

# Brixton Beach

Roma Tearne

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# *Brixton Beach*

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Dedication on page 273: an unsourced passage (originally in German)  
that Wilhelm Hesse pasted in Eva Hesse's first Tagebuch;  
EH 1, inside back cover, 1939. Courtesy of the Estate of Eva Hesse  
Lines from *White Flock*, 1917, by Anna Akhmatova on page 374 © Anna Akhmatova

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places  
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author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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*All of life is a foreign country*

JACK KEROUAC,  
letter (24 June 1949)

# *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.

BRIXTON BEACH

‘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 Aunt 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.