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From a Novel in Progress

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Abstract

The island's single international airport was crowded. This, I soon discovered, was because His Excellency the President was expected to arrive any moment now, from a conference he had been attending in Rome. Half the population of the city, seized, it seemed, with a burning desire to welcome him home, had converged on the airport which was decorated as far as the eye could see with coloured banners and huge posters which carried pictures of His Excellency's smiling face. Flag-waving crowds and cheering school-children lined the approach to the airport. It was impossible to get a taxi -security police had cordoned off the taxi rank, and arriving passengers were ushered into an airconditioned lounge where they were politely told they would have to wait until the President was safely on his way to the city, and the Customs and Immigration desks could re-open for business.

YASMINE GOONERATNE

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'Oh, God! isn't this a pain!'

The young woman who had spoken, half to herself, half to me in the way irritated travellers occasionally do at airports when their itineraries get fouled up, took a book from her carry-on bag and began to read. I couldn't have agreed more. But she was clearly not expecting a response from me, so I bought a copy of the *Daily News* to check out the weather up-country. During my time on the paper the weather forecast had always been on Page One, but the format had obviously changed since I'd left, for I had to work through the whole paper, Local News, International News, Tea Prices, Stocks and Shares, Women and Culture, and Auction Notices, before I discovered the forecast on the Sports page, above the football and cricket scores. And that was how I learned – from Auction Notices – that Mrs Edith Crocker's property was on view that weekend, and was to be auctioned on the following Tuesday.

I hadn't thought of Mrs Crocker in years. But the auctioneer's notice brought her back so vividly to my mind that it was as if she had never left it. 1957. The island's social world had moved up for the 'season' to the misty blue line of the hill country, escaping the heat of April in town. Its members had redistributed themselves among the hill-stations that the British had built in the last century, focusing their attention as the British had done before them on the tennis courts in one little township, on the golf links in another, on the racecourse set among lush green paddocks at the third. The centre of all this activity had been, of course, the Grand

Imperial Hotel, older than the Raffles in Singapore, grander than the Great Eastern in Calcutta. Its sweeping lawns and long reception rooms with their log fires and parquet floors, once venues for Fancy Fetes and Governors' Balls, had become, since Independence, ideal locations for the operation of the local marriage market. There new saris were paraded by young women, and marriages were planned by mothers and aunts, a feverish business from which the men sought refuge in billiards or beer in the Grand Imperial's famous teakpanelled bar.

Not that I'd been involved in any of that. I was a working girl then, as now, with no fond mamma to make matches for me, no papa to negotiate a dowry. As a free-lance journalist, writing occasionally for the Women and Culture page of the *Daily News*, I knew something of what lay behind the glamour: I knew, for instance, that the drinkers in the bar on whose behalf marriage settlements (their daughters' or their own) were being delicately negotiated in the reception rooms didn't give a damn about the fashion show going on upstairs, just as they didn't give a damn about the classes in *haute cuisine* and dress-making in which their daughters or future wives were hopefully enrolling as qualifications for marriage. How did I know this? As a working girl living on her own in a city flat, obviously unattached and far from unattractive, I'd been propositioned too often to remain naive about men, married or single, or to retain many illusions about marriage.

There was a stir and bustle in the airport, and a line of officials snapped smartly to attention. I looked up and I saw, through the thick plate glass that separated our lounge from the main lobby, an imposing figure in snow-white national dress and dark glasses, garlanded with flowers and surrounded by a cordon of security guards.

My fellow passengers pressed forward to have a look at an Asian President, and he, pleased by their respectful attention, folded his hands and smiled, bowing graciously in our direction. I scowled back at him. I recognized him all right, he'd been a Junior Minister in the cabinet that Peter, working in association with his friends in the group they code-named 'Camelot', had gallantly attempted to remove for their country's good by means of an army coup in the fifties.

Who had Peter thought he was? I asked myself, not for the first time. Sir Lancelot of the Lake? Simon Templar? James Bond? And as for 'Camelot' - David, Jeremy, Colin, Nigel and company - who had they thought they were? Knights of the Round Table? 'A League of Gentlemen'? Just what had they thought they were doing? Their miserable 'coup', undertaken in the joyous spirit of a *Boys' Own Paper* adventure, ill-conceived and hopelessly mismanaged, had stripped Peter and his friends of their rank and decorations. It had landed some members of 'Camelot' temporarily in jail (where they had had to wake up rather abruptly to living conditions which were certainly medieval), and had pitched others with their families (including Julian and me) abroad, into permanent exile. Yet it was obvious

that the same coup which had altered our very lives had been but a tiny hiccup in the political career of the man who was now smiling blandly at me through the plate glass of the airport lobby.

