment. He took out his pipe and tapped it against his chair. Then he lit it.

'I want to go to England one day,' Stanley had confided a little later on.

He was eating the cake his new mother-in-law had baked hastily. There had been no time to make an auspicious dish for the bride and groom; this was all she could offer. The servant woman standing in the doorway, waiting for a glimpse of the eldest daughter, shook her head sadly. This was not the way in which a Singhalese bride returned home. It was a bad omen. The bride and groom should have been given many gifts. Jewellery, for instance, a garland of flowers, a blessing at the temple. The bride should have entered her old home wearing a red sari, to be met by her sister and fed milk rice. And before all of this, right at the very beginning, the servant woman believed, before the wedding date had even been set, the couple's horoscope should have been drawn up. But none of these things had been done. It was very, very bad. As far as the servant woman could see, shame had descended like a cloud of sea-blown sand on this family. Sita had brought it to the house, trailing her karma carelessly behind her, fully aware but indifferent to the ways in which things worked in this small costal town. The servant felt it was a wanton disgrace.

'I want us to go to the UK,' Stanley had said, taking Sita's hand in his.

Watching him, Kamala had become afraid. She thought he sounded a boastful man.

'After we have children, of course,' Stanley continued. 'This bloody place is no good for children to grow up in. Everything is denied to us Tamils. Education, good jobs, decent housing – everything. The bastard Singhalese are trying to strangle us.'

His voice had risen and he had clenched his fists.

'Stanley!' Sita had murmured, shaking her head.

Bee had seen with a certain savage amusement that at least his daughter had not quite forgotten her manners.

'Does your family know you've got married?' he had asked his new son-in-law finally, ignoring his wife's look of unease.

What did Kamala think? That he too was going to behave badly?

'Yes, yes. I've just told my mother. We'll be visiting her after we leave here,' Stanley said dismissively, lighting a cigarette without offering Bee one.

He would not be more forthcoming. No one had known what to say next. May went over to her father and sat on the floor beside him.

'Well, let's have some tea, huh?' Bee had suggested, returning his wife's look defiantly. 'What are we waiting for?'

And that had been all that had happened at that visit. They had simply taken tea and made small talk. At one point Sita had gone to the bedroom she shared with her sister and collected a few of her belongings. She had shown them her wedding ring. Heavy filigree Tamil gold, not what the Fonsekas cared for, she knew, but they had admired it anyway. The newly weds would be living in Stanley's old bachelor pad, an annexe in Havelock Road, she informed them. The family listened politely.

'We'll stay there for a while,' Sita had said. 'Once I get a job and we can afford something better, we'll move.'

It was no good any of them visiting, she told her mother.

'The place is too small to swing a cat,' she said.

The Fonsekas stared at her, not understanding the strange phrase. Why would they want to swing the cat? And it was then, for the first time, that Stanley had laughed. Ah! thought Bee, understanding at last, startled by the sudden animation in the man's face; yes, he could see what the attraction was.

That had been fourteen years ago. Fourteen years that had given Ceylon time to change for the worse. Time enough for corruption to rise unchecked and burn like a forest fire. Riots, demonstrations, the bitterness accumulated from a century of foreign rule, all these things combined to unhinge the nation. While the British, Bee observed bitterly, had de-camped, the Ceylonese had no concept as to where on earth they were going.

Bee gave up talking about his eldest daughter and buried himself in his work. Eventually the servant woman persuaded Kamala to have Sita's horoscope drawn up. The sea of superstition still remained. Bee watched, refraining from comment. What was done was done. Slowly,

aware of his own weaknesses, he tried to be fair to Stanley, refusing to tolerate any comments on their differences in his home. It was the British who were the enemy, not his son-in-law's. The plight of the Tamil people since independence was what needed to be addressed, not petty family differences. But for the first time Bee understood how complex a business this was. Determined, in spite of his son-in-law's covert challenges, he tried to patch the rift. If he was disappointed, he did not show it.

'It's just his nature,' he would say to Kamala whenever she became upset. 'Human nature is the same the world over.'

But the easy affection he had once shared with Sita vanished. He did not expect it to return. Now all was correct and careful. Slowly his work had begun to sell and he became a prominent figure in the tiny artistic community that existed on the island. Once or twice a painting had sold to collectors in Malaysia. So, with one daughter married, and another growing up, he buried his disappointment and painted instead. Two years passed in this way. Sita visited, sometimes with Stanley, but more often than not alone. Her new husband was always busy. He still wanted desperately to go to the UK.

'When we have saved up a little,' Sita told her parents without a tremor of regret in her voice, 'then we'll leave.'

Bee understood. What else can the man do? Even while Kamala wept, he accepted the inevitable.

'She chose a difficult path,' Bee said, 'and in spite of everything I can't help admiring her.'

He spoke as he believed, never knowing how his words would return to haunt him.

