AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Kushlani de Soyza for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts in English presented on April 27, 2010.
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_____________________________________________________________________________________

Marjorie Sandor

Parangiya, Kotté Giya is collection of linked short stories, focusing on the experiences of a young Sinhalese-Dutchburgher woman growing up in Colombo Sri Lanka, in the years following the nation’s independence from British colonial rule.
Parangiya, Kotté Giya

by
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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Kushlani de Soyza, Author
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The way Dolly’s mother told it, it seemed the tale could be true.

That year, the December monsoon did not come, so off the Balapitiya coast, the fish did not awaken. No cacophony of raindrops fell upon the silent waters, under which schools of lumbering seerfish slept. Cool winds failed to blow in from the Maldives, failed to push thousands of addled seer toward the shore where the men expected them. It was the unduvap poya, Buddha’s holiest full moon day, but the fish did not come. In the absence of rain striking the resistant sea, no music rang to rouse them—the fish continued to sleep under the blanket of midnight heat. The men waited in vain. No one knew why, but each December poya drove male seerfish into the Balapitiya shallows. The larger, female kingfish—as the seer were also called—never joined this moonlit circus. The men claimed these fish were lazy and stupid, too indolent to stir despite the symphony of rain, but the women of Balapitiya knew better. Kingfish mothers, many as long as three feet, absorbed the rain’s vibrations from the safety of deeper waters, shaking their bullet-shaped snouts at the hordes of males rushing to meet their human counterparts. The men watched and waited with nets to take the fish home to their wives.

Dolly’s grandfather Wijesena was among the restless crowd. Like the others, he wondered why the rains and fish stayed away, but he also eyed the Fernando boys, who had taken to swilling arrack to kill time in the paralyzed night. Already, Dinesh Fernando was stumbling and slurring his words. He thrust the cheap coconut whiskey at Wijesena, who took a long draw from the bottle. But Wijesena’s youngest brother Ajit had always been a better Buddhist. When Dinesh offered Ajit a swig, the boy hissed. “Kalé hari nah,” Ajit said. “You fools make bad luck worse. Fish or no fish, it’s still the poya.”
Ajit backhanded the bottle, sending it tumbling into the sand. The crowd of men tensed, and all eyes turned to Dinesh, who stared as his arrack formed a small amber pool and then bubbled into the tiny holes left by sand crabs. The men waited and watched, the scene clarified by the sharp light of a great white eye that should have been obscured by rain clouds.

Dinesh struck with speed no one expected from a man who, moments before, had been staggering. It seemed as if he’d shoved Ajit hard in the chest; later, the men would all agree how strange it was that no one saw the blade flash. Ajit reeled backward, and Dinesh turned and ran. No one pursued him, because the men were mesmerized by the bright red spot spreading over Ajit’s white shirt and the unearthly exhale that could only be the boy’s spirit leaving his body. Wijesena knew his brother was dead before the body hit the sand.

The men waited and watched.

The tiny, tidy house sat atop a small rise just beyond the train tracks, which the British had completed to service their coconut and rubber estates in the south. The home’s proximity to the Colombo-Galle road and a small railstop made it easy for the women to sell kingfish to groups traveling by bullock-cart or by train. Despite the late hour, Dolly’s grandmother stayed awake, hoping for a bounty of seerfish to prepare for home and for the market. Though Nalini typically took a small glass of arrack to quiet the baby’s kicking and quell her nausea, on the poya, aromatic spices sufficed. Nalini’s mother-in-law poured her a cup of ginger and cardamom and brewed a thick, sweet cup of hakuru tea for herself. In the stillness, they heard the men’s heavy footsteps – the harbinger of bad news.

Gripping the chairback, Nalini hoisted herself to her feet and threw open the door. “Mokatha, Wijesena?”

Crossing the threshold, Wijesena touched his wife’s cheek with the back of his icy hand and walked past her. He approached the old widow to tell her she had outlived her
youngest son, as the grim procession waited at the door. Dropping to his knees, he placed his head at her feet and wept.

“I’m sorry, Amma,” he whispered.

Seeing the men holding Ajit’s limp body, Mrs. Amarasekera lunged from her chair. Her mug of tea crashed onto the polished earthen floor, and the splintering clay broke the silence. As the men lay Ajit gently on the ground, the boy’s mother held him for the last time. Her cries echoed through the village.

The British colonial officer who briefly investigated Ajit’s stabbing found no eyewitnesses to the crime and closed the case. But on the night before the next poya, there was another unexplained death in Balapitiya – this one discovered at Ajit’s gravesite, still marked by remnants of the boy’s funeral pyre. Police reported that the head and bowels of a known village ruffian were found on top of the grave, the rest of the body never found. Again, there were no eyewitnesses to the crime.

The morning after they found Dinesh’s body, the way Dolly’s mother told the story, Nalini made two trips – first to the temple to give alms to the priests, and then to the convent where she’d been raised. There she lit candles for saints she didn’t believe in, but those were the things that had been there in the beginning. That very night, rain clouds obscured the full moon and the kingfish awoke from their slumbers. The men of Balapitiya gathered to await them in the shallows. The women waited at home. This was where the story ended – with its bloody finale and the answering of prayers. “The saints heard Nalini’s cries,” Dolly’s mother said. “Prosperity returned to the village, and one month later, your father was born.”

But over the years, Dolly had cobbled together other ways to end the tale. Prosperity, she came to believe, was harder to come by. No one among the police or neighboring villages had been surprised at the killings in Balapitiya, where fiery
temperaments and a genetic predisposition to drink blended with lack of opportunity. This incendiary combination gave the fishing village a violent reputation as the home of thieves and thugs quick to settle disputes with the knife. Fishing had become less lucrative as British trawlers had gone to work on the seas closer to Colombo, the capital. Many Balapitiya men had cast away their nets to find posts on coconut and rubber plantations further inland. The work was menial, but it was work. The men who remained, hot blooded to begin with, simmered bitterly and often turned their anger toward each other as the Fernandos and Amarasekeras had recently proven. Nalini must have understood this and fretted in the final days of her pregnancy.

After Ajit’s death, there was no question of leaving the village. Mrs. Amarasekera was broken, a vital piece of her gone with the December poya. The oldest son, Wijesena bore the responsibility of looking after the old woman who now could only sit in her chair and gaze out the window. Nalini talked to her constantly while cooking or doing housework, but it felt as if she were talking to no one, her words evaporating unheard even as they left her lips. She wondered how her child interpreted this noisy silence and worried it would make him deaf. When her mother-in-law slept, she began telling the baby stories in English, the language she had learned in the convent, the only home she’d known until her wedding day. And though she feared it was impossible, Nalini sometimes spoke quietly to Wijesena of making a new life in Colombo.

“My English is good, Wijay. I could teach you,” she said when her husband returned from the boat. In a dirty white banyan shirt and faded sarong, Wijesena smelled of the sea and sweat. Tiny rivulets of salt outlined the wiry muscles of his neck and shoulder blades as he peeled a mango at the kitchen table. If circumstances had been different, Nalini would have gone to him and softly rubbed the salt from his face and body, coaxing the exhausted man into a few minutes of passion—probably all he could muster after
hauling nets all day. Even in her last month, Nalini still felt desire for her husband, and he for her. But today, anxiety overshadowed their yearning.

“In Colombo I could cook or sew, tend house maybe,” she said. “You could do anything you wanted—get a job on one of the fishing ships or open a shop in the Pettah?” “You’ll work as a sutha’s servant?” he said, referring to the British by the whiteness of their skin. “And what work will I find stammering in broken English? Besides, who will look after the baby? It’s not as if—”

He looked at his mother sitting silent by the window, her sari impeccably draped and her black hair coiled into a perfect condé. He recognized Nalini’s effort in his mother’s neat appearance and paused, setting down the knife and half-peeled mango. Nalini stood in the doorway to their home’s other room, leaning heavily against the wall—her hips had begun to loosen in anticipation of her labor and she needed the support in case her spindly legs gave way. Her swollen belly was miraculous and comical, for the child seemed to defy gravity by protruding up and out from Nalini’s narrow frame. Although she was carrying a baby boy who would enter the world at close to 10 pounds, Nalini was still built like a papaya stalk. Wijesena rose from the kitchen table and went to his wife, taking her hand.

“Patience, baba. Patience.”

Nalini drew her fingers free of Wijesena’s grasp and pressed her hand against the doorknob. Aligning her hips in their sockets, she stood up from the wall she’d been leaning on. “Patience? The world didn’t wait for Amma,” she said quietly, motioning to the old woman. “It didn’t wait for Ajit. Why should I wait, Wijay? For what?” Of course, Nalini did wait in the village, looking after her mother-in-law and the four children she lived to see. The fifth did her in, but Dolly was certain there could have been, should have been another ending.
Needle and Thread (1947)

The new servant gripped the glinting metal between her teeth. Dolly peered from the doorway as the woman shifted a well-worn silk bushcoat on her lap. The buttons hung slack against tired thread crosses, which had once held them firmly in place. Slipping the needle out of her teeth, she pierced the silk from beneath the placket and drew the thread through one of the faltering button’s four eyes.

“Kohomatha, baba,” the woman asked Dolly. “Magay nama Prema, Mokatha nama, baba?”

Dolly said nothing, mesmerized and a little frightened by the servant’s glimmering teeth and the gold filigree stud shining in her nostril. Her skin was glossy as melting hakuru.

The woman set aside her work. Scanning the tiny room, she took up a small jute bag. She removed a newspaper clipping: the picture showed an expanse of corrugated metal shacks, and in the foreground, a grubby child, a toddler, waving a papaya stalk at the camera and grinning. “Magay nangi,” the woman said, pointing to the girl in the photo. The headline, written in English, asked: “Raze or reform Colombo’s slums?” The word “reform” was foreign to Dolly, but there was no point in asking the servant about it – she wouldn’t read or speak English. She wondered why anyone would raise such an ugly village, picturing instead a fairytale city rising from the earth. In such a place, the child – the woman’s baby sister – would be scrubbed and rosy, buoyed on a cloud.

The woman laid the empty bag flat on the table and motioned for Dolly’s help. At the woman’s request, Dolly approached slowly and placed her small hand – bony fingers spread wide – against the fabric. Her arm seemed to vanish against the caramel-colored cloth. The woman gently pressed Dolly’s fingers together and, with a thick sewing lead, traced a rough triangle. The outline began near the heel of her palm, rose to the tip of the middle finger, and
back down to the base of the thumb. With a few more strokes, the woman had sketched the outline of a girl, whose dress was precisely the size of a child’s hand. Dolly breathed in sharply: How could her own fingers be so transformed?

“Magay nama Prema,” the woman said again. “Mokatha nama, baba?”

“Dolly.”

“Ayubowan, Dolly.” She took up her needle and traced the penciled outline with tight, efficient stitches, leaving an opening of several inches along one edge. Cutting away the excess fabric, she turned the remaining figure outside-in, and miraculously, the shell of a rag-doll emerged.

Dolly and Prema filled the doll with scraps of cloth and stitched shut the hem. Spare buttons were too big to use for eyes, so Prema gave the creature some bits of coconut shell – polished to a shine and used, until it had broken, as a serving spoon. Sewn into place, the shell fragments looked like two tiny cups balanced above the doll’s mouth, which Prema stitched with red string.

“Bohoma isthuthi,” Dolly exclaimed. “Bohoma isthuthi, Prema!” She raised the unexpected thing into the air above her head, and the sunshine gripped a million tiny fibers that stood up from the newly filled body like the finest hairs. The creature smiled blankly ahead, out into the courtyard or perhaps beyond. “You and your baby go play,” Prema told her in Sinhala. “I have work to tend to.” Dolly happily complied, running off with her new companion and leaving Prema to her mending.

The servants lived in rooms tucked back between the kitchens and the garage, while Dolly and her mother occupied the top floor of the house, above her father’s suite. When she wasn’t at school or practicing her piano, she prowled the upstairs rooms, as well as the servants’ quarters and the dusty courtyard to which their rooms opened. Prema’s room was just by the
kitchen. Her door was never closed, and a thin curtain flapped over a single barred window. A persistent breeze swept away the heavy aromas of frying onions and cumin. Instead, the room smelled perpetually of sweet, grated coconut and the karapincha that grew just beyond the window grate. The space was perfectly situated for sitting unobserved and listening to the servants at work. Her own bedroom was tucked between the front balcony and her mother’s rooms. Its windows opened to a towering rain tree that loomed over the family’s driveway and was often filled with boisterous black birds. Their cries, particularly incessant each morning, rang in her ears long after she’d fled to a more interesting spot.