I rummaged in my bag for my passport and immigration card. When I glanced up, the young woman beside me had disappeared. I looked about in vain for her that night in the lobby of my transit hotel. I needed someone to talk to, but could find not a single soul to whom I could relate in a place which was crammed with people, tourists on charter flights from Europe and journalists who, it seemed, were winging into the capital on every jet, intent on filing reports to their papers on what was expected to be the news sensation of the year. I gathered from the animated conversation around me what I had not learned from the Government-controlled *Daily News*, that a push by Government security forces was expected to take place at any moment, an offensive by air, land and sea that the Government hoped would end once and for all the problem posed for the country by the terrorists concentrated in its Northern Province.

Waiting for the news story to break, the journalists sat about in the bar and the lobby, jockeyed for places at official briefings, bribed their way on to helicopters bound for the north, and chatted up middlemen who swore they could fix up interviews for them with terrorist leaders. Everywhere in the hotel telephones were ringing. Barefooted bell-boys raced along corridors carrying telefaxed messages. It wasn't difficult to tell the tourists from the journalists: while the tourists herded like terrified cattle into the comforting waters of the hotel's three swimming pools, the bar rapidly became the headquarters of men equipped with pocket microphones, mini-computers and cameras, trading information and busily comparing notes on their experiences in Cambodia and Vietnam. (Some of them had memories that went as far back as Korea.)

A list had been posted in the lobby for tourists who wished to go on a guided tour of the old colonial city, another for visitors who wanted interviews with Government spokespersons. The old hands among the newspaper-men delightedly took the tour and pointedly scorned the interviews, preferring (where the 'war' was concerned, at any rate) to impress one another with the superiority of their inside information. One was able to tell his drinking companions that the city hotels were flying in bargirls from Bangkok for the benefit of the assembled *paparazzi*. These would be available for viewing from 7 pm that very evening, when the festivities would begin with a cabaret in the hotel's Pink Elephant nightclub for which tables were being reserved *now*. Another touched his mates for a ten-rupee note in order to demonstrate from the devices printed on its surface, front and back, an obscene joke at the President's expense that was currently circulating in the city. The *Post* representative had been filling in his time making an in-depth study of island culture. He wanted, he said, to get the background right, and he regaled his comrades with snippets of island history.

'In a society like this,' he said, 'time stands still. What was true in the 5th century B.C. remains true today. Did you pick up yesterday's story about the military commander the Security Forces saved from being walled up and starved to death? Well, it happened in the 10th century, to a chieftain of the Inner Kingdom. His wife saved his life. Granted permission to visit her husband, she pounded rice into a paste and rubbed the paste into her body. When she met her husband, and they were left alone together in the privacy of the prison, he licked the paste off her. Sexy, eh?'

The man from *Time* was researching the colonial period, and had discovered that the area in which terrorists were currently concentrated was one in which Sir Samuel Baker had once dreamed of founding a British colony.

'This was before the old boy went off to explore the source of the Nile. Imported a bunch of English villagers, complete with ploughs and tools and aprons, imported a pack of foxhounds, too, so he could hunt sambhur in the uplands. Built a brewery, a court house and a church, in that order. Ran the place for six years as if it had been a private estate, before giving up the idea and moving on to Africa. I've fixed up an interview for Monday morning with a descendant of one of Baker's villagers, an ancient who's holed up in a nursing home in the city. Monday afternoon I've been promised Padma Devi, queen of the terrorists in that area. Thought it'd make a nice contrast - old colonial Brit, clinging to his life, young Asian revolutionary throwing away hers.'

All night long a typewriter tapped in the room next to mine. I buried my head in my pillow and tried to ignore the noise, but the guest on the other side of the wakeful typist didn't. 'Stop that bloody racket!' yelled a female voice. The protest was accompanied by a furious banging on the sturdy connecting door. The typing ceased immediately, but it was by then five o'clock in the morning. Unable to sleep, I got up, dressed, and went for a walk.

All along the beach front in the early light of dawn, beneath the tossing fronds of a long line of palms, plump, pale tourists were jogging along the promenade or standing in their minuscule beach gear, facing the ocean waves and taking deep breaths of invigorating ozone.

'Un! deux! trois! quatre! cinq!' puffed one of the joggers as he thudded past me in his boxer shorts and Reeboks, lifting his white-skinned knees high in the air.