Then five years and three months into their marriage, in the cool of the rainy season Sita announced she was pregnant. Bee responded to the news with astonished silence. Kamala, thinking he was angry, eyed him warily. But Bee was not angry. Far from it. On the same evening in the deepening twilight, he went on his usual walk across the beach to watch the ships taking up their position on the horizon and to marvel at the way in which this simple piece of information had altered his perception of the entire world, forever. A child, *his*

grandchild! A blessing that, after so many years, brought such hope. I am glimpsing eternity, he thought, speechless with amazement. Out there in the void, between the fore and aft of his own life, was an extraordinary vision of the stars. He was delirious with happiness. Standing on the beach, gazing out towards the sea with nothing beyond him except Antarctica, he had fallen in love with this notion of immortality. Here was a life to be, not of his own time yet joined to him by time's common flow. They would be bathers in the same sea, he and this child; time had brought the generations together. This was how he felt, even before he set eyes on her, the little scrap they were to call Alice. As far as Bee was concerned it was love at first sight, paradise regained. Alice, returning from the hospital in her mother's arms, ready to be shown the sea for the very first time, could anything top that? In that instant he had seen her great dark eyes roaming curiously towards the ocean and he knew that forever after the shore and the sea would be bound up with Alice, his first grandchild.

Things changed rapidly after that. *He* changed. All that had been falling apart began to reassemble. Kamala watched him indulgently, secretly breathing a sigh of relief. May laughed, teasing him. The neighbours became accustomed to his long discourses on the child and the nature of childhood. Her intelligence was soon legendary and had quickly become an established fact in this part of the coast. Bee didn't care. They could laugh at him as much as they wished, but his painting now began to be influenced by the child's interests. He stopped the sweeping watercolours of the ocean and began to paint in miniature: small sea plants that grew in cracks, minute white seashells buried on the edges of rocks, fragments of marine life washed up in the monsoon storms, fish scales, raindrops on the edges of a coconut frond. All the things in fact that he had begun to show his new granddaughter. The dealer in Colombo came to visit and liked what he saw. Life in miniature, he called it, and urged Bee to paint more. There was, it appeared, a market for this closely observed minutiae. Bee allowed the dealer to take a few paintings. But mainly he was reluctant to sell this new work, for it felt too private to be seen by others. He re-decorated the room facing the ocean, for before long, Alice was old

enough to be left with them. And finally he saw, to his greatest joy, the child *wanted* to be near him as much as *he* wanted to see her.

'Grandpa!' she cried, as soon as she caught sight of him, waking from a sleep, carried in her mother's arms, delighting in the sight of him.

Stanley wanted her to speak only English, of course, but somehow both Singhalese and Tamil slipped into her vocabulary. Bee made no comment, the gleam in his eye saying it all. The child could do no wrong. Kamala produced small, dainty cakes whenever a visit was eminent and May, grown tall and very lovely now, embroidered white frocks for her niece.

Time passed slowly as the sea and the old whitewashed house absorbed these moments thirstily. Memories moved lightly against the sun-warmed walls. It was a long golden moment stretching over almost a decade. Sita gave up her job as a teacher and began to write a small column for the woman's page of the *Colombo Daily News*. An uneasy existence between Singhalese and Tamils existed lulling them into a false security. She wrote her articles under a pen-name and Alice, without anything being discussed, was taught to use her mother's Singhalese maiden name. By the time she was ready to go to school she thought of herself as Alice Fonseka.

Then one night, when Alice was five, Stanley was beaten up on his way back from work and his money stolen. When he arrived home he was bleeding from a wound on his head and his clothes were torn. Luckily Alice had been staying with her grandparents. Sita called for their usual doctor, but he refused to come out, telling her to take her husband to the hospital instead. The police too were indifferent. There was a travelling circus in that part of town, the policeman said, shrugging. Best to keep away from Galle Face for a bit. It would be impossible to find the culprit.

'And besides,' the policeman had said smiling broadly at Sita, taking in the fact that her husband's name was Tamil, 'these things happen to everyone. Not just the Tamils. You mustn't be so sensitive.'

Sita stared back at him, speechless. The men had hurled racist insults at her husband in Singhalese. How could the policeman think this was not a racist attack?

'Why doesn't your husband think of going back to Jaffna?' the officer had suggested.

He sounded reasonable and was, he told her, trying to be helpful. Sita couldn't believe her ears.

'I'm doing this because I like the look of you,' the policeman said, swaggering a little, holding his paunch with both his hands. 'I'm doing this as a favour, d'you understand?'

When he smiled she had seen the prawn-pink undersides of his heavy lips and shuddered.

'My husband is *not* from Jaffna,' she had shouted, 'not even his relatives came from Jaffna.'

The policeman had stared at her suggestively, warningly. Afterwards she felt violated.

'He asked me what a nice Singhalese girl like me was doing married to a Tamil,' Sita had told her parents when she came to collect Alice.

Bee, listening grimly, wanted to go to the chief constable in Mount Lavinia, but neither Sita nor Kamala would let him make a fuss.

'Everything's fine here, Father,' Sita had said, shaking her head, calming down a little. 'Don't make trouble. It's safe for Alice here and for May, too. Leave it.'

So against his better judgement he had consoled himself with the fact that it was just one incident. One corrupt policeman in a disturbed country was not as bad as all that.

The Sea Serpent emerged through the trees, lumbering towards the station and breaking into Bee's thoughts. He smiled as with a grinding of metal the train came to a halt. A moment later Alice leapt out at him followed tiredly by Sita.

'Hello, birthday girl!' he cried, kissing the top of her head and taking his daughter's bag.

'I can't stay very long,' Sita warned. 'I've got to catch another train back this evening.'

'Have you brought the car? Is Aunty May with you? And is Esther coming? And Janake?' asked Alice.

'Steady on,' Bee said, talking with his pipe in his mouth in the way she loved. 'Now you're such a great age you must try to act a little bored. It's more grown up that way.'