While Prema worked in the kitchen or ran iced drinks to her father’s visitors, Dolly liked to perch on the woman’s cot and rifle through the small hutch there, which her mother had recently deemed too babyish for Dolly’s room. In the top drawer lay a silver tin filled with spools of thread, their stringed skins pierced through with needles of every size. A small glass bottle of coconut oil balanced on the bristles of a hairbrush, and a tiny spot of oil had soaked into the wood. She was unsure if the stain had come from Prema’s bottle or from pilfered squares of milk toffee Dolly had hoarded and hidden there when the hutch was still hers.

The drawer below held the servant’s wardrobe – three sets of cloth and jacket, and several cotton panties so large they made Dolly laugh. She could not imagine such ridiculous garments staying up around Prema’s slender waist; they seemed more suited to Kanthi, the chunky old ayah who had grumpily attended to Dolly for as long as she could remember. Neither could she imagine why the woman kept a single sari, whose glittering headpiece – embroidered with a swarm of silver fireflies – seemed out of place on the rough cotton fabric. In a newly stitched bag, she found the newspaper clipping of Prema’s baby sister. Trapped in the photo, the village and its girl remained earthbound, neither raised nor reformed, which Dolly had learned from her school’s English dictionary meant “converted for the better.”
On school days, Kanthi marched Dolly past Prema’s room toward the garage and waiting driver. Like a ritual, the ayah would bark at the younger woman during her morning prayers, scolding her to get to work – loudly enough, Dolly suspected, for her mother to hear from the balcony above. And each day Dolly waited with wicked anticipation for Prema’s response. Always an instant out of Kanthi’s earshot, as their footsteps signaled what Prema must have judged a safe distance from her room, the woman would let loose a quiet curse that was just perceptible to Dolly’s vigilant ears. On holidays, she would sit at the edge of Prema’s cot, keeping her company as she went about her work. Dolly admired the coverlet Prema had made by patching together still-lovely pieces of sarongs that could not be satisfactorily mended. The bed cover was sewn with rough scarlet string, which had been thickly embroidered into half-inch rivers running between each colorful panel. Like the sari’s shining fireflies, it looked out of place.

One weekend, Dolly decided she needed a companion for her rag-doll. She found Prema, hunched over an imposing heap of Dolly’s fraying uniforms, which needed to be darned before school resumed. “Make something yourself,” Prema said flatly, then added – “your mother could probably use a nice shawl.” Setting aside her mending, she gave Dolly a basket of cloth remnants and threaded a hefty needle for her. Dolly took up each discarded scrap of cotton as if it were a swatch of the finest silk. Her uneven stitches puckered the material or left it gaping at each seam, and the trail of thread ran crazily along the fabric. But eventually she fashioned a sash of sorts, about the span of her scrawny arms and the width of Prema’s hutch. She imagined her mother wearing it to the club, pulling it close when her iced brandy and ginger ale gave her a chill as the sea breeze came up.

When the sash was finally complete, she hurried down the grand staircase to catch her mother before her parents left for their night out, pausing on the landing to assess the situation downstairs. Though Dolly moved easily between her mother’s rooms upstairs and the servants’
quarters, her father’s suite at the base of the stairs was another world. Her father held court from his bedside, always wearing his house sarong and a battered bushcoat – no matter who came to see him. His visitors were men in elegant suits, with lucky drivers who waited out back with a cool drink or bowl of curry from the family kitchen. But occasionally he hosted other, rougher men in sarong and banyans – men who came and went quickly, always on foot or bicycle. Dolly was cautious before barreling past her father’s suite, into the adjacent dining room or to the kitchen and servants’ quarters beyond.

Her father’s door was open as usual. Ever concerned with ventilating his cigarette smoke, he covered his doorway with only a linen curtain, yellowed at the edges with age and tar. Though the servants washed the drape and even sent the whites to the dhobi on occasion, the dingy hem clung to the dust and polish collected on its guard. When he was out of the house, Dolly would often steal into his room and rummage there until her mother or the servants chased her out. Now she sat with her rag-doll and sash on the stairs, listening intently. The flimsy curtain seemed to gather wisps of words and smoke inside her father’s room and release them for Dolly to inhale. Her father sounded agitated. “I should have been told – not left to read about it with the rest of Colombo,” he growled, and she heard the telephone receiver clang back into its cradle. A heavy breeze swept the drape’s hem back and forth along the tiles.

“Oliver, please,” her mother sighed. “There’s no need to be peevish. And these? How many times have you read them already? You’ve been waiting for this day – you’re only angry because you weren’t told.” There was a shuffling sound, and her mother walked out of the room with an armload of the day’s newspapers, which her father read almost as religiously as his racing forms.

Dolly tried to scuttle around the corner, but her mother snapped: “Child, why are you lurking here in the shadows? Come get ready for your bath.” She set the papers on the dining table and gently led Dolly back up the stairs. “Kanthi,” she called out. “Baba wash natha?”
Her mother was already dressed for the club. She was draped in a deep blue Manipuri sari, shot through with glints of silver that made her gray eyes shine. Heavy diamond earrings glimmered above her pale shoulders. Dolly imagined the holes bored into her mother’s ears tugged into slits like needles, but hidden by the cluster of brilliants. “What are you clutching there, Dolores?” her mother asked.

Dolly held out her sash. Her mother took up the cloth and inspected it closely, admiring each patchwork square and tracing the stitches with her fingers. “This is lovely,” she declared. She threw it dramatically around her neck and twirled in her high heels. Dolly clapped her hands and laughed to see her mother so delighted by her work. “You’ve made this yourself? It’s beautiful, baba. It’s absolutely lovely. Will you give it to your baby doll? Or to Prema or Kanthi? They’ll look after you while we’re at the SSC.”

Dolly looked at the cloth as it lay across the headpiece of her mother’s sari. The dull fabric smothered the shimmering silk and looked rough against her mother’s fair skin. The ladies at the Sinhala Sports Club would be togged up to the nines, sipping beer shandies or long drinks outdoors, while the men smoked cigarettes and talked at a bar inside. Now, Dolly could no more picture her sloppy patchwork sash at the SSC than she could imagine it draped on her mother’s ebony dressing table.

“It’s ugly, Amma,” she said, tugging the cloth off her mother’s arms. “I’ll take it.”

“It is not ugly. It’s quite wonderful. It will be perfect in one of their rooms. And please don’t snatch at me like that – it’s quite rude.”

“Can I come with you?”

“Not tonight, baba. I’ve a feeling the club will be a bit chaotic. The servants will look after you.”
After her bath – with her father out of the house – she walked down the stairs without hesitation. She placed her rag-doll at the head of the dining table and sat down in her chair. Prema had set out a bowl of saffron rice cooked with carrot and lentils. Over this simple chorrua, Prema had poured thick coconut gravy from the morning’s potato curry. It was Dolly’s favorite meal. She was grateful for its lack of chilies, since neither Prema nor Kanthi had fetched her glass of water. Instead, they were huddled over the newspapers that had been discarded on the table. On the front pages, Dolly saw a familiar face, a man with deep-set eyes, a heavy mustache and floppy ears that belied his serious expression. He’d been at the house – and recently. From her usual vantage point on the front balcony, she had watched him emerge from his car in a suit as dark and crisp as a priest’s. Kanthi had shooed her away before she heard much of the conversation: it seemed the man required some financial backing, but her father had some reservations about his plans.

“Minniha maruna,” Kanthi said – he must be dead. Prema wondered if the man had been arrested. Dolly walked around the table to look at the papers with the two women. “No,” she told them in Sinhala, pointing at the headlines. “He quit. He quit his post at parliament. See?”

“What else does it say,” Prema asked quickly. “Does it say why?” She jabbed a finger toward the text that ran below the man’s photo.

Kanthi seemed to lose interest, looking down at the tablecloth and fussing at the embroidery with her fingertips. But Dolly was pleased to show off her reading skills, for which she was often praised at school. The man had quit his government post to lead a national party for independence and reform. Dolly was pleased to know this meant that something was to be converted for the better. The party, the report said, would include Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims.
“Thatha told him the Tamils will cause problems,” Dolly said. “And why would he need to quit his job to throw a party? If we have the party here, you can serve the children your chorrua!”

Prema responded sharply – in Tamil. Dolly couldn’t understand the words, but the woman was angry. “It’s not that kind of party,” she told Dolly, reverting to Sinhala, her voice still crackling. “And how would you people manage if no one were there to serve you at all?” She shoved at the table as she turned to go, and Dolly’s dinner sloshed over the rim of her bowl, splattering the tablecloth with a bright yellow stain.

Dolly looked to Kanthi, who stared silent and wide-eyed back at Dolly. The ayah walked around the table and picked up Dolly’s bowl, wiping up the rice with a napkin. Walking back to where Dolly stood, she placed the bowl onto a clean spot on the table. “Eat,” she told Dolly and hurried out into the kitchen. Alone in the void, Dolly felt her skin prickling across the backs of her shoulders, her ribs constricting beneath her chest. Confused and angry at being scolded, she picked up her rag-doll and slipped into her father’s room.

Her father’s bed loomed above a small, rectangular table and the rough cane chairs that surrounded it. Out of habit, she gathered up her father’s empty cigarette boxes, tearing out the gold paper linings and rubbing bits of dry tobacco between her fingers. She liked to count and stack the shining foils as if they were bars of gold. On the table, she counted the rings left by visitors’ tumblers of scotch or arrack, swirled her fingertips through the cold sweat left behind by her father’s glass. She’d learned that Johnny Walker smelled like the soil, only sweeter, while arrack was sharp, more like something Prema used for cleaning. Both, like the tobacco, smelled better than they felt on her tongue.

She climbed onto her father’s bed and rooted herself in the familiar depression at the edge of the sprawling mattress – he had boasted to her once that the hollow was from all the deals he’d closed while seated there. She sifted through the racing forms he’d left behind,
inhaling the smoke and citrus smell that permeated the room. Below her father’s seat were two shallow spots in the tile, where years of scuffing his slippers along the floor had worn away the clay. Climbing down from the bed, she ran her fingers along the indentations’ edge, felt the rough rim collapse into the smooth crater below. She wondered how much pressure was required to make the earth give way in this manner.

The clattering of dishes in the kitchen and the drone of a radio arose from the back of the house. The servants were cleaning up, and someone – undoubtedly – was scrubbing at a soiled tablecloth. As she crouched on the floor, palms pressed into her father’s footprints, she noticed something she hadn’t seen before. Fraying threads betrayed a small lump at the base of the curtain hanging behind her father’s ebony dressing table. She set aside her rag-doll and took up a discarded nib from his fountain pen. Pulling the curtain into her lap and flicking away a dusty mass that had escaped Prema’s broom, Dolly went to work. She hooked a fraying stitch in the nib’s rusted cleft and tugged. The fabric puckered and the thread snapped free with a barely audible ping. Dolly felt an elated shame as she unraveled the hem – moving from the cloth’s outer corner toward the curious bump, about the size of a durian seed, a few inches from the edge. She hooked and tugged, hooked and tugged, careful not to knick the fabric and rolling between her fingers stray bits of thread. She relished each broken stitch, the tautness of the line before it succumbed to the jerk of her thumb and forefinger.

Soon enough, the hem gave up a small packet, which dropped into her palm. Dolly unfolded the waxy paper to find two gems, the blue of a brilliant Balapitiya sea. The heart of each pea-sized stone was marked with a six-fingered glimmer, as if a brittle star had been captured in the crystal.

She rolled a stone into each depression at the side of her father’s bed and listened to the rhythmic clatter of cut stone against the clay. Dolly turned her attention again to the dressing table and the curtain. She folded and rolled two cigarette foils, wrapping them carefully in the
wax-paper packet. She would need some way to secure the hem. On one of the discarded
*Racing Times*, her father had marked a single story with a metal clip – a dozen horses dead of
poisoning at Wallace stables. Pulling the clip from the paper, she recalled with relief that her
father’s racehorses were stabled at the Turf Club nearby. She plied the metal into a makeshift
hook and, once she had set the packet back in its hiding place, punctured the cloth to make a
serviceable repair.

