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BRIGHTHELM



*small star*

One by one, they fell into shade. She watched as Hannah's retreating form was absorbed into the darkness of stone steps. The last thing she saw: the pale face of the child, slumped over Hannah's shoulder, and the small star of her hand as she waved goodbye.

Savi drew her scarf around her and braced herself for the sea wind. The distant stalks of esplanade lights flickered into view, coming to her through the spray as a pale shower of young coconut flowers, waxy buds falling from golden wedding urns as she peeled them clean. Here they were again, glowing warm against the sea.

She was used to them now, these once disconcerting slips. They were to be expected in this land of shifted, shifting things, where hills rose and fell in smooth, leafless echoes, undulating like a frozen sea, and the sea itself materialised as solid waves of flint that matched the broken rocks on the shore. Brighthelm was spread between these repeating rolls of grey hills and waves, sometimes as a space of possibility, sometimes ephemeral as a dream. She would move through winding alleys that opened into gardens, pass lights that led to darkness, a pier that drew her over sea. As she walked above the moving water, she felt how much she'd left of herself behind. There were spinning wheels and trains that carried tourists into the clouds, and a language that turned chaotic on the lips. It was a place that shifted time and region, of rain from other shores. At its heart lay a royal dream of Asia – a curved and flowing building affectionately called *The Pavilion*; a prince's whim, a sideshow, where turquoise minarets and parasols of palm trees covered writhing dragons of red and gold.

Savi walked through the Lanes with her rucksack on her back, stepping out of the way of the crowds, the men and women who strode out of shops as glossy as airport magazines and dined al fresco in those sea-front hotels made famous in films. She would feel the contact of their holidays in the sun as they brushed past, their bronze against her brown, their smooth oiled skins against her dry arms, the contrast reminding her she was alone.

She was still jostled, for she walked too quickly and her rucksack was weighted with books. 'Sorry', she would say, when someone bumped into her. 'That's OK', she would respond on behalf of unsuspecting strangers, 'Thaht's OK. Zat's Okay', trying out variously a Scottish brogue, an American drawl, some version of Teutonic intonation. 'I was wondering if you could tell me the way to...? You don't have the time by any chance?'

But of course they never saw her, never responded. Just moved on as if she wasn't there.

The cobbled streets were too narrow for the jutting shop signs that festooned her native city, signs that reached out and bickered with one another. She would pause by windows spangled with lights as bright as the sequined silks within, enter the aisle and run her fingers through the skirts, feeling the texture of those places that rose in her mind – saris, shawls, shirts, sarongs that fluttered from the open stalls of the Pettah.

'How much?'

'Forty pounds.'

In the Pettah it might have been less than four.

She withdrew her hand, wondering how many people she might have touched, who they were, what form of contact this was.

In the evenings, her work done, she might emerge and step over shapes that stirred into sleeping vagrants and slip into the Greek café. She might hear the laughter of students in their uniform of club leather, light a cigarette and watch the pier illuminate into a skeleton of bright bulbs, as the waves slid into darkness and the sea was reduced to a hiss.

Time was measured in anticipation of the full moon. Savi would strike off the days in her diary, each day a match lighting their separation, her diary empty but for these strokes. She placed her

pen by the table, heard it roll and tap the lamp, reached for the switch and turned the light off. In the dark, it came to her that her mother, too, might have willed her into oblivion, that their enforced separation had made this a necessary act.

Her mother had always had the ability to cauterise pain. At the airport departure gate – a memory that might be called false because it was a composite of different events – her mother had turned away with her familiar decisiveness, cleared a path through the crowd with a trolley weighted with buckled cases, and never looked back. *On poya days I will think of you* – her mother's words sealed in bright berries of crimson lipstick, uttered just moments before. The words were real but the events that framed them belonged to a different time.

She recalled the saline drip coming from her mother's arm, a crescent of paleness on the inside of her wrist, the lifeline split and trailing into vagueness. She had sat by her mother's side, stroking her hand, running her fingers down the length of her mother's fingers and locking them into hers.