'But I *have* been bored!' cried Alice, her eyes like the polish of water on wet stones.

'She talks too much in class,' Sita said, irritated. 'It was so bad today, her teacher made her sit by herself. No, Alice, it isn't funny,' she added in warning.

Alice grinned, wrinkling her nose. Later on, when she had her grandfather all to herself, she would tell him what her day had really been like.

'Why go back tonight?' Bee asked, helping his daughter into the waiting car.

Alice could not wait. She sucked in the air like a lollypop and shot straight into the back wishing her mother would simply leave quickly. The back seat of the car had the familiar smell of warm leather and love. There were other smells too, of sea, sand and grease and long, younger days sitting on tedious journeys in the heat. It held the memory of sticky Lanka lime and hot winds blowing and can-I-eat-the patties-yet whines. The sea was out of sight for the moment, screened by a tangle of bougainvillea, but still its presence remained powerful. Sea sounds were everywhere, tossing about and fragmented by the breeze.

'So,' Bee said wryly, glancing over his shoulder, for she had been silent for at least a minute, 'how's the birthday girl? Asleep?'

He pretended to look stern and Alice squealed with pleasure. She felt as though she was sucking on a sherbet dib-dab, or running with a kite. Excitement made her want to shout and wriggle her toes all at the same time but her mother was talking and so, impatiently, she tied a string to her pleasure and reined it sharply in. The sound of her mother's sombre voice always deflated her a little. Bee glanced at her in the mirror. Then he coaxed the old Morris Minor slowly up the hill. Tantalising glimpses of the beach followed them.

'Esther and her mother want to see you,' Bee said.

His daughter had leaned back and closed her eyes.

'That's nice,' she said, shutting out the view.

A man with a white loincloth looped over his legs was drawing a catamaran across the sand. Alice blinked; unknown to her, the image fixed itself in her mind forever. Two sun-blackened boys were collecting coconuts in a sack. In the high bright daze they appeared silhouetted like matchstick men. The car climbed up Station Road with a sound like an old cough tearing at its throat. It passed the small *kade* where Bee bought his tobacco. Bougainvillea choked the stone walls all along the way. Magenta and white; too bright to look at without squinting. A golden-fronted leaf-bird flashed past, heading for a canopy of hibiscus bushes, leaving a searing after-burn of colour, and all around the seagulls' cries made invisible circles in the air. It was almost four o'clock. Nine years had scuttled away like a crab.

'I wish today would slow down,' she said, as the car clutched the hairpin bend, turning higher and higher until suddenly, sprawling in front of them and with no warning, the Sea House appeared.

The light had changed the colour of the house. Everything was clearer and more beautiful than Alice remembered. Someone had sharpened the picture of it, making the verandah and the old planter's chairs and the garden appear brighter too. In a moment Kamala appeared and Alice was enveloped in a juggery-scented hug. On the table was a selection of *rasa kavili*, Singhalese sweetmeats. She did a quick count in her head. *Alu-Eluvang* and *hakura appa*, juggery, hoppers and jelly. No, nothing had been forgotten. All her favourites were there: the *boroa*, the small delicious Portuguese biscuits she loved, and the jug of freshly squeezed lime juice. In the middle, in pride of place, was a magnificent love cake with nine candles waiting to be lit. Her grandmother had not stopped smiling. Beside her, tied with a pink ribbon, was a lime-green bicycle.

'Well,' Bee asked, 'so, what d'you think about the colour?'

'A bicycle!' Alice said, astonished further by this day of surprises.

And she rushed full tilt towards it.

Then she stopped.

'But I can't ride,' she wailed.

'Ah! Yes, that's a problem,' agreed Bee seriously. 'Well, someone's got to teach you then. Now, I wonder who that might be!'

'I'm not hungry, Amma,' Sita was saying even before she sunk awkwardly down on one of the old planter's chairs. 'All I want is a cup of tea.'

Alice scowled. Why was her mother spoiling everything? Or rather, she corrected herself, why was the *baby* spoiling her birthday?

'Sita,' Kamala said, 'you look exhausted. How can you go on like this? Think of the baby. Why didn't you let your father collect Alice? And why don't you stay the night now you're here? Stanley can manage for a night, can't he?'

But Sita was shaking her head in a way Alice recognised. Stubbornness was the thing she had given Alice in bucketloads, and stubbornness was written all over her own face now.

'No, Amma, you know I don't like him being alone. And after last night and the riots in our area, I must go back. You didn't see what we saw; you don't know what these people are really like. There were neighbours in the crowd who *knew* us, people we thought were our friends, the same as us. Singhalese, like me!'

Her voice was beginning to rise; Kamala put out her hand as though warding off her daughter's fear.

'How can I *ever* trust anyone?'

They surveyed the tea table in silence. Alice washed her hands in the bowl of water that the servant held out to her. Then she dried them on the soft cotton hand towel and started on the sandwiches. She was tense with waiting for her mother to go home. Guiltily she anticipated the evening with her mother gone and the moment when she had her grandparents all to herself. And then, forgetting about everything, she realised she was enormously hungry.

'Ayio!' Kamala said, pouring out the tea.

Two tea leaves floated on a brown sea in the cups.

'It isn't the riots,' Bee told her, handing over his cup. 'We shouldn't place too much emphasis on them.'