Pushing the drape to the side, she climbed back into her father’s bedside seat with the
gems clutched in one fist. She slid the stones into an empty cigarette box. The rattle pleased her:
papery thumps, a sharp clicking, and – when she listened closely – the gentle swish of lost
tobacco shreds. Dolly took the stones out of the box and placed them in the cups of her rag-
doll’s eyes. The sapphires’ stars remained trapped, shining out of the blue in the dim light,
staring at something, at nothing, at something again. And then, Prema was standing over her,
staring back at the blue-eyed creature Dolly had made. She pulled at Dolly’s shoulder with one
hand, and with the other, lifted the curtain from the bedside. “Your parents have come,” she said
quietly, inspecting Dolly’s mending and shoving it back behind the dressing table. “You should
have used a needle and thread – take your things and go.”

Sweeping through her father’s curtain, Dolly scurried back up the stairs. The cigarette
box and its gems clicked seductively with each desperate step. In the safety of her own room,
she burrowed under the bed covers and tucked the box beneath her pillow. The rain tree
whispered, and the black birds rustled on their perches. A treefrog mimicked the clicking of her
stones as Dolly faded into sleep.

The next morning, she awoke to the sound of her father’s voice – raised and angry –
and her mother’s heels, banging against the stairs as she rushed down. Dolly cowered in her bed
until silence settled over the house like a fog. Even the birds dared not cry out. She slipped open
her cigarette box, careful to keep the stones from clattering. Their stars still shone out of the
dark. She climbed out of bed and pushed the box as far as she could reach beneath her new almirah, a massive mahogany thing set against the room’s back wall. For good measure, she set her rag-doll underneath as well, to guard her prize blindly. Venturing downstairs, she slipped past her father’s room and toward hushed voices coming from the back. As she hid in the kitchen, she heard Kanthi in Prema’s doorway, speaking with breathy excitement.

“I never trusted that girl,” Kanthi said in Sinhala. “Shifty from the beginning, that one – and now, a thief.” Dolly cringed at hearing such harsh words from the woman who had raised her. She rushed away toward her and her mother’s rooms, hoping to avoid her accusers for a little longer, but at her father’s doorway, she stopped. Hearing nothing, she crept inside. There, spread obscenely at his bedside lay the curtain that should have been tucked behind the ebony table: a gaping hem, a gnarled metal clip, a wax-paper packet torn open.

“Dolly, come away from there.” Her father’s voice boomed as he and her mother emerged from the servants’ quarters.

“What happened,” she asked stupidly.

“Prema has stolen some gems,” her father said. “She’s a bloody thief.”

She clutched at the empty packet and fingered the mangled hem, the fabric pierced by her clumsy hook. That her father could make such an accusation was ridiculous: Prema would never do such shoddy work. Even so, he failed to see the truth – about Prema or about herself, for the moment. “Will you send her away,” Dolly asked.

“She’s already gone, Dolores,” he said. “She’d cleared out before I even discovered the theft. Must have taken the stones and run – back to that filthy village of hers, I suppose.”

But Prema had seen her. She had seen the blue eyes sparkling in their coconut-shell sockets. Perhaps she had recognized something strange in the stones’ unseeing gaze; perhaps she simply decided she would not look after a thief. Her father was right on one account, Dolly was sure – Prema had gone home. She imagined Prema back in the world of her newspaper
photo, lifting her baby sister into the sky. Behind them, the sun beat down onto an ugly metal sea. At Prema’s feet, the child had dropped her toy, the papaya stalk discarded in the dirt.

Dolly’s mother loosened her fingers from the cloth and pushed it back behind the dresser. “Come, baba. I’m sorry – I know you were fond of her,” she said, cupping Dolly’s chin in her hand.

Dolly pulled her face away and looked back to her father’s bedside. Taking up the wax paper and twisted clip, she threw them into her father’s wastebasket. “She should have used her needle and thread.”

Her mother’s eyes narrowed, and she gripped Dolly’s arm firmly as she led her from the room. “Let’s leave this to your father now. I don’t want to be late for church.” Together, they walked in silence toward the servants’ quarters. Dolly stopped as they reached Prema’s room. Her mother dropped her arm and walked without pausing into the courtyard. “You don’t seem yourself, Dolores,” her mother called as she climbed into the waiting Peugeot. “It’ll do you good to rest here. I’ll light a candle for you.” The car’s tires groaned against the gravel as the driver and her mother wheeled out toward Queens Road.

In Prema’s doorway, the curtain had been stripped. There was the hutch – cleared out, its drawers ajar. Her eye caught the glint of abandoned metal, trapped in a crevice in the dresser’s top drawer. She ran her palm across the embedded needle and over a small, greasy stain. She supposed that it was hers again, had been hers all along. Dolly sat down heavily on the cot, and where Prema’s coverlet had lain, the grass mat scratched at the backs of her legs. The woman and her things were gone, the room bare except for a scrap of jute at the foot of the hutch, the outline of a girl.
She had been cloistered upstairs for three days already. She would remain in relative isolation, her mother estimated, for another three to five days – however long it took for this first bleeding to wane. In the meantime, preparations were underway for the requisite feast. The celebration would mark the day that Dolly would be allowed, again and anew, into the company of men. All the relatives and family friends were on notice: Dolly knew the coming-out of Oliver Amarasekera’s only child would be a major event. The idea of throwing a party for her own body, for this strange bodily function, was horrifying – and thrilling. On her mother’s balcony, Dolly waited with her feet on the railing, gripping her toes around the metal grate that had been installed after a break-in years ago.

“Put your legs down, child,” her mother growled. “You’re a lady now. Please behave like one.”

“I want to go downstairs, Amma. I can’t remain cooped up like this.” Dolly slid her feet off of the bars and let them drop to the floor. They made a muted, fleshy thump against the clay.

“And for God’s sake, Dolores, do not walk about with your feet exposed,” her mother said, predictably. Her irritation amplified Dolly’s pleasure at the naked thud.

“I’m sorry, Amma,” Dolly said, swallowing a smile. “I’ll get my slippers.”

Her mother’s steps echoed in the hallway. The sound grew hollow, then sharp, and then faded as her mother passed by Dolly’s open bedroom and onto the stairs below. Dolly counted the seconds until she heard her mother emerge below into the servants’ quarters. Her mother moved with habitual efficiency – about half a minute from bedroom to the kitchens – and resumed the week’s ritual of harassing the cook about curries and short-eats for the party. Somehow it was strange to see her mother – who still appeared young enough to be Dolly’s sister – berating a grown man, even if he was merely a servant.
Dolly walked down the hallway to the front balcony that opened to the garden and portico below. With the soles of her feet, she mapped the floor’s uneven spots and noted with oily satisfaction the patches of polish laid on too thickly by the servants. Custom demanded that she neither see nor be seen by men during this first cycle. But each day of her confinement, Dolly had waited for her mother to leave the upstairs, or better yet, the house. There was much to see from the balcony’s vantage point and relatively little risk of being caught.

She pushed aside the cane blinds, which her mother had drawn to keep out the morning rain. Then, she dragged a high wooden chair to the edge of the balcony and propped it against the metal slats that rose above the balcony ledge. Bracing one grimy foot on the chair and the other on the ledge, she craned her neck to see through the bows of the pihimbiya trees and beyond the garden wall. Balancing in this manner, she counted the number of her transgressions, laughing as each man passed into and out of her sight. As far as she could see, they posed no greater threat to her than before, and she wondered then if she had become a danger to them. At the end of the driveway were the cobbler and his son. The man sat on a rickety stool just at the edge of the road. His was the first in a number of makeshift stalls along Queens Road where men and women sold fruit, rubber slippers, or other odds and ends. His battered leather case was filled with shoe polish and needles thick as nails, and he had worked there from morning until night for as long as Dolly could remember. The man’s son had appeared as a toddler, around the time of Dolly’s tenth birthday. Now he was a little boy of about five.

The fifth man to pass was an old man. One tine of his umbrella had broken loose from the fabric, leaving the once-taut fabric to sag. Dolly was glad the rain had trailed off and supposed the broken umbrella would serve him better against the sun. The man’s steps were stiff and slow, and his head moved this way and that, in the same vague way her grandfather looked about after his vision had begun to cloud. The old man stopped and turned toward the
The chair tottered beneath her, and as she regained her balance, she looked down to find the hem of her dress snagged. A single stitch had gripped the balcony’s rough plaster, and the fabric was rucked up in bunches on either side of the tightened line. Carefully dislodging the string, she coaxed the gathers out of the cloth until the thread was once more hidden within the cotton folds, the hem reasonably unravaged. Her mother would pay little attention to the new defect in such an old garment: holed up this week, Dolly had no reason to wear her nicer clothes, and besides, she’d be receiving a brand new dress for the upcoming party – once the astrologer pronounced the auspicious color she should wear. Out on Queens Road, the old man’s gaze was still turned toward her, his chin lifted. He couldn’t possibly see her from this distance. With a twist of the umbrella, the old man vanished beneath its canopy, leaving one skinny metal finger wagging crazily at Dolly. The umbrella walked away slowly.

The purr of the Peugeot’s engine signaled her mother’s approach down the driveway. Dolly pushed back as the car passed and then resumed her perch, taking care not to lean too far toward the balcony’s ledge. If the driver turned to the left, her mother might be headed toward the market. If the car went right, however, she might be headed to the Pettah, the tailor’s, or even the jeweler’s shop. The car stopped just near the cobbler and his son, and the back window rolled slowly open. Out of the car window came her father’s sandals, as well as a pair of dress shoes that spent most of their time shoved beneath his bed. Since he conducted his business from home, he seldom needed footwear more formal than slippers or sandals. Her mother would insist that he dress up for the party.

The cobbler took the shoes and toggled his head – he would likely bring them to the back of the house as soon as he was finished; that was their usual drill. He retreated from the
car, and her mother’s pale hand emerged from the window. She was motioning to the boy. Dolly couldn’t quite make out what she was handing him: usually it was a treat of sorts, a piece of potato toffee or chocolate. The child accepted her gift and stuffed whatever he’d received into his pockets. Perhaps her mother had given the boy a coin or two. The car edged out onto the road and turned right, across the traffic.

The little boy had tied a discarded rag around his head like a cap. If he’d hoped to protect himself from the rain, he had been foiled completely – the child was soaked through. He entertained himself by filling up one murky puddle and then another with bits of gravel he collected. The sun had seared away the morning clouds, and in the garden below, Dolly could almost see the heat rising from the earth. As damp air wafted into the unshuttered balcony, she longed to be out of doors, to shake the rain from the hibiscus blooms and hunt beneath the trees for frogs whose rubbery grip had failed in the downpour. Looking out toward the road, she wondered if the boy could see the earth steam beneath his feet.

“Stop pressing your face against the rail!” Her father’s voice boomed from the portico below. She should have noticed him pottering there; she would be more cautious next time. Perhaps her father was expecting a visitor. “You’re like a prisoner there,” he said, laughing. “You’re supposed to be in hiding, isn’t it?”

“Thatha, can I come down, please? I’ve nothing to do here.”

“Your mother will wring your neck if she sees you lurking about this way – poking your head out of doors. She’ll wring mine as well, I suppose, for allowing it.”

“Please, Thathi?”

“Well, your amma has dragged both the cook and driver to market, so only the women are here...”

Dolly didn’t wait to hear the rest of his sentence. She hopped off of her chair and rushed toward the stairs. She knew she’d have to hurry back up before her mother arrived and when her
father’s guest drove up. She skidded to a stop as she reached the banister: she’d left her slippers in her bedroom. Her father would bend the rules, but only so far. She hurried back to her room, and the exuberant slap of her sandals announced her bounding down from captivity.

Her father had come to the main hall to greet her. He wore his usual uniform of a faded cotton sarong and a once-white bushcoat Dolly’s mother had been pleading with him to discard. His hair had been swept into a shiny mass of black curls – Brylcreemed to perfection – that towered over his skinny frame. Dolly leapt at him as she made it to the last stair. He caught her in mid-air, and rather than spin her around and rumple her hair, he tensed and set her down abruptly. Dolly’s slippers slid beneath her when her feet hit the ground, and she winced as the cheap rubber bit into the flesh between her toes.