It had been many months – years perhaps – since her mother had been strong enough to rise up and hold her. With their hands locked together she felt the need to be held, gently as her mother had held her, not with the abrupt and crushing need with which her father drew her to him during the last few months of her mother's life. Even in those rare moments of contact when her mother used to towel her hair dry, drawing Savi to her dimpled belly – her watalappan tummy as they both called it, smelling of sandalwood and talcum – and rolling her wet head in the large, soft folds, her mother had maintained the gentlest touch, her hands losing definition in the tumbling roll of towel that swaddled Savi's head, laughing at her exaggerated squeals of protest, their laughter frothing into one.

She had run her fingers along the ridges of her mother's left hand, around the rim of surgical tape, conscious of the looseness between skin and bone. A tight white sheet was drawn about her mother's form. Only the face shifted a little, drawn into its primary lines. The thin light in her mother's eyes seemed to be burning through Savi to a point beyond her on the window, the

force of her gaze pared down to this bright filament. She was reminded of a cobra, eyes glazed in concentration as it shed its skin in the silver needles of a cactus, caught in the slow and delicate process of casting off an old self.

She had pressed her mother's hand with the pulse she wished to instill in her, and then pressed it again, more insistently, with a pressure that must have hurt, hating the stillness that had settled over the bed. She had learnt about loss in those slow hospital hours, learnt of it long before she came to England. Aloneness. Her mother's stillness a disease that threatened them all, when she could have swooped through the lengthening intervals between each breath.

It might have infected her too had not her mother smiled that last time and said the words that unravelled everything: *On poya days I will think of you*, the eyes fixed on her in the permanence of love, the words leaving her lips slack, open, with the promise of more.

Savi reached forward to kiss her but was pulled back by an attendant and led firmly to the window. Someone held her shoulder as if to stop her turning round. She heard a screen being drawn about the bed where her father had been sitting on the other side.

Plumes of smoke were rising from the glowing buildings below. There were the orange flares of the city riots, the fires smudged into clouds of glowing fingerprints. *On poya days I will think of you*. Her mother's poya prayers repeating through her tears. Each full moon held a promise of sorts.

She could hear a woman's loud boots on the porch, almost certainly her landlady returning from work. She turned towards the window and opened the blind to reveal the night in slats. The railings gleamed wet. The lamp held up its globe of yellow light against a distant satellite dish. It would be a full week before the moon rounded, a full week before her mother might have lit three sticks of incense. She needed her mother now, needed to conjure with the final farewell of airport sliding glass doors, imagine that her mother had made the journey with her to become a part of a larger self that crossed the sky, place her mother there at the time of her own departure so that she might see her calling, calling and

waving an arm of shiny bangles, as she turned and walked away in her new, heavy, serious, English shoes.

She was eleven years old when she left the island. By then the past was already a necessary lie.

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‘How can he remember something wrong? That is like mis-remembering, no? He’s a real boru karaya. All snaky lies coming from his mouth,’ Renu protested as she ran ahead, slipped off her sticky shoes, and scurried into the pantry. The girls were soaked from a sudden downpour after cycling home from tuition, and were eager for the Horlicks held in Josilin’s dimpled arms.

Renu was the like that, the one who ran after her but always ended up leading the way, so it sometimes felt to Savi as if someone rushed right through her when Renu sped by.

The girls had been picking over the bones of a notorious family murder that had been spoken of in their history class, a story lightly buried in casual gossip and recently exhumed and dusted off by a national newspaper. Sir Henry De Mel, a man with ancestral links to their own family, had been shot dead during a dispute over pay and working conditions on his vast coconut estate. The murderer had been apprehended and hanged. Uncertainty lay for the girls in De Mel’s exact relationship to his assailant.

‘Well he was treated like a son, so he might as well have been a son,’ Savi reasoned, stirring the heat from her drink and downing a gulp. Did it really matter that the man accused, condemned and executed for the murder was in fact the first-cousin-once-removed of the victim? Did it really matter if their tutor referred to him as a son, as most people – including Josilin – did, when the papers dredged the details into view? It was a matter of degree rather than kind, surely.