His eyes had closed into narrow slits in the way Alice loved. It made him look like the picture of an owl in one of her books. Bee's voice was noncommittal. It changed the atmosphere, taking the tension away from Sita's face.

'Human nature has no surprises. All the riots do is make it more obvious.'

'Well, we all know it's the fault of the British,' Sita murmured. 'It's their mess.' But she spoke sleepily, without conviction.

This was too much for her father.

'Don't talk to me about the British,' he said, sitting up instantly, eyes flashing open, alert, as though sniffing out any stray British.

'Now, Sita, don't start him off,' Kamala warned, but Bee waved his arm irritably.

'They'll pay for all this, all right. One day they'll be called to account, just wait.'

Alice yawned. The conversation was going its usual way and she was losing interest.

'Enough, enough, Benji,' Kamala warned. 'Nothing is going to change the past.'

She glanced sharply at her granddaughter's face, reading it accurately.

'And please don't forget it's Alice's day today.'

'Just one more thing,' Sita said.

She hesitated, holding out her cup for more tea.

'Stanley got the passports this morning.'

The silence was electric.

'For all of you?' Kamala asked bleakly.

'Yes, of course!'

Alice saw her grandmother's hand shake and the cup she was holding rattle on its saucer. The next moment the glass door opened and Alice's aunt May walked in, followed by Esther and Esther's mother Dias, in a flurry of birthday visitors, a rustle of birthday presents.

'Happy birthday, Alice,' Esther cried, giving her a kiss.

Alice looked at her with interest. Esther was chewing on something.

'Many happy returns, darling,' Aunty May said, handing her niece a small parcel. 'It's all the books you put on your list.'

'My God! You're a regular bookworm, child,' Aunt Dias laughed, pinching her cheeks with her hand as though she was squeezing rubber out of a rubber plant. 'She looks just like you, Sita!'

And she too handed Alice a small parcel.

'Where's Janake?' Alice asked, seeing he was not with them, trying not to be disappointed.

'He's gone to his aunt's,' Kamala told her. 'He'll be back tomorrow.'

'Oh!' Alice said. She *was* disappointed.

'Their passports have arrived, did you hear?' Bee told the visitors grimly while Alice opened her presents. His voice was muffled as if he was somewhere far away.

'Ayio!' Kamala said again.

'Oh, thank you, Aunty May,' Alice said. 'I *wanted* the new Secret Seven book! And the *Wind in the Willows*.'

'Good! But don't read it too fast!'

'And look at these paints!'

Kamala was beginning to look as though she might cry.

'Now,' May said briskly, 'I need some tea.'

'Why did Janake have to go to his aunt's?'

The servant handed round white china plates edged with gold. Aunty May gave everyone another change-the-subject kiss, but couldn't resist one comment of her own.

'Those bastards in the government have done this,' she said under her breath.

Alice finished her piece of cake and reached for another.

'There are bastards everywhere,' she said matter-of-factly, making Esther giggle and May hoot with laughter.

'Hear, hear!' she said, clapping her hands.

Even Sita smiled a thin, watered-down smile. Bee's shoulders shook.

'Our birthday girl's thought for the day!' he chuckled.

His eyes were the colour of cloudy glass. The tension eased imperceptibly. Perhaps now they could get on with the business of enjoying her birthday, thought Alice. She was longing to try her bicycle. Sita leaned back in her chair, shutting her eyes, and once again without warning the moment became fixed in Alice's mind, with the sea glimpsed through the doorway and her aunt May's sari the colour of ripe mangoes.

'Why don't you children sit out on the verandah,' May suggested.

'I'm not a child,' Esther frowned.

She went in to see the cook, to get a small handful of hot rice.

'Aren't you going to eat anything?' Alice asked curiously when she returned and sat down on the step.

Esther rolled the rice up into a small ball and popped it into her mouth. Then she chewed it in silence. She was wearing her polka-dot dress and a pair of pretend sunglasses. Her hair was tied in a ponytail and she wore a brooch in the shape of a heart with Elvis's face on it. Alice stared at her.

'Why don't you swallow the rice?' she asked curiously after a while.

Boredom flitted across Esther's face like a passing cloud.

'Because it's meant to be gum, silly. You don't swallow gum!'

'Why don't you get some real gum, then?' Alice challenged.

Esther gave her a withering look. Then she picked up her hoola-hoop from the ground and began to swing it on her hips.

'Elvis the pelvis,' Alice said.

Everyone knew Esther was Elvis-mad and that the whole of her house was a shrine to him. Alice continued to gaze at her.

'Why don't you get some proper gum?' she asked again.

'They don't sell gum at the kade,' Esther said at last. 'And it's too expensive at the hotel shop.'

'Come on, children,' May called out from the dining room. 'Time to cut your cake, Alice.'

They sang 'Happy Birthday' and Alice blew out all nine candles in one go so she knew her wish would come true.

'How much longer before the wedding, Aunty May?' Esther asked.

If there was one thing Esther envied Alice for, it was having an aunt like May. Her own family consisted of just her mother and herself, for her father had died when she had been born. Esther had known the Fonsekas all her life and May with her large dark eyes had all the glamour of the film star Esther wanted to become when she grew up. May smiled and handed out the cake plates.

'Three weeks and four days after the new baby arrives,' she said, winking at her niece. 'You'll be the big sister then!' she added, laughing at the expression on Alice's face. 'Don't worry, darling, you'll always

be the eldest. The baby won't count! Look at me, once a baby always a baby!'