“Sorry, baba – Dolores,” her father stammered. “Your mother won’t have you jumping about in this, in your… current state.”

Usually this sort of horseplay was the sort of thing her father enjoyed, the sort of thing her mother enjoyed teasing him about: “You can take the boy out of Balapitiya,” her mother used to say of his hometown, a small fishing village to the south. “But you cannot take Balapitiya out of the boy.” He had always tousled Dolly’s hair too roughly, squeezed her with a brusqueness that made her ears ring. It was as if he wanted to bully her into loving him back. But now he looked at her with a tenderness that was foreign and strained.

“The astrologer is on his way, Dolores. He’ll be making all the decisions about your – this event, so please listen carefully for the car. We can’t have him thinking ill of you.”

Dolly felt a wave of shame at his warning. “I’ll go back up, Thatha. I’ll just get some tea from the kitchen? I’ll be gone before he or Amma comes, don’t worry.”

“It’s nice to see you,” he said, as if he were greeting a distant acquaintance, and walked away toward the front porch. “When you hear the car – up, up, up you go,” he called over his shoulder.
The back kitchen was deserted, but preparations for the party were well underway. The room smelled strongly of roasted coriander and cumin seeds, which the cook had ground into the fresh curry powder he would use to season the meal. A pile of coconut husks, scraped clean of their sweet, white meat, lay on the floor. On the rusting table above, bunches of beets awaited peeling and boiling; they would become the dangerous curry that Dolly loved: if even a single drop went awry, it promised a deep purple and yellow stain on whatever it touched. Once shorn from their roots, the beet greens would be stir-fried with dried fish, chilies and onions to be served at the family’s breakfasts.

Dolly heard one of the women approaching, her feet thumping heavily from the back courtyard toward the house. To avoid being chased back up the stairs, Dolly ducked into the servant’s room nearest the kitchen – it had been converted into a storeroom and pantry. She heard the clinking of ice on glass, the hiss and clatter of bottle-tops set free. Soon enough, men’s voices would be rumbling down the hall.

As the sound of the drinks faded toward her father’s room, Dolly walked out of the pantry. The covered walkway that separated the servants’ rooms from the courtyard was empty, just a rolled-up grass mat propped up in a corner. The gardener, the only servant not permanently boarded at the house, slept there when he had work to do – or, as Dolly’s mother noted, when he simply needed a meal and a place to stay: “When the garden is immaculate,” she would laugh to the women servants, “I know he’s been up to his tricks. His wife chases him out, and we get the benefit of full-time service!”

Dolly was always fascinated by the idea of this woman – the wife of a common gardener, but strong enough to clear a man from his own home with, Dolly imagined, a cutting remark and the wave of her hand – out, out of my house! Just last week, the gardener had been cast out in this manner. The result at Queens Road was a newly planted row of anthuriums and gladioli on the edge of the back courtyard – unnecessary, her mother said, but the blooms would
have been superfluous in the front, where the garden was exquisitely maintained. Dolly walked out toward the new plot. Ordinarily, Dolly watched the man while he worked – she was sure he appreciated the company, supervising his various projects after she came home from school. She tried to inventory in the man characteristics that would make him an easy target of his wife’s harassment, but he seemed to her like any other of the servants: good natured and garrulous, but sometimes cranky around Dolly and the rest of the staff – generally more subdued in the presence of her mother or father.

Since she had been confined upstairs this week, this new garden had been dug without her. Its location in front of the clothesline was strategic and perfect: now, as the day was hottest, it enjoyed the shade of laundry hanging on the line. Later in the day, when the sunshine waned and the laundry was removed, a gentler light would bathe the garden in full view of the back kitchen and the servants’ rooms. Dolly ducked beneath the damp sheets and tablecloth to the illuminated side of the line. There, she felt not just hidden, but invisible – burned away by the light reflecting off the linens, wonderfully reduced to the heat she felt rising in her cheeks. Her father was busy with business, while her mother’s errands would certainly keep her away for some time: perhaps she could take a walk, just to the edge of the road, to test this new feeling. Shaking a pebble loose from her slipper, Dolly headed down the driveway.

Her father’s windows were protected by a long stand of trees, in whose shadow she walked unseen. When she reached the mouth of the driveway, the cobbler and his son were both engrossed in their work. The child had removed several tins of polish from his father’s bag and was busily stacking them into a precarious tower. Hunched over one of her father’s sandals, the older man had slipped one hand through the shoe’s thick straps. His pinky finger jutted comically through the ring that otherwise gripped her father’s big toe. The cobbler’s hands were further darkened by polish embedded deep under his nails and what seemed to be a permanent stain of reddish-black on his fingertips. He tilted his palm this way and that, reading the marks
of the leather in the shifting light. The sandal’s mate waited at the cobbler’s side, already gleaming in the sunlight.

“Thatha sent me to collect his shoes,” she said in Sinhala. “I can wait until you finish. It’s no trouble.”

A few paces behind his father’s stand, the boy paid Dolly no attention and pulled from his father’s bag a crisp blue cloth, a rag that soon would be blackened by polish. She recognized the cloth as an unwanted scarf of her mother’s. The dhobi had been unable to scrub it free of a stain, so – like many unwanted scraps her mother collected – it had ended up here. The boy folded the cloth and used it to swaddle an empty bottle of Elephant House soda, which he’d likely bought with her mother’s pennies. Smudges of chocolate around his mouth betrayed another morning treat. His fingernails were immaculate.

“Your son speaks Sinhala?” she asked the cobbler.

“Of course,” he said quickly, shifting away from her and pressing his shoulder into buffing the shoe with an extra vigor.

She had offended the man. Embarrassed and unsure how to proceed, Dolly squatted next to the boy. She tucked her dress around her legs, gripping the fabric behind her knees to keep the edges safe from the still-damp earth. She shuddered; between her legs she felt the shift of cotton, held thickly in place by an elastic band and diaper pins.

As the last of the morning clouds gave way to the sun, Dolly motioned to the corners of her mouth and pointed at the boy’s. “May I?” she asked him. “You’ve chocolate there.” She removed the blue cloth from its bottle and wiped at the chocolate on his face. The boy pulled away, grabbing at the rag, and Dolly lurched forward. She caught herself by planting a hand in a puddle, but not before the hem of her dress grazed the muddy street. While she righted herself and caught her breath, the boy laughed and laughed. The cobbler did not look up from his work, but called over his shoulder to his son, something in Tamil.
Settle down, Dolly guessed he was telling the child.

Dolly wiped her hands and dabbed ineffectually at her dress. The boy took the rag from her and said simply: “I think you need a cap – like mine,” as if somehow that would solve her dilemma. He folded the cloth carefully, the muddied side of the fabric out, and tied it around her head into a snug skull-cap. She could only imagine that she looked absurd, her hair pressed flatter than usual and poking out stick-straight from beneath the cloth. As she reached up to tug away the scarf, a city bus screamed by – so close to her and the child that she felt the heat of exhaust brush her cheek and saw the boy’s black curls bouncing in the bus’s wake. She gasped, then coughed violently in the noxious air. The boy and the cobbler were unfazed, she noted through bleary eyes. They had had the sense to hold their breaths. The bus careened to a stop a few yards down the road, closer to the small fruit stand just down the way. Disembarking passengers flew out from the doors like bats at dusk. Men stretched their arms wide, and women unclutched their sarees. They filled their chests with what appeared to be their first breaths in ages. One man, however, descended without the desperate relief of his fellow passengers. Dolly recognized her mistake the moment she saw his sure, slippered foot hit the pavement: she had expected the astrologer to arrive by car.

She had never seen him before, but he moved with the certainty of a prophet. She had imagined an old man, like the one with the umbrella – half-blind and hunched from the weight of the future. This man, however, was not old at all, and each crisp step brought him closer to discovering Dolly’s trespass. Her mother, a proud Roman Catholic, always described astrology as a sort of quaint habit, a throwback from Balapitiya: “For the right price, they’ll tell a man anything he wants to hear,” she’d said. Still, here the man was – ready to read Dolly’s fortune, pronounce without ever laying eyes on her – or so he thought – the exact time and manner she’d be reintroduced to the world of men. If she bolted now, the astrologer would certainly see her rushing down the driveway ahead of him, so her best bet seemed to be staying put. Dolly hoped
that her mother was right. And if the man could divine the future, perhaps it obscured his vision of the present: perhaps he would simply see a cobbler and his children.

Dolly studied the pavement as the man walked with purpose past her and the boy. She imagined him looking down at two sloppy headscarves and gladly noted his increasing pace as he turned past them onto the driveway. He stopped, however, just before turning into the driveway and returned. “That one should be at home,” he said. “Too old to be gallivanting here on the pavement.”

The startled cobbler followed the man’s stare toward Dolly, and his eyebrows snapped even higher when he saw the ridiculous blue scarf tied around her head, the slash of mud across her dress. He opened his mouth, but before a single sound emerged, Dolly had grabbed the empty sandal from the ground and whisked the other off the cobbler’s blackened fingers. Shoving the shoes into the air – toward the surprised astrologer – she wiped one dirty hand across her dress as she stood. “Save your lectures, uncle,” she said. “I’ve work to do.” With that, she marched down the driveway, swinging her father’s shoes as she went. She felt exhilarated, knowing she had left the two men – and most likely the boy – bewildered. The astrologer’s footsteps echoed slowly behind her, even as she stepped more quietly along the edge of the driveway furthest from the opening to the front portico. Her father might be waiting just on the other side of the hedge.

In the back courtyard, the young anthuriums still cowered in the shade of billowing linens. As she bent over to place her father’s sandals by Lilawathi’s door, she noticed one deep scuff the cobbler hadn’t quite buffed away, his work aborted by her outburst. She took the blue cloth from her head, rubbing it across the scratch in the leather until the residual polish filled in the crevice and shone brightly, as if the flaw had never been there at all. Folding the cloth precisely, she placed the neat blue square on the ground and set the shoes neatly on top – like an offering, she thought.
“Anay amme!” Kanthi’s voice rang out from the kitchen. “Why are you creeping there, naughty girl?” she said in Sinhala. “What are you doing downstairs?”

“I’m sorry. I just – I just – got tired of waiting.”

“Tired of waiting? How much trouble can that be? Your father is with the astrologer, child. If they see me with you here… Come go – back upstairs.” Dolly stood up to follow her, and Kanthi gasped – her muddied dress.

The servant hurried down the hallway, and on her signal, Dolly walked through the back kitchen, past the coconut husks and piles of dull, dusty beets. At the threshold of the main house, she removed her slippers and padded through the dining room, past her father’s door. There was no time to listen for what the astrologer had to say – she’d find out soon enough. Her sandals hooked between her fingers, she scurried silently up the stairs to the relative safety of her and her mother’s rooms.

“Quickly,” Kanthi said. “Get out of that dress. You’ll tell your mother you’ve – soiled it in your – situation, and I’ve washed it for you. See the work you’re making for me?”

Four days later, the auspicious day arrived. Dolly’s mother had been worried when the previous night, when her bleeding had still not ended, but Dolly awoke to find the bulky cotton pad clean – she was herself again, she thought with relief. She would bathe at 11:00, and her mother had been furious that so little time had been left between her bath and the arrival of the guests. “The stars have ordained that we should run like madwomen to get you ready? Nonsense,” her mother said. “Obviously, that man has never thrown a proper party – or else he is simply cussed. You oughtn’t be rushed today. A few more rupees would have given us auspicious and convenient times.”

Dolly spent the morning at the top of the staircase, observing as best she could the preparations for the party. Her father had returned from the jeweler’s, where he’d picked up her
new set of gems, and her mother took a break from supervising the servants to see what he’d brought home. Dolly heard their voices rising from her father’s open doorway at the base of the stairs. “Surely these are too frivolous,” her mother said. “An odd combination, isn’t it – diamonds with such a girlish design? Why didn’t you let me handle this?”

“Dolly will like them very much, and Nizzar won’t dare to overcharge me – you always come away from his shop paying more than you should.”

“Just be, Oliver. I know how to get round Nizzar,” her mother shot back. “And the point is this – these are too juvenile for the occasion. She’s not a child.”