‘But he wasn’t a son, he was a poor relation who was being treated as a hanger-on. How can Stiltskin get it so wrong? He talks as if it’s all just a story, not true true people and facts. Anyway, he’s meant to teach proper history, not fat stories about rich men.’ Renu pulled her damp dress off and kicked it in exasperation.

Stiltskin was their name for the private tutor whose real name

was tongue-twistingly long and whose body was half its original size from fifty years of leaning over children's desks. A large-nosed taskmaster who pranced about them, sniffing snuff.

'It doesn't matter. It's finished now and he got most things right. Redley worked for Sir Henry and was family. He was lucky to have the job and all.' Savi picked the dress up and gave it to Josilin who folded it into the sink. 'So killing Sir Henry was not just murder, it was,' she searched for the word, 'tretch – treacherri. It was *as if* Redley was a son. Stiltskin is just repeating what everyone else says and thinks. He is telling the story as it is NOW.' Her mouth expanded with emphasis. She looked to Josilin for support, but Josilin just smiled and chucked her under the chin.

'You think too much, baba.' Josilin sniffed as she went to the door. 'My baby girls both think too much.'

'It doesn't matter what is true or not. What matters is what people believe,' Savi said with a finality that she hoped would win the day.

But Renu, for whom spoken words were slippery fish, who could only find the exact words for her feelings in the quiet of her room with a pen in her hand, would not be silenced. 'That's just stupid. Belluddy Stewpid,' she shouted. 'You'd believe the moon is a pancake. You're becoming, you're becoming' and Savi could see the words coming and can still hear Renu say them across the years, '*a lost cause*'.

She knew what this meant. She had heard her father speak of lost causes when referring to a difficult case, a case so entangled in the machinery of political power that it was impossible to win. Now, in the basement flat, the words seemed to gather new weight.

The slatted blinds cast shades of light and dark on her night shirt and the foolscap she'd laid on the table. Her thesis was now called *The Manticore's Tale*, the original name lost in some filing cabinet at the university. It had begun as a study of parricide in myth and metamorphosed into what her supervisor, Dr Highfield, called a *cultural analysis of nationalist discourse in relation to ethnic fratricide* – terms which indicated his disapproval of her change of direction and his intention not to engage with her work at anything other than a cursory level.

She had not intended this change, but the study appeared to have evolved of its own accord, metamorphosing over the years as readily as the history it was attempting to reclaim. *The Manticore's Tale*. She liked the name. It had bite, like the manticore itself, the mythical man-eating creature from India, half-man, half-lion, with a tail studded with poisoned quills and three rows of teeth. Its quills sprang out and regenerated themselves each time it was attacked. The history of Sri Lanka was like that, she felt, a tale of generative violence protecting the lion men who called themselves the Sinhalese. But only the title felt certain now. The rest of her study was written in a new language with an accent all its own that she was struggling to master.

*Theories of belonging*, she wrote, *work on the premise of a fixed and stable originary culture.*

Here it was again, the question of origins, the perpetual problem of where to start. All beginnings were interruptions, lacerations, a tear in the fold of time. If her mother had not died in a hospital bed in central Colombo on a private wing reserved for the terminally ill, on a day when neighbour torched neighbour into bright beacons, burning 300, 400, 500 people, the numbers flaring and accumulating in charred heaps before being swept away along with broken timber, Tamil shop signs and booty, sliding into that historical crease that was marked for her only by her mother's thin hand on the whiter than white sheet, her father's tight grief, and the cries of the ambulance men as they called for haste in the corridors below, while her mother looked through the window at a sky spiralling with smoke and white flags of scrap paper; if her mother had not died at this time, the dawn of Black July, had not died at all, there might not have been this sudden collapse, this tumble into darkness between moments that could be remembered and those that could not.

It was a beginning of sorts, her mother's death. It marked the start of her own new life. She put down the pen, sat back and closed her eyes.