May was ten years younger than Sita, less remote and easier to talk to. She worked as an English teacher in the boy's school at the top of Mount Lavinia Hill. She was the only woman who taught there. Everyone joked that she had got the job because of her looks and that the masters were all a little in love with her. Even after the scandal of her sister's elopement, no one had turned against May. She was too beautiful for that. Then a few years ago May had met Namil. He was from a well-respected Singhalese family and had been to the university in Peradeniya where he'd qualified as an engineer. Very soon Namil had fallen in love with her.

'He'll never be short of a good job,' Alice's mother had said wistfully when she heard.

Namil was very tall. Together, he and May made a striking pair. Esther was constantly admiring them.

'You're so lucky,' she told Alice, 'having an aunt like May. It'll be such a stylish wedding.'

'Aunty May is lucky that Namil is a Singhalese,' Alice agreed. 'Not like my dada.'

Startled, Esther raised her eyebrows.

'Don't go passing on such information to everyone, men,' she said loftily. 'Not in this day and age, or you'll get into trouble.'

'Alice!' May called. 'Don't neglect your guests. They're dying for more cake! Come and serve them.'

'I'd better make a move,' Sita announced without moving.

'Why on earth can't you stay the night?' Dias asked.

Being both neighbour and family friend, she felt she could say those things others could not without giving offence.

'It's no use, Dias. I've already asked her,' Kamala said.

There was an awkward pause. Sita shook her head without speaking and the conversation moved on in sharp staccato sentences overlaying each other. Every word seemed as heavy as the heat outside.

'Are you going to the fair tonight, Alice?' Esther asked.

'Yes, yes,' May called out, laughing at them. 'It was meant to be a surprise, Esther! Namil and I are going to take you tonight, Alice.

It's your birthday treat. Your *second* birthday treat in one day, you lucky girl!'

May came over to where they sat on the cool verandah beside the pots of ferns.

'Are you going to live in England, then?' Esther asked suddenly.

'No, of course not!'

'Oh! Why have you got a passport then?'

Alice didn't know. Her father's older brother lived in England. He had gone long before Alice was born.

'I think he sent it,' she said dubiously. 'As a present.'

'You don't give people passports as presents,' Esther scoffed.

'It's always good to have a passport,' May told them lightly.

'Why?' asked Alice, but May had turned and was taking Sita's bag out to the car. There was a scraping back of chairs and the grown-ups came out on to the verandah. They no longer looked happy.

'I think,' Esther said softly, 'you'll find you *are* going.'

She spoke under her breath and Alice, glancing up at her mother, did not hear. Although she did notice that Sita had a funny, closed expression. It was the look that usually followed an argument. Her grandfather was frowning and staring at the ground.

'Come, then,' Bee said finally. 'I'll take you.'

He sounded cross.

'Will Stanley be waiting for you at the station?' Dias asked.

'Oh yes,' Sita replied. She spoke easily but Alice knew, from the way she spoke, that she was lying.

'Can I learn to ride my bicycle now?' she asked, kissing Sita good-bye.

'Don't wear your grandparents out,' was all her mother said.

'You must get out of your school uniform first,' her grandmother added.

'We must go too, child. Just look at the time,' Dias announced, yawning. 'Come on, Esther. If you're going out tonight you must help me in the house first.'

'I'll be back soon,' Bee called.

He turned to Alice and now he was smiling again.

'So be ready,' he warned. 'We'll go to the beach and I'll teach you to ride your bike!'

Outside, the sea beckoned invitingly. It hissed and rolled restlessly, catching the last of the radiant light. Ahead of them, three white ships had positioned themselves against the horizon, and as the last train to Colombo hooted its way towards the station a small kite rose and fell languidly in the breeze.

Later, when he returned, Bee and Alice set off on foot, down to the sea.

'Like in *The Water Babies*,' said Alice, who had just finished reading the book.

'Don't be long,' Kamala warned. 'And hold her hand when you cross the line.'

'Yes, yes,' Bee waved impatiently.

But then at the level crossing he stopped and took her hand, waiting and listening for the sound of any stray trains.

'Just to keep your grandmother happy,' he told her. 'So you've finished *The Water Babies*, huh? You read that quickly.'

Alice skipped beside him.

'Aunty May has given me all the books I asked for,' she said.

'Good!' he nodded. 'You must read as much as you can. English is a beautiful language,' he said thoughtfully. 'It's a language of grace and culture. We have been very foolish to confuse such a language with our government's anti-British attitude.'

Alice yawned. This was the moment she had been waiting for. Going down to the sea with Bee. At last, she thought, wondering what they might find today. He was always finding her things on the beach to add to her collection of objects. Mostly it was glass that he found, but sometimes it was other things: driftwood and rusty bits of tin that made Kamala scream with horror.

The barrier was up. An old woman carrying two chickens crossed the lines. She beckoned them to cross with her.

'*Eney, eney*,' she called, showing betel-red teeth. Two boys on one bicycle rode across.

And then, at long last they reached the sands where several bigger boys shouted hello as they passed. Bee heaved Alice up on to the bike and began pushing.

'Right,' he said with a grin, 'let's go!'

They wobbled off.

'Pedal, pedal,' he shouted above the roar of the waves. 'Keep going, faster! *Faster!*'

On and on they went, Bee breathlessly behind her. A train roaring past. There was spray against her face. She could hear Bee's encouragement, as, head down, she pedalled furiously. The sand was completely unmarked and very white. A half-buried shell flashed by. The wind ran through her hair, wet and heavy with water.