“Not a child?” His voice dropped, and Dolly pressed herself against the banister, straining to hear his hushed words. “She’s 13, baba. The astrologer said her chart was very troubling, and difficult to read. He told me Dolores could be something of a wanderer if we weren’t careful – she won’t know her home.”

“Nonsense – that’s absolute gibberish. The man doesn’t know a thing about Dolly besides the date and time of her birth. He probably knows a thing or two about you, Oliver. You’re a long way from home yourself, isn’t it? I suppose both of us are. Perhaps he’s reading your past rather than your daughter’s future. But what’s done is done with these gems – give those here, I need to help Dolly bathe and dress.”

Her mother’s heels hammered up the stairs – she was angry. Dolly fled her post at the banister and rushed back to her room. Yes, her father had come a long way from the tiny fishing village of his birth, and she couldn’t imagine what it must have been like for him to leave his family to make a new life in Colombo. It was strange to hear her mother refer to herself as far from home; Dolly’s grandparents had always lived in the capital, where her mother had been born and raised. She’d been boarded a few years at the convent school in Galle – perhaps that’s what she meant. Dolly couldn’t conceive of leaving her family and making her own way – as a
wanderer, the astrologer had warned. Though she couldn’t picture such a life, she felt a quiet thrill at being labeled such a danger.

The hour of her bath had come. A rickety gas heater in the upstairs bathroom could warm bathwater to just above tepid – enough to take the cool edge off a quick shower, but her mother found the temperature inadequate. So Kanthi and Lilawathi were marshaled into lugging several large soup pots of boiling water up the stairs from the front kitchen – another inconvenience that was setting back preparations for the upcoming feast. “We can’t have you freezing there, but my god, those women are taking their own time,” her mother complained.

Once the tub was filled, the servants added rosewater and sandalwood oil, along with handfuls of petals they’d collected from the garden plot out back.

After a week of body washes – custom did not allow bathing the head during this first cycle – Dolly soaked in the luxury of stepping into a hot bath. Thin circles of sandalwood oil pooled around the tips of her toes as they poked up from the water’s surface; the oil clung to her skin wherever it emerged from the fragrant pool, and – just as her mother had told her – she did indeed feel renewed. Her own familiar scent was washed away and replaced by this softer, sweeter aroma of temple flowers and jasmine. Lapping against her neck at the edge of the tub, even her hair seemed transformed – kissed by oils and herbs, the strands floated in lovely, wet curly-cues above her submerged shoulders.

“Dolores,” her mother interrupted from the doorway. “You really must come along.”

“A few more minutes, Amma – please?”

“No time to waste, baba. What about your new dress, your jewelry? The guests will be arriving soon, and you’re to make your appearance quite soon. I’ll wait for you.”

Standing up from the tub and reaching for a fresh towel, Dolly shuddered against the cooler air and felt her skin pucker beneath its flimsy coating of oil. No longer buoyed by the
warm water, her hair went back to its old ways, hanging limply on her shoulders in locks that
would not curl as they dried.

“Your dress, Dolly,” her mother called from her room. “It’s ready.”

The astrologer had pronounced the dress must be blue, and Dolly worried the color was
more suspicious than auspicious: the blue was the exact shade of her mother’s discarded scarf,
the one she’d been wearing – on her head – when the astrologer came to the house. The dress,
however, was as lovely as the old scarf had been shabby. Made of newly imported nylon, it was
cut in the fashion of a sailor dress, a square neck bordered with a white collar of fine cotton
cutlawn. Dolly had been angry when her mother returned from the tailor and announced she’d
ordered such a childish style, but the final product, once Dolly had it on, was not as silly as
she’d feared. The light-blue nylon felt heavy against her skin, and as she turned in front of the
mirror, she saw that it swung with a gravity that gave her skinny frame the appearance of grace.
Her mother had lent her a pair of low heels for the afternoon, instructing her to take small steps
rather than shuffle to keep her balance.

And the jewelry. Her father had been correct: Dolly adored the new set. On a sovereign-gold
chain, she wore a small, brilliant pendant in the shape of a butterfly, which perched just
above the neckline of her dress. The earrings were simple – three small diamonds in a cluster,
and the white cutlawn collar of her dress seemed to magnify the light reflected off of the stones.
But what delighted her most was the ring, a replica of the butterfly pendant, which she wore on
the index finger of her right hand. She could not help but lift it into the light to watch the stones
catch fire. “Stop pointing your finger like that, Dolores,” her mother scolded. “And certainly do
not point it at me. It’s terribly proud.”

Dolly’s uncle arrived first. Her father’s oldest brother, Hiram was chronically early and
even louder than her father. “Come on, Dowdy!” From the entryway, he bellowed his pet name
for her. “Or is the girl waiting to make a grand entrance with all the guests assembled?”
Upstairs, her mother rolled her eyes and continued to fluff Dolly’s hair ineffec
tually. “He’s right, you know. You should go downstairs before everyone arrives. No need to put on such a show, I suppose. There – you look lovely, Dolly. Shall we go downstairs and await the guests?”

Dolly toggled her head – she felt suddenly mute, too embarrassed to speak. Dozens of people would be arriving within minutes, all to ogle her and “congratulate” her on growing up. “Remember, baba. Small steps – you don’t want to stagger in those shoes. Come go.”

As she walked down the stairs, the new dress swished heavily against her legs. But now the foreign fabric scratched at her skin and seemed to encase the sweat that had sprung up under her arms, along her chest and hips. The nervous energy from her body rose up and met the humid noontime heat of the house, warmed further by the activity in the kitchen. She felt as if she were being embalmed in a cocoon of sky-blue nylon; it was repulsive, overwhelming. Her father and uncle awaited her at the bottom of the stairs.

“Good afternoon, miss!” her father said with mock solemnity. “You’re looking lovely.” Dolly could feel her face, red as a beet and covered in an oily sheen. “Are you all right, baba,” he asked as she approached.

“She’s fine, Oliver,” her mother said. “A hanky, please? I’ll get her one of my Japanese fans. All this excitement, you know…”

As instructed, Dolly’s uncle produced a handkerchief and handed it to her father, who dabbed at Dolly’s face and hugged her close. He put a hand to her forehead. “Are you feeling well?”

“Yes, Thatha. Amma’s right – I’m fine.”

When the guests began to arrive just past noon, Dolly realized none of her friends would be attending. Cooped up in her and her mother’s rooms, she’d lost track of the days of the week – all the children but the smallest would be at school, and the youngest would have
been kept home with their ayahs to keep them from asking questions about the meaning of a coming-out party. Many of her parents’ friends presented her with small envelopes, and she wondered if on this occasion she’d be allowed to count the bills herself, since currency was considered too unclean to handle. Other guests brought impressive gift boxes, which were heaped upon one of the servants to take into the back.

Lunch was over by two, and the servants were just clearing away the serving dishes when a late-arriving guest caused a stir: Sir John had finally arrived. Knighted by the queen many years ago, he was an occasional visitor to the house and, Dolly had heard her mother gossiping to friends, was even considered a possible candidate for the job of prime minister in the new government. A confirmed bachelor, he raised eyebrows around town for the group of young, attractive, politically active women who flocked around him – the purple brigade, Colombo’s papers called them. Dolly was thrilled to see him accompanied by a woman she’d never seen before. Though she held his arm as they walked in, Dolly noted that Sir John did not seem to have any particular hold of her; even when his free hand rose to grasp hers, it seemed her flesh repelled his grip, and Sir John had to be satisfied with giving her a small pat and putting his hand back in his pocket.

Here she was, Dolly imagined: the gardener’s wife. She was lovely in a purple saree – surely she’d chosen the color purposefully. She’d draped the silk modestly, so that as the fabric wound up and over her shoulder, just a single fold of lovely, dark flesh was exposed at the back of her waist, between jacket and skirt. She was quiet, but Dolly knew she held her tongue intentionally,-reserving her words for when she needed them; she would not engage in empty talk. Instead, she listened and waited.

Once the excitement at their entrance had waned a bit, dessert was served. Guests could choose between Dolly’s favorite – chocolate biscuit pudding – and a more dignified and traditional watalappan. The smell of steamed coconut custard mingled with the cardamom and
clove was intoxicating. Dolly noted with pleasure that the gardener’s wife had chosen biscuit pudding. Just as the woman seemed to elude Sir John’s grasp, there was a similar distance between herself and the other women, who had gathered in the front portico while the men drank scotch around the dining table. She hovered just inside the doorway of the portico, and Dolly could hear what she, too, must have been able to overhear: the women were tittering about Sir John, and his nerve to bring one of his “brigade” to such an occasion.

“Would you like to see the garden?” Dolly was surprised to hear her own voice.

The woman looked equally surprised at being spoken to in Sinhala. “Thank you, Dolly, and congratulations on your coming-out. Don’t think me rude,” she said, nodding toward the portico, “but I’d rather not charge through the ladies assembled there to get to the garden.”

“No, there’s a new plot in the back – it’s very small, but it’s beautiful.”

“All right, then. Why not?”

She grasped the woman by the wrist and led her toward the back, past the dining room and through the back kitchen and hallway. A dozen or so drivers were seated, some in chairs, some on the ground, eating leftover curry while their employers finished their meals. Dolly and the woman walked past them, and around the cars that were packed into the courtyard. There, below the empty clothesline, was the tiny garden. In the absence of shade, the anthuriums craned their stems toward the light, which glared against the glossy leaves.

“This is lovely,” the woman said. “Look – it’s as if those anthuriums are pointing their fingers at you – perhaps they’re reaching for your pendant.”

Dolly smiled and raised a hand to the butterfly at her throat, and indeed, the stones of her pendant and ring radiated like tiny suns. A passing shadow extinguished their light, and Dolly waited for the cloud to pass. It did not. She turned to find her father’s outline illuminated by the sun shining behind him.
“Dolores!” Her father’s voice boomed. “Back into the house. Immediately. I won’t have you lingering here with – your guests are waiting. Come indoors.”

“But, Thatha…”

“Your father’s right, Dolly,” the woman said. “Another time, another time.”
This time, the new headmistress declared, she would defeat the ruffians. At the morning service, Mrs. Jonklaas announced that she would padlock the gates to keep the Thomians and Royalists from invading the hallowed grounds of Methodist College.

“Today, ladies, we will maintain our dignity,” she cried, striking a clenched and bony hand against the podium. Dolly knew she meant business from the way her tiny, well-oiled bun shook at the nape of her neck. “Any girl found gaping and winking at the windows will be sent home immediately with a recommendation that your parents keep you home from the match.”

Like most of her sixth-form classmates, Dolly wished fervently that the school’s dignity would not be spared this day. She hoped that history would repeat itself, as it had done every year for as long as anyone could remember. Opening day of the Royal-Thomian cricket match marked a day of a riotous parade – of boys! – straight through the grounds of all Colombo’s fashionable girls’ schools. When the young men were feeling particularly cheeky, they threw open the school doors and actually raced through the hallways, singing and hooting, while the teachers tried in vain to keep the girls in their seats and away from the windows and doors.

But the boys’ annual sortie also represented an important opportunity for Mrs. Jonklaas’ nascent administration. Though the school year was drawing to a close, she’d been promoted from longtime Scriptures instructor to headmistress just days ago. Mrs. De Silva had resigned her post in an absolute scandal – a love affair with one of the school’s few male teachers. A seemingly bookish mathematics instructor, he had resigned also, and the lovebirds had vanished – some said to England, leaving their spouses in the lurch. Aside from the misfortune of Mrs. Jonklaas’ rise to power, it was utterly thrilling.

Clearly, Mrs. Jonklaas had made it her mission to defend Methodist College’s honor against this latest assault. Dolly knew that she, too, was on the headmistress’ list of wrongs to
right. She had been waiting to be discovered as a savage among the converted since the day her mother enrolled her at Methodist College ten years before, instructing to always keep quiet about her father. Most people knew he was a Buddhist, her mother tried to reassure her, but they would just let her be if she kept quiet. Her mother had insisted Dolly would be enrolled in the Christian curriculum by hook or by crook. The Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims were banned from Scriptures and instead were herded into a class called Moral Instruction. “Moral Instruction?” her mother had scoffed, “I won’t have you treated like a heathen.”

Dolly remembered crying as first-grader, the pressure seemed so great. But her mother had been correct. She stayed silent, and everyone played along – with the exception of Mrs. Jonklaas, who had always looked at Dolly with thinly veiled disdain. Dolly now realized that her father was considered a formidable man, and school officials had little choice but to honor his wife’s most reasonable request. Mrs. Jonklaas’ recent promotion from Scriptures instructor to headmistress, however, threw Dolly’s amnesty into question. She hoped her father’s reputation would continue to save her.

As the morning assembly was dismissed, the halls filled with girls, their long plaits hanging over each shoulder, colored ties indicating their assigned allegiance to one of seven houses that divided the student body. Dolly followed the stream of purple-and-green ties toward the Wesley House classrooms. She and her classmates headed to their Sinhala-language history class, while the Tamil Wesleyans and the full-blooded Burgher girls went to study in their own languages down the hall.

She took her usual spot, the corner seat in the first row – just near the teacher’s desk and a window to the main courtyard. She’d been selected as a class monitor at the beginning of the term, though she could not imagine bothering to pull up her classmates for misbehavior. Rather than police her friends, she used the coveted seat to watch the goings-on outdoors. Mostly, she watched the groundskeepers tend to their work. In recent days, however, she’d also
told friends about seeing the scandalous headmistress slip out of the gates, followed within
minutes by her bespectacled lover. And Dolly knew the way she told it, it seemed the story
could be true.

The class was to start a history unit on the Sinhala kings. It was all information they’d
learned in earlier grades, but apparently Mrs. Rajapakse had decided they were due for a
refresher course. “As Sinhala girls in these troubling times,” she told them bitterly, “you will be
well served to be reminded of your history.” Dolly had read in her father’s newspapers that the
Parliament had just amended the Sinhala-Only Act with a small concession to Tamil speakers.
The decision had no direct effect on Dolly’s private school, but still, her teacher was incensed.
“Who can tell me about Dutugemunu’s greatest battle?”

But the headmistress’ affair set Dolly daydreaming about another king, one who arrived
from India on the very day of Buddha’s death, and – with the help of a native demon-goddess –
became Lanka’s first ruler. She imagined King Vijaya as the hapless mathematics teacher,
seduced and propelled to power by Mrs. De Silva’s irresistible demon-goddess. Dolly’s father
had told her that things had ended badly for the legend’s original goddess. The beautiful Kuveni
had eventually married Vijaya, helped him establish his kingdom, bore him two children – only
to be driven away so he could bring a proper princess to be his queen. In one story, Kuveni
threw herself from a mountaintop. In another, she was murdered by her own people after she
came home in disgrace. Either way, Dolly figured, Kuveni had been a fool. A proper demon-
goddess should have seen the betrayal coming. The former headmistress, on the other hand, had
worked things out more profitably.

As the teacher railed about the might of Dutugemunu, Dolly saw two workers emerge
from the back of the grounds. Just as Mrs. Jonklaas had promised, they walked through the
courtyard and began to close the massive wrought-iron gate. Above the gate, the Methodist
College crest declared the school motto in sickly greened copper: “We scatter light.” The
morning sun seemed to illuminate the flame that burned perpetually on the crest’s horn-shaped lamp. In the distance, Dolly heard the faint but steady throb of drums. The caravan of boys was approaching.

The teacher broke from her lecture as a laborious groaning arose from the courtyard. Dolly wasn’t sure whether the sound came from the rusting metal hinges turning on massive pins or from the gate’s wheels straining in seldom-used tracks. As the men secured the gate, Mrs. Jonklaas herself walked out to the massive metal structure and snapped closed a padlock, which appeared to be larger than life. Mrs. Jonklaas’ head, however, seemed from this angle to be curiously shrunken. The woman had a pinched expression, and over the years, Dolly had begun to imagine that each time Mrs. Jonklaas looked at her, the woman’s skull actually contracted, sucked toward perpetually pursed and tightening lips.

The science teacher had described a recent discovery in Ireland, a centuries-old body pulled out of the bog – perfectly preserved by the cool, rotting peat. The corpse’s once-white skin had turned to tanned leather, and what was left of her hair was scraped to one side. Somehow, this description of the Windeby Girl seemed to capture Mrs. Jonklaas’ appearance as well, her pale skin – of which she was likely so proud – darkening and toughening with age. Dolly could not imagine her mother, also a Dutch Burgher, turning into such a sight.

The drums were now booming. The teacher barked in vain for the girls to get back in their seats, but no one could take her eyes off the line of trucks and autos that had assembled outside. Mrs. Jonklaas was standing before them, framed by the elongated shadow of the gates’ six-foot bars. She looked like a tiny warden standing down a prison mob. The drummers carried on unseen, buried within the blue-and-black crush of St. Thomas’s students overspilling each vehicle. A few of the oldest boys rushed out to open the gates. A tall, stocky boy with a mop of wiry black curls tugged at the padlock and rattled at the gates. His striped jersey and hefty frame suggested he played rugby, rather than cricket, but his efforts were in vain. Mrs. Jonklaas
seemed to grow taller with each fruitless pull and push. The cheering and drumming began to fade. By the time a few brave souls scaled the gate, she had grown so large that, once the boys were poised at the top, she was staring them right in the eyes. For a moment, Dolly imagined cowering before Mrs. Jonklaas’ looming figure, when the old woman finally came for her. Seeing the futility of their efforts, the men of St. Thomas skulked back toward their caravan, and then, they were gone.

The headmistress turned on one sensible heel, glared toward the adjacent building, and walked back toward the front doors. Her bun bounced jauntily with each satisfied step. Pressed against the windows across the courtyard were dozens of faces – and though she had threatened to dismiss any gawkers, Mrs. Jonklaas was likely pleased at having had such a rapt audience for her Thomian defeat.

Dolly’s history teacher had scarcely finished scolding the girls for misbehaving when the hall monitor interrupted class with a note. Dolly squirmed in her chair and felt her palms grow damp. In the classroom’s sudden silence, the note’s unfolding crinkled thunderously, and the flimsy onion-skin paper suggested the missive came from Mrs. Jonklaas, who inexplicably used scraps of air-mail writing forms for all her memoranda. As the paper grew larger in the teacher’s hands, Dolly felt the air in the room contract around her as she drew in her breath and held it. The teacher’s eyes grew wide, and then narrowed as she read.

“Miss Amarasekera,” the teacher said crisply. As the blood rose to her face, Dolly felt the collective relief – and surprise – of her classmates. “You are wanted in Mrs. Jonklaas’ office – immediately.”

In the hallway, Dolly compulsively tugged at her skirt and smoothed her tie, as if somehow a less crumpled appearance would save her. The mottled glass window on the office door had been recently painted: Mrs. J. H. Jonklaas, Headmistress. Dolly knocked on the
window, and the glass panel reverberated in its frame. It seemed on the brink of falling away from the door and shattering at Dolly’s feet.

“Come in.” Already, Mrs. Jonklaas sounded victorious.

“Good morning, madam.” Dolly’s voice came out like a humiliating squeak. It was no way for Oliver Amarasekera’s daughter to confront a challenge.

“There is a problem with your paperwork, Dolores. A rather long-standing problem.”

Dolly tried to think of the correct response to the question the headmistress would ask next, but instead she could only gape at Mrs. Jonklaas’ shrunken, leathery head.

“Are you listening to me, Dolores?” Mrs. Jonklaas hissed and waved a handful of papers toward her. “I asked you a question. Don’t stammer and stare at me.”

“Yes, madam. I’m sorry.” Dolly breathed in deeply. “My father is Buddhist.”

“Buddhist. He’s a Buddhist.” She shook the papers again. “So how is it that on your entrance forms, someone has ticked ‘Christian’?”

“It must be a mistake, madam. Those forms are very old, and I suppose someone ticked the wrong box.”

“Ticked the wrong box. That’s very convenient.”

Dolly bristled. She would not be treated like a liar. “I’d say it’s rather inconvenient, madam. It seems the school has placed me in the wrong class since the first grade.”

“The school has placed you incorrectly?” Mrs. Jonklaas’ eyes bulged out of their collapsing sockets. Her jaw fell slack. “This is your mother’s doing, and yours. This will stand no longer. A Buddhist father? You should have attended Moral Instruction with all the other, the other – non-Christians.”

“I attended the course assigned to me. I’m sure my father will be unhappy to learn of this mistake.”
“Are you suggesting your father has been unaware of your attendance in Scriptures? For ten years?”

“I can’t speak for my father, Mrs. Jonklaas. But I’m sure you know – he’s a busy man. Perhaps you can take up this error with him?”

The headmistress’ lips tightened, and her eyes sank back into her head. The conversation with Dolly’s father was apparently one Mrs. Jonklass did not care to have.

“There’s no need for that,” she said. “You’ll report back to class – Scriptures will have begun by now. I will consider how to proceed now that we’ve discovered this error.”

As Dolly turned to leave, she was certain she heard the sound of leather contracting against bone.

Walking past the school’s main entrance, Dolly imagined striding out of the doors and into the city beyond the locked gates. Fresh off of her victory, she felt too excited and nervous to return to Scriptures. Instead, she ducked into the music room. Since Dolly had been chosen as the accompanist for the first-form chorus, the music teacher had given her free reign to practice whenever the room went unused. There, the piano bench was backed up against the front windows and offered an unfettered view of the courtyard, a perfect spot for escape.

She flipped through a stack of sheet music to find the pageant songs. She couldn’t stand the thought of dull children’s tunes, so she set the metronome to a steady tempo. Its hollow regularity helped free her thoughts and hands to float more freely, and she began to play a tune of her own. Though she never committed her songs to paper, she could envision the notes racing along the staff as she played. Dolly enjoyed the stretch of her fingers over the keys, the turn of the wrist as her thumb reached toward a distant C. When the song veered to a run of sixteenth notes, her fingers seemed to kick off the damp March air and stir up a cooler breeze that rose up against her cheeks.
As the tune returned to a lazier legato movement, Dolly closed her eyes and let her hands grow heavy, each fingertip lingering on its key as the next note sounded. But her fingers began to stumble as another, chaotic beat floated up. Still pounding in her head were the caravan’s vanquished drummers.

The dullest hum drew her attention out into the court yard: the Thomian caravan had returned – this time in silence. A sea of boys embarked from a dozen vehicles and walked up to the gates. The rugby player was in the lead, motioning with his hands for his classmates to keep quiet. In the building across the way, Dolly could see teachers writing on chalkboards, girls picking at their plaits. It seemed that only she bore witness to the boys’ maneuver.

The oldest boys were deployed in three groups: one at each of the gates’ massive hinges and one group at the padlock. Younger boys filled in along the barrier’s length until Dolly could no longer see the vehicles or the road behind them: it was black, blue and brown as far as the eye could see. The rugby player, at the center of the gate, dropped his weight and pressed his shoulder into the metal. The other boys followed suit.

“Ready – steady – GO!” His voice rang out, a comically high tenor for a boy of his size. Dolly laughed in astonishment as a deep groan followed, the croak of metal hinges losing grip on their pins. Sure enough, buoyed by a sea of straining Thomians, the gate rose and fell to the earth with a boom that shook the courtyard. Dolly’s metronome fell from its perch on the piano’s lip. The boys rushed back into their vehicles as the drums boomed back to life. “God in heaven,” someone cried out in the hallway. “They’ve breached the gates!”

History had repeated itself after all.

Across the courtyard, teachers were rushing at their students to shoo them from the windows and put them back into their seats. Mrs. Jonklaas reappeared outside just in time for the throng to sweep past her on the front steps, a black and blue river that parted where she
stood at the top of the steps. Led by the drum line, the current of boys poured into the school’s grand entrance.

Dolly stood just inside the music room doorway as they made their entrance. The littlest drummer looked as if he’d seen a ghost – his dark skin gone pasty with fear and excitement – but the child played on without missing a beat. His eyes, wide as saucers, were locked on the outer edge of his snare. Though he appeared thoroughly petrified, he seemed determined to carry the beat for the rowdy chorus pushing him onward. They marched down the hallway singing the St. Thomas’s school song – that was the tradition, after all. They bellowed the lyrics as they passed by, massacring both the tune and the tempo in their glee.