'Am I doing it?' she asked, but there was no reply.

Turning, she looked behind her and wobbled.

'Watch out!' Bee called too late as she went crashing into the water.

He was laughing now.

'You stopped,' he cried, going to help her. 'I told you not to stop pedalling!'

He was still laughing as he pulled her up and righted the bicycle.

'That's enough for today,' he said.

Her dress was soaking and her knee hurt.

'Your grandmother will kill me!'

'Oh, please, please,' Alice pleaded, her eyes like saucers. 'I don't want to stop yet. I have to learn now!'

Bee hesitated. He was done for with Kamala, he knew.

'Come *on*,' Alice insisted, tugging his hand.

Bee laughed.

'Oh, all right, all right, just one last time, then,' he agreed. 'It's true. You *have* nearly got it. But this time, don't look behind you, for God's sake!'

Some of the boys had gathered round to watch. They knew Bee from his daily visits to the beach to buy fresh fish and talk to some of the fishermen. They were used to seeing Alice, too, had watched her learn to swim and now they wanted to see her learn to ride her bicycle. One of the boys whistled encouragingly and wheeled his own bike in the air, showing off. Alice ignored him, wishing Janake hadn't

gone away. She wasn't going to admit defeat, not in front of these grinning idiots.

'Ready? Let's go!'

Once again the sound of the sea was close to her ear, mixed up with Bee's footsteps thudding softly in the sand behind her, telling her to pedal faster. And then it was only the sound of the sea, insistent and haunting, that filled her head. She could go on this way forever, she thought, raising her head. Startled, she saw her grandfather was no longer behind her as the horizon righted itself in her sightline. So that finding she was riding the bicycle entirely by herself she laughed so loud and so much that she wobbled and fell off again.

It is evening. Alice can see the sea through the horses as they fly round and round. Gilded hooves, flying sea-spray that disappears to be replaced by the sky. Then they're back, flying high, dipping low, back and forth. She sees Bee's face as he chews on his pipe. He is waving at her. Music belts out; its beat riding the sea from side to side, swinging the fairground lights, the pink-and-green paper lanterns strung around the stalls. Round and round. There's Esther eating candyfloss wearing her polka-dot dress. Even her ponytail swings as she waves at Alice before strolling off. Aunt May holds on to Alice tightly and laughs. Uncle Namil stands on the grass verge watching solemnly. He is still wearing his Colombo office clothes and doesn't seem part of the fair at all. Maybe, thinks Alice, that's why Aunty May is laughing so much. Alice throws her head back, feeling the wind running through her hair, the dress her aunt made, cool and lovely against her legs. Above her the stars blink in the vast tropical sky. I will never forget this, she thinks, shouting into the air that rushes by. She wants it to never end. Three kites fly lazily, flicking home-made tails, while the sound of the barrel organ is loud in her ears and the smells of roasting gram and fried fish and burnt sugar seemed to gather together and explode around her like Catherine wheels.

In another part of the island, in Colombo 10, a woman screams. It is an old familiar scream, primeval and ancient, travelling down the

corridors of centuries. In this darkening hour, in the brief southern twilight, the woman screams again, this time more urgently. A child wants to be born. Nothing can stop the need, the desire to exist. Nothing, not the Colombo express rushing past, nor the poya moon gliding tissue-paper-thin across the fine tropical sky can stop it. The child is coming before its time; its clothes, lovingly embroidered, are piled inside a shoe-box in the woman's house. The clothes are small enough to make this possible. Blue; most of the fine lawn clothes are as blue as the sky, for the woman is hoping for a son. She has already decided on a name. For months now she has been saying the name to herself in a whisper.

'Ravi,' she says, 'Ravi.'

She speaks softly for fear of the evil eye. But now she is in pain, three weeks too early, and here in the government hospital. It is late. Too late to inform her mother. Or her sister. Her husband has been sent home, told to return in the morning. This is women's business, the nurse tells him.

'Don't worry,' the nurse says. 'Three weeks is only a little early. And Doctor will be here shortly.'

So the husband goes, the sounds of his wife's whimpers resounding uneasily in his ears.

The carousel has stopped. Alice and May stagger down the steps with shaky feet, fresh sea air cool in their faces. They are still laughing. The puppet master has begun his show. Beside him is a huge neon-coloured inflatable man who sways in the sea breeze. The monkey screams in terror. Namil buys them all an ice cream, but Alice can hardly eat it she is so excited. She can't decide what to look at first. The world is a spinning, rocking, top of sparkling lights. Someone has climbed the tallest coconut tree and strung the coloured bulbs amongst the branches. The carousel starts up again. Alice watches as the lights swing across her face. Her grandfather, yawning, has gone home, leaving her with her aunt. May stands close to Namil and watches the carousel begin again slowly at first and then gathering speed. She smiles a secret smile, thinking about her wedding. Not long

now, she thinks. There will be lights threaded across the trees in the garden for the wedding party, just like these at the fair. They will serve iced coffee, May tells her niece. And wedding cake.

'It will be the height of sophistication,' May says, laughing.

Esther, strolling by, hears of it and stops, impressed. Esther has won a baby doll at the coconut shy. As she's too old for dolls, she gives it to Alice, but Alice isn't really interested.

'Give it to the new baby, when it's born,' Esther suggests.

'What if it's a boy?' Alice asks.

Esther shrugs; she is already bored with the conversation. There is a boy called Anton in the crowd. He is here with his school friends. They are from the boys' school and Esther thinks he likes her. She would like to borrow Alice to go with her to the lady card-reader's tent.

'Don't be long,' Aunty May warns. 'We'll wait here.'

The lady card-reader's tent is occupied. Esther takes some money out of her purse. Then she sees the boy called Anton.

'Here,' she says, thrusting the money into Alice's hand. 'You go in, instead. I'll stay here. I want to talk to someone. Go on, I'll wait here for you.'

Alice doesn't want to go. She can't comprehend something as vast as the future, but Esther and the fairground atmosphere are too insistent.

'Go on,' Esther urges impatiently. 'You can ask her anything. Ask if you are going to have a brother or sister.'

The customer inside the tent has come out now and there is no excuse. Esther pushes her inside the tent, nodding encouragingly.

'I'll wait here,' she promises.

The tent is dark with a small glow from a red-shaded lamp. The lady card-reader sitting at the table points to the chair beside her.

'How old are you?' she asks in Singhalese.

Alice tells her. It is her birthday today, she says and the woman moves her head as though she wants her to stop talking now. Then she begins to lay the cards out on the table. They aren't the same cards that Alice has seen the servant boy playing with. These cards have pictures. The lady card reader uncovers three sevens.

'Not so good,' she observes. 'Can you swim?'

Alice can swim, although her grandmother doesn't like her to go into the water here because of the strong currents. And all because once a servant had remarked she could drown if she weren't careful. The servant had seen how Alice's hair grew at the back of her head in a whirlpool. Ever since then her grandmother had been frightened of the sea. Nothing her grandfather could say or do could take away this fear. But yes, Alice tells the lady card reader, she can swim. The woman stares at her for a moment. Then she nods, satisfied.

'I see lots of water,' she says. 'Cold water, grey faraway skies. And you have a good memory. Don't forget anything. One day you will find happiness, so don't give up.'

She looks at Alice and hesitates. Then she holds out her hand for the money. When Alice gives it to her, she stands up.

'You are very talented,' she says. 'So do the best you can. It won't be easy.' And then she holds open the curtain.

'What on earth were you doing in there?' Esther greets her crossly. 'You've been ages. Your aunty's going to be worried.'

'Did you see Anton?'

Esther nods.

'Well, are you going to have a brother or a sister?'

'I forgot to ask,' Alice tells her.

'Idiot!' Esther bursts out laughing at her.

In the bright heart of the fair the carousel is still turning and blasting loud music as the two girls walk back, carrying their thoughts with them.

The doctor is drunk. His breath smells as he squints at the notes the nurse gives him.

'What?' he asks in high-pitched Singhalese. 'You called me in just for this Tamil woman?'

'She isn't Tamil, sir,' the nurse tells him. 'Just the husband.'

'Exactly!' the doctor says, trying not to belch but without success. 'That's my point. Why should we help breed more Tamils? As if this country hasn't enough already!'

Outside, the trees rustle in the slight breeze. Tonight is quiet, no drums, no police sirens, no sudden violence. A perfect night on which to be born.

'All right,' the doctor says, bored. 'Take me to her.'

The woman lies groaning in a pool of sweat. Moonlight falls on the ripeness of her belly. Catching sight of the doctor, she begs him for something to relieve the pain. She speaks in perfect, old-fashioned Singhalese. The nurse bends and wipes her face and offers her a sip of water.

'Give her some quinine,' the doctor tells the nurse.

Then he examines the woman. Because he is drunk, because he has driven here in haste, leaving his dinner guests still at the table, he has forgotten his glasses. Roughly he inserts two fingers into her dilating uterus and the woman screams. The doctor tells her sharply to be quiet, and stepping back half loses his balance. The nurse glances at him, alarmed.

'Sir?' she asks tentatively.

The doctor does not know that this nurse is still a student. She should not be here alone, but the midwife has been called out on an emergency. The student nurse thinks *this* is an emergency too, but she doesn't know what she could say. She is frightened. The doctor prods the woman, ignoring her screams, then, having satisfied himself that all is well, leans over the bed.

'Do you understand English?' he asks slowly.

It is important he does not slur his speech.

'Yes,' the woman says faintly, in Singhalese. 'I do.'

'Good. Then you will understand when I tell you these pains are perfectly normal. They are just called Braxton Hicks contractions. The baby will turn soon and then you'll go into labour. It may take a few hours; you just have to be patient. Nothing to worry about. It's a perfectly normal process. You Tamil women have been doing this for centuries!'

And he laughs, washing his hands.

'The nurse will take care of you,' he says, gesturing to the nurse to give the woman the quinine. 'This will calm you down. I'll be back later.'

The woman, feeling another contraction coming towards her in a wave, tries to ride it and begins to cry out again. The nurse holds her head and she drinks the quinine, the bitterness hardly registering on her. The doe-eyed nurse wipes her face again and follows the doctor out.

'Don't bother calling me. I'll be back in a couple of hours. She'll be fine till then,' he says.

'But, sir, I think it's a breach,' the nurse says tentatively.

She isn't sure, of course, and doesn't want to look foolish in front of this famous consultant.

'Nonsense,' the doctor tells her. 'Do you think I don't know a breach when I see one!'