One voice rose from the melee, high-pitched and surprisingly on key. The rugby player’s head bobbed above the crowd, and he was singing at the top of his lungs. He wasn’t fair, but not so dark, either. His features were broad, but Dolly thought he was handsome – and something about that squeaky voice made her laugh. She blurted out a tiny “hello!” as he was shoved past her doorway.

Still buoyed by the flood, the boy looked up. Pressing himself to the wall, he pushed against his rushing classmates and popped, quite breathlessly, into the music room.

“Hello,” Dolly said.

“Hello,” he said.

Dolly stared at the boy for several seconds before she thought of how forward he must think her. He followed her gaze to the window. “I never really understood that,” she blurted. “‘We scatter light.’”

“Beg your pardon?” he asked. Perspiration and a red flush popped up on his cheeks, along the shadow of a beard.

“A prism? I’m sorry, I’m not following you.”

“After the lamp, if the light were to strike a prism, then it would scatter. But not right from the lamp.” Was she sweating as much as he?

“I see,” he said. The drumming and singing grew fainter in the hallway.

“Yes. I suppose the idea is, we each have a lamp, we go forth et cetera, and scatter light. But I think ‘scatter’ is the wrong word.”

“I see,” he said again. He picked at the cuff of his shirt. “‘Dispense,’ perhaps?”

“No, not ‘dispense.’ It’s too… medicinal.”

“Yes, of course. Not ‘dispense.’”

“Possibly ‘disperse.’” Why was she still talking about lamps? “Do you play,” she asked, motioning to the piano.

“Only rugby,” he said. “I used to sing, up until fourth form – I couldn’t get on with the choral master. And you?”

“I was here practicing when your whole jim-band arrived. That was quite a display – Mrs. Jonklaas was a bit deflated, isn’t it?”

“I’m terribly sorry for the disruption,” he grinned. “It’s tradition, you know.”

“Yes, of course… I’m Dolores,” she said, extending her hand.

The boy seemed surprised, but then leaned into her greeting. “Very glad to meet you, Dolores.” He reached out nervously, and Dolly startled herself by pressing her open palm into his and wrapping her fingers decisively around his hand. She gave him a firm shake, but did not release him. The boy’s expression reminded her of the young Thomian drummer.

“What’s your name?” she asked. The edges of their palms were sealed together by the most wonderful tension.

“Ishan. Ishan Bahardeen.”
“Oh –” Dolly dropped his hand – too suddenly, she realized. “Then how do you like St. Thomas’s?” She regretted the strange tone in her voice as soon as she’d asked the question. The boy’s Muslim name had surprised her.

“I like it very well,” Ishan said sharply. “I’m a rugby captain there. My father is a Thomian old-boy.”

“I didn’t mean –”

“No, of course not.”

From the far side of the courtyard, the sound of drums and singing grew louder. The Thomian parade was coming to a close. The older boys ran ahead of the pack toward the caravan – to rev the trucks for the getaway. “I’m driving one of the lorries,” he said. “I have to go.”

“It was nice meeting you,” she stuttered, stupidly holding out her hand.

Although the hallway was empty, the quick rhythm of Ishan’s footsteps was strangely muddled, perhaps by the pandemonium outside. By the time she recognized Mrs. Jonklaas’ furious gait coming from the other end of the hall, it was too late. The headmistress burst into the room to find Dolly red-faced and flustered.

Mrs. Jonklaas peeled back her pursed lips to speak, and Dolly felt the queer gravitational pull of the woman’s shrinking head.

“Mind you pay close attention in Moral Instruction,” the headmistress growled. “You’re quite behind in the coursework.”
Dolly was certain she heard his heartbeat in the next room. A low cloud had swallowed the Castlereigh Guest House, and the cool silence seemed to amplify the thumping. She imagined the sound floating past the unhearing ears of her aunt and his sister, who’d accompanied them on the trip. Over the deep waters of the nearby reservoir, a tree frog began its song, clicking out of time with the strange thrum of Bernard’s heart. Now, separated by a thin wall, she felt as close to her future husband as she ever had.

She had spent weeks sitting next to him on her mother’s great wooden divan on the front porch at Queens Road, felt a thrill when his hand brushed up against hers. Her mother, of course, had been hovering close by throughout the courtship, arranging tokens on the coffee table and cleaning furniture only the servants had dusted in years. Bernard was so shy he sometimes stammered, so her parents gave them more privacy than Dolly had expected. But still, over the weeks, she’d come to know only the pinky edge of his left hand – against which her right pinky would slide. It was smooth, as if he used hand cream, and had a strange bony lump at the base of the knuckle – scarring from a chronically dislocated joint from rugby, he’d said proudly.

The alarm sounded in Bernard’s room first. She wondered if it was his hand that reached out in the darkness to silence the bleating clock. If his room was arranged as hers was, he might stirring in his twin bed, setting a bare foot on the mat, stretching his toes this way and that to feel for slippers he might have tucked under the bed a few hours before. For the first time, Dolly realized she’d never seen his feet. He’d always dressed formally at the house. Sitting next to him on her mother’s settee, she had taken in every detail of his shiny leather shoes – but never his feet.
She imagined a sarong bunched up against his knees as his feet sought the ground. For some reason, she pictured calves rubbed smooth of hair a few inches above the ankle, gleaming and scaled like her uncle Hiram’s after decades of wearing trouser socks to office. Bernard was a young man, his medical practice barely established, so it was absurd to compare him to her uncle, but somehow, she simply could not believe his leg might be covered in woolly hair. She tried to think back to pictures she’d seen at his parents’ home: a teen-aged Bernard scowling with his rugby team, Bernard as a toddler scampering after one of his sisters. Still, she couldn’t picture his feet, which were just there, on the other side of the wall.

She heard murmuring. Bernard’s eldest sister, Eugenia, must have awakened as well. Dolly leapt at the light switch. She didn’t want Eugenia to shuffle to their door and get the satisfaction of finding the lights off, as if the Amarasekera women were too lazy to get up on their own. Auntie Maude was out cold in the other twin bed, and as the light flickered to life, Dolly stifled a laugh at the sight of her. She had sloughed off the thin coverlet in the night and lay there swaddled tightly in her climbing outfit – a white cotton skirt over woolen leggings someone must have brought from abroad, a white cardigan buttoned over a long-sleeved shirt. Though the hill country was cool compared to Colombo’s heat, Auntie Maude must have been sweltering, and her mouth gaped open as if to provide some much-needed ventilation. Dolly wondered how many gekkos had crept in during the night.

In the toilet, she heard water splashing on the other side of the wall. The very idea that Bernard might be brushing his teeth – or heaven forbid, relieving himself – just inches away made the blood rush to Dolly’s head. In just a few weeks, what would separate them in intimate moments like these? She supposed it should be thrilling. She turned on the tap at full blast to drown out any further too-familiar sounds and to cover up any noise she might let escape at this hour.
At the engagement party, she’d been careful not to touch Bernard, as she knew the kind of whispers that followed a clingy bride-to-be – just look at her, clutching at him like that. Can’t even wait for the ceremony, that one. Must think he’ll run if she lets go. There had been some unpleasantness at the party with Bernard’s sister, who had raised concerns about her grandmother, Nalini – her caste was unknown to the nuns who’d raised her in their orphanage. No one else in Colombo seemed to give Nalini’s caste any notice – Dolly’s father had come too far for people to fuss too much – but, she supposed, marriage was another thing altogether than business. Or was it? This marriage to Bernard had been approved and orchestrated by both families, a far cry from her own parents’ story. They had eloped in a love-marriage against the wishes of her mother’s wealthy Burgher parents. This, Dolly supposed, was another mark against her.

Auntie Maude had suggested a pilgrimage to Sri Pada, and Bernard had agreed – too quickly, Dolly thought. It was insulting to think that because Eugenia had gossiped about her grandmother’s caste, Dolly was expected to climb to a mountaintop shrine to prove her merit. Her grandmother had grown up an orphan at a small convent near Balapitiya. The nuns, it was said, found her after a storm, swaddled at the water’s edge amid flotsam blown in from the sea. Some of the village folk told tales of a good Salagama family whose boat had broken up, but no one ever came forward to claim or vouch for the child – the nuns called her Nalini after the lotus. She had died in childbirth decades earlier, but her story fascinated Dolly. Never, until the ugliness with Eugenia, had Dolly considered her grandmother’s history a reason for family shame. Dolly’s mother, whose European roots elevated her above caste, had always loved telling the story of Nalini’s mysterious origins. Though Dolly found their elopement and her grandmother’s mysterious origins utterly romantic, she understood now that Eugenia – and others – did not.
Dolly’s father had insisted on hiring a new Land Rover for the trip, and had sent along their driver, Wimalasena. There had never been any question of her father coming on the pilgrimage. He limited his hill-country travels to the Grand Hotel in Nuwera Eliya, and even then, only during the racing season. “If I want to see the ocean, I can damned well go to Galle Face,” he’d said when Maude reminded him that the view from the peak stretched 100 miles to the western shore. He had, however, conferred with Bernard’s father and the astrologer to decide upon an auspicious day for the trek. He said that giving his permission, and an almsgiving to the priests, was all he was willing to do toward humoring Bernard’s sister.

As Auntie Maude snored, Dolly began to dress for the climb. Accustomed to Colombo’s constant heat, she felt as if she were stepping into a stranger’s clothes. She wore long cotton socks beneath a pair of thick white trousers, which her mother had the tailor sew just for the occasion. Dolly had resurrected an old white sweater that had made several trips to Nuwera Eliya during the racing season, as well as a pair of athletics shoes she hadn’t worn since physical-fitness class back at her high school. Their three-hour climb would take them to the shrine atop Sri Pada, just in time for a glorious sunrise if the trek went smoothly. But the full-white outfit made her feel as if she were going to a funeral.

“Auntie,” Dolly said softly, “They’re moving about next door. It’s almost time to go.”

“Put the fan, child.” Auntie Maude’s skin appeared damp, her face flushed. “Just a moment to freshen up, and I’ll be ready.” She lowered her voice and glanced toward the other room. “Had we stayed at Hatton, we’d enjoy another hour of sleep.” Her aunt had lobbied to stay at a boarding house near Dalhousie, just near the base of the mountain. But Bernard’s family knew the man who ran this place at Castlereigh, which was considerably more plush, so they would drive an hour before they reached the mountain.

When they walked out of the room, Eugenia was in the courtyard standing over one of the servants. The poor man looked as groggy as Dolly felt, and he squatted on the stone
driveway fishing out soda bottles from a small satchel. “This one’s an out and out simpleton,”
Eugenia said. Presumably – hopefully – the servant didn’t speak English. “He’d loaded up our
bag with drink bottles, which we can buy on the trail. We’ll keep the snacks, of course. His
patties are out of this world.” Her voice reverberated in the fog, and Dolly wondered if there
were other guests who might be trying to sleep.

Bernard emerged, looking embarrassed at his sister’s booming voice. He hunched as if
trying to shrink into his six-foot frame, scuffed his tennis shoes against the tiles. Dolly smiled to
see him in all-white, like a choirboy.

Eugenia looked his way and fairly bellowed. “What say you, Bernard?”

He straightened up quickly and said, “Yes, Akka. No need to lug bottles along the way.
Good morning, Auntie Maude – Dolly. You slept well, I hope?”

Dolly held her breath, anticipating her aunt’s making an unnecessary comment about
their long drive to the trailhead. “Yes, Bernard. Shall we load up then?”

By the time they arrived at the Dalhousie camp, Auntie Maude was green. The hour-
long drive along winding plantation roads, combined with the lack of sleep, had proven too
much for her. Bernard instructed Auntie Maude to stretch out in the Land Rover’s back seat and
checked her pulse, while Dolly fanned her and stroked her head. He sent the driver rushing
toward the ramshackle shops to find the least offensive toilet. Dolly liked seeing Bernard spring
to action when her aunt admitted feeling ill; she liked tending to their patient together. And, she
quite liked how Eugenia paced and muttered outside the vehicle.

It was obvious Auntie Maude wouldn’t be climbing, and Dolly insisted she would
remain with her aunt at the base, while Bernard and his sister made the trek.