Again he laughs in a high-pitched manner, peering at this pretty girl's anxious face.

'What's a nice girl like you doing here?' he asks.

He has a sudden urge to run his hand across her back and further down. He begins to imagine the places his hand might reach.

'You should be in my nursing home,' he says, a little unsteadily.

The nurse, her dark eyes made darker by tiredness, smiles a little.

'We must see what we can do,' promises the doctor, thinking how good it would be to have such a lovely face at his private clinic.

And then he goes out into the car park and towards his Mercedes, parked sleekly beside the stephanotis bush, back to his lighted house and his dinner guests.

'Just one more ride,' Alice pleads.

She feels as though they have only just got here. The puppet master is beginning another show and the Kathakali Man of Dance can be heard beating his drum. Alice does not want to miss anything. May and Namil hold hands in the darkness, swaying in time to the music as though they were one person and not two. Namil has brought May some bangles that glitter and jangle as she moves. Alice notices her aunt has some jasmine in her hair and her eyes are shining. She thinks May looks even more beautiful than usual. Namil is looking at her solemnly.

'All right,' May says, smiling at them both.

She can hardly keep still; the music makes her want to dance.

'One more, then we go, no?'

This time Alice goes on the merry-go-round on her own. Slowly her eyes adjust to the faint line of sea and sky as she rides, swaying to the music. Is this what flying is like? Alice wants to move through the night forever, swooping down from the tops of the trees, scooping up the dark water below the cliffs. She can no longer see the faces standing below; all is a blur of rhythm and bright light. Everything reduced to sensation.

The woman screams. She is pleading. The baby inside her struggles, it turns and turns again. In the darkness she sees her stomach heave and rise up in another wave. It turns into a shape too grotesque to be normal. The woman is petrified, she doesn't recognise her own body. It has become something separate from her, dragging her along into an unknown place. She screams, not wanting to go.

'Please, please,' she cries.

Even as she watches, her stomach lurches in a landslide movement to one side of the bed. The nurse who has been holding her is terrified.

'Wait, I'll get someone,' she says. 'Wait, hold on.'

The young, sweet nurse is crying too in great gasping sobs of panic.

But the woman is past listening. Her cries have changed. They pierce the air, becoming something other than despair, sounding inhuman. They are the cries of an unseen child. The child she once used to be, the child inside her, maybe. In the darkness outside, jasmine flowers open, bursting their pouches of scent. Large spiders move haltingly amongst the leaves of the creepers that grow against the whitewashed wall. This is the tropics; insects and reptilian life flourish. A drum is beating in the distance, its regular beat out of step with the cries of the woman in the hospital bed. The spiders and the snakes move relentlessly through the long grass, deaf to the fact that she is pleading for her life now.

They walk back down the hill carrying their prizes. The moon paints a long silver strip across the ground. The road has been recently tarred

and the smell of hot bitumen mixes with the smell of the sea. Alice breathes it in deeply. The fair is following them home in magical bursts of heady lights and smells and cries, and the faint jaunty sound of music. She dances ahead of her aunt, waving her thin arms in the air. The moon picks up her shadow and throws it on to the empty road, turning her into a child on stilts.

'Is this child not tired yet!' sighs May, pretending despair.

She is swinging Namil's hand as she walks. She too takes little dancing steps.

'I'm not a bit,' Alice sings out in time to the music. 'I'm never going to be tired because I'm nine today!'

They all laugh. They are still laughing as they reach the house. Bee, who has been working in his studio, comes out to greet the revellers. Kamala is shaking her head and trying to look stern.

'Come, come, Putha, it's very late,' she tells Alice. 'You must have a wash and go to bed,' she says, giving the little girl a hug.

'Amma, she still has bags of energy,' May cries in mock complaint. 'Namil and I have been trying to wear her out with no success!' she adds, kicking off her sandals and throwing herself down on one of the many planter's chairs that dot the verandah.

'Well, I'm taking her to the beach early tomorrow morning, so she'd better get some sleep or she won't be able to wake,' Bee tells her slyly.

'Yes, yes, yes,' Alice says, knowing when she is beaten.

Everyone laughs and she follows the servant in, the faint music from the hill still luring her like the tune of the pied piper.

In the last hour, the darkest moment of the night, just before dawn breaks, a doctor hurries into the room. He is a different, younger doctor. He too is a Singhalese; a family man, a father. Capable of hiding his feelings under a mask of professionalism. The woman on the bed has bled so much she is only semi-conscious, and the doctor knows he has not got much time. The baby, the girl child, he knows, is already dead. Later he will fill out the death certificate. *Still birth*, he will write. And although no one will be watching, his hand will have the faintest tremor; his jaw will tighten imperceptibly with anger. That will be all.

Later, in disgust, he will apply to leave his wretched country, unable to stomach what he has always known. For he, more than anyone, knows that life is cheap in this Third World paradise. It comes and goes like waves on its many beaches. But all of this will happen later. On this long, solitary night the doctor will do his job and deliver another dead child. He will see the baby's soft downy hair as it comes away on his hands, when he lifts the body out of this woman. The woman, herself semi-conscious now, far beyond tears, has one last request.

'Let me see her. Please, let me see her,' she begs.

But the doctor, his face softened by pity, his heart filled with pain, shakes his head. The woman sees the compassion in his face in the growing light of the new day.

'What the eye doesn't see, the heart doesn't grieve over,' the doctor says.

It is his only mistake that night.