“Nonsense,” Auntie Maude said. “Wimalasena can take me to the guest house in
Hatton. As you know, it’s only a few minutes drive from here,” she croaked, rather
triumphantly despite her nausea. Bernard caught Dolly’s eye, and they shared a small smile at
the dig at Eugenia’s expense. “I’m sure they’ll have a room for me, and I can wait for you there. You can look after these two, can’t you, Bernard?”

“Of course, Auntie,” he said. “We’re all fit for the climb. It’s you I’m worried about.”

Once Auntie Maude had been sent to the nearby hotel, they set off for the peak. Dolly was astonished to see that business was booming for the Dalhousie vendors despite the late hour. The night was particularly cool, which meant the peak – 7,000 feet above the sea, Dolly had read – would be freezing. Pilgrims who had the means bought overpriced hats, scarves and jackets from dozens of stalls, while poorer folk simply pulled their sarees closer or buttoned up thin cardigans.

Eugenia marched ahead as the path rose gently through the Mousekelle tea estate, which covered the base of the mountain. A small peace pagoda, originally built by Japanese monks, marked the end of the estate road and beginning of the rougher trail that led to the peak.

“We should leave an offering,” Dolly said to Bernard. “To start the journey on the right foot. You have the temple flowers?”

He called to his sister to wait a moment, but she shouted back over her shoulder without slowing. “Waste of time, malli,” she said. “Let’s wait until we reach the top. I want to see the sunrise. Come go.”

“We shouldn’t delay unnecessarily,” Bernard said, shifting the bag containing the offerings on his shoulder. “Perhaps on the way back down?”

“I’ll catch up,” she said. Bernard scowled, but said nothing as he hurried behind Eugenia. Dolly stepped off the trail and leaned into a well-manicured shrub that had been trimmed, like every plant in sight, to about waist-high. She gripped a single bud at its base, just where the green shoot emerged from two tender leaves that seemed to guard it. She tugged, and the leaves gave way with a satisfying pop. Unmoored from the plant, the three-fingered bunch seemed heavy in her fingertips, and she wondered how many thousands of them a single tea
plucker carried on her back each day. Ducking into the shrine, she left the leaves at the base of a large bell. Though she wanted to hear it ring out, she resisted the urge to sling the clapper against the brass lip.

As she stepped out of the small shrine, the moon had shaken off the clouds, and the peak seemed thrown into relief against a gossamer fog that covered the mountain. A faint trail of lights marked the relatively easy ascent along the mountain’s southern face, but Dolly was shocked at what appeared to be the sheer vertical rise as the lights swept up to brightly lit temple at the peak. The reality of climb, which before had seemed something between an inconvenience and an adventure, came sharply into focus. She hurried to catch up with Bernard.

“There’s no turning back now, I suppose.” Eugenia was speaking to Bernard, loudly as usual. “But she should know her place, her good fortune that we agreed to this marriage.”

“She’ll be coming any second now, Akka,” he said quietly. “She’s a good girl. Can you please let it drop?”

A good girl? She could not imagine him crying out that he loved her, but even so, the compliment was meager compared to the defense Dolly would have settled for: But her family is honorable – unimpeachable! As he turned his head, she called out and waved. “Hello, there! I fell behind at the Japanese temple. It’s quite beautiful.” She wouldn’t give Eugenia the satisfaction of knowing she was upset. Let them both wonder if she’d heard them.

With the tea estate behind them, the gravel path gave way to a steeper dirt trail. Electric lamps flickered every few yards, but they were outshined by the moon. Dolly couldn’t tell whether the clouds were gathering or clearing up. As they climbed in silence, Eugenia’s steps began to slow, but she still led the way. Bernard followed closely behind, ready to lend a hand if she missed a step. At six feet, he towered above her, and though Dolly found the old girl more than irritating, she had to admit Bernard’s devotion to her was sweet. She was starting to feel the climb, the muscles along the backs of her thighs strained with each step forward. Bernard
didn’t seem the least bit tired. His hips seemed to spring up each time his back foot left the earth, and Dolly liked the hitch in his shoulders as he shifted his weight at the top of each step. Though he’d given up rugby since finishing school, he was clearly still fit and seemed to be relishing the trek.

As the trail rose more sharply, old stone stairs replaced the dirt trail. The steps were uneven, as if the laborers who’d brought them here couldn’t be bothered to arrange them properly. In spots, the stairs were worn perilously smooth. The divots in the stone reminded her of indentations in the floor of her father’s bedroom, where years of swinging his feet from his bedside had worn away the tile. These grooves were not made by one man, but by thousands of pilgrims who’d made the journey before her. She liked the idea of her own shoes wearing away the tiniest, next layer of stone with her every step. It was impossible to get into a rhythm with the uneven steps, to feel any consistency in her stride, but she felt drawn up the mountain by the ghosts of those who came before.

As they climbed, they passed a travel party that seemed to be scaling the mountain an inch at a time. Two old women in rubber slippers and impossibly thin sarees clung to each other, accompanied by one of their daughters. Their progress was slow, but every so often, they’d somehow find the top of another stair. Dolly was out of breath herself, but the women chanted a traditional blessing as they passed. “Karunawai,” they sang. “Samandiyo devipihati.” The sound of Bernard’s voice as he chanted the proper response surprised her. His tone was deep and clear.

“My heart is pounding,” Dolly said. “How on earth do these old women make the climb?”

“Faith, of course,” Eugenia said. “Their faith gives them strength. How do you think I’m managing?”

Bernard agreed with his sister, of course. “You’re sallying forth, Akka. It’s a marvel.”
“But Eugenia Akka,” Dolly said. “These women are old enough to be our grandmothers. Surely, we can’t compare our climb to theirs?”

“Akka has a bad back, Dolly,” Bernard said quickly. “It’s very difficult for her. There’s a spot to rest just ahead – shall we continue?”

“I’m surprised you bring up your grandmother as a point of comparison,” Eugenia said, pressing one hand against the small of her back and holding Bernard’s arm with the other. She started up the path. “The longest trek she ever made was from an obscure convent to that fishing village of yours.”

Dolly felt her face redden, but before she could summon a response, Bernard had helped his sister up the next set of stairs. “Come, ladies,” he said. His voice was high-pitched and strained, the conversation clearly over. “Seetha Gangula is just ahead. A cup of tea and a rest will do us good.”

Several groups of climbers had gathered at the rest stops around Seetha Gangula, the icy river that flowed from a waterfall above and rushed beneath a rickety bridge that marked the beginning of the steepest parts of the climb. Dolly dropped back as Bernard and Eugenia headed toward one of the tea stalls. At the side of the trail, the water bubbled up in pools. There, a bare-bodied toddler howled as his mother plunged him into the freezing stream and pulled him quickly out. She wrapped the child in a blanket, and he huddled there as she completed her ritual. Shedding a thin white robe, the woman shivered in her cloth and jacket. She folded the robe, held it firmly on top of her head with one hand, and stepped ankle deep into the icy pool. Bowing forward, she bathed her neck and shoulders without even flinching and stepped back out of the stream. In an instant, she had dressed the child and herself, and she whisked the boy across the bridge and took the stairs, two uneven steps at a time, toward the mountaintop shrine.

Bernard called to Dolly from one of stands. “Tea?”

“Yes, thank you. I’ll be there in a moment.”
She sat down on the rock where the child had awaited his mother. There, she removed her shoes, carefully placing a sock in each. She stepped into the pool, and instantly, her feet gave way to a strange burning sensation. She wondered how many others had stood in this very spot on their way to the top. What had they hoped to find there, or what had they hoped to escape?

At dinner the night before, Eugenia had lectured them about the lord Buddha’s journey: in a single stride, he stepped from this very mountaintop to another in Siam. This legend gave the mountain its Sinhalese name, *Sri Pada* – illustrious footprint. Hindi belief held that Shiva the destroyer had visited the peak, that Sita herself had been held captive in Ravana’s nearby kingdom. Some Christians claimed the footprint was that of St. Thomas, but others – along with the Muslims – believed it was Adam’s footprint, left in the beginning, once he’d been expelled from the Paradise below. In English, the mountain was called Adam’s Peak. Of all the legends, this one bothered her: Adam had not occupied the Garden alone – why had Eve’s naked foot not marked the land they’d been cast out of?

The rushing water and numbness in her feet gave Dolly the sensation of floating, and she thought of her grandmother Nalini, untethered in the world until she’d married Dolly’s grandfather. Auntie Maude, who was old enough to remember when Nalini died giving birth to the fifth child, told Dolly that all the Balapitiya relatives swore she was too fair to be Tamil, but not so fair she might be the result of an affair or worse with a British plantation manager. Before she died, Nalini had encouraged Dolly’s grandfather to educate all their children – even the girls – and rallied to send Dolly’s father to Colombo. Auntie Maude, a more devout Buddhist than Dolly’s father, was particularly proud that, despite growing up in the convent, Nalini had somehow remained a Buddhist.

Hearing Bernard call for her, Dolly stepped out of the water. Her toes felt thick and slow, as if the blood within them had turned to slush. The pinked skin began to tingle as she
pressed her feet like stumps back into their socks and shoes. Rising to fetch her tea from Bernard, she enjoyed the clumsy thud of her frozen feet, her ability to tread lightly washed away in the stream.

Eugenia had already finished her tea when Dolly walked up. “You’ll have to hurry if we’re to make it to the top by sunrise,” she said.

“I’m ready,” Dolly said. “I’m quite refreshed after splashing my face in the river. It’s supposed to be good luck for first-time pilgrims, you know.”

“God knows if that water is polluted from the rest stops above,” Eugenia said. “And we’ll need more than luck if we’re to see the sunrise.” She scowled and gestured to the clouds, which now blocked out the moonlight.

“It will be a shame if the sunrise is obscured. All this, for nothing,” Bernard said. He scuffed the tip of his shoe into the dirt, and his voice took on his sister’s imperious tone. “Finish your tea quickly, Dolly. We’ve bought it for you.”

She was surprised at how easily his enthusiasm had faded, and how sincerely he now seemed to expect the worst.

“I find I’m not thirsty,” she said. “Eugenia Akka is correct. We should get moving if we’re to reach the top in time. Perhaps I’ll have a cool drink at the next stop.” As she turned and walked toward the bridge, she was quite pleased with the shuffling sound of their feet as they followed the heavy stomp of her own.

Dolly went slowly up the stairs, calling back to Bernard to warn them of broken stones or other obstacles. Although Eugenia was dreadful, it would not help Dolly to have her injured on the climb. If the pilgrimage had been meant to soothe Eugenia’s dissatisfaction over Bernard’s marriage, the trip seemed a total failure. She grew more and more disgusted with each jagged step, complaining with increasing vitriol that the clouds had the nerve to remain. And, of course, her back had begun to pain.
They made good time, however, and arrived at Indikatu Panna – the place of the needle – almost an hour before sunrise. There would be just enough time to regroup, gather their strength before climbing the almost vertical steps to the shrine above. Here, the wind began to gust and the cool, damp climb became frigid. Only the clouds seemed impervious to the wind. Prayer flags around the vendors’ stands flapped violently, creating an eerie percussion that rang out over the darkness. Dolly could imagine the scene that gave the spot its name; on his way up the mountain, the lord Buddha tore his robe and stopped here to mend his torn garment. It was easy to picture the wind taking up the saffron cloth and flinging it against a shrub blown clean of its greenery.

A small stand catered to pilgrims who hoped to follow in the Buddha’s footsteps. Like those who’d gone before her, she bought a needle and a tiny spool of white thread. Faithful climbers were to thread the needle and drop it into the shrub that marked the site of the Buddha’s mending, leaving the string to unravel as they climbed. Each pilgrim’s thread was a different length, and its running out was a moment of good fortune, a reason to keep going on the difficult climb to the top.

A shriek rose up from the teashop. Dolly hurried back to find Eugenia flailing about on a bench and wailing like a fishwife. Bernard was standing over her trying to get hold of her arms.

“Akka, calm down,” Bernard said. “Please, Akka. Let’s take a look here. We need to get him before he – before he moves onward.” He looked at Dolly, his eyes desperate. “A leech.” At the sound of the word, Eugenia launched into another round of gymnastics, and Dolly tried not to laugh. The perpetually damp trail was known for its blessings, but also for its bloodsuckers, which promised to grab hold of any pilgrim whose foot strayed from the trail or lingered too long near a puddle.

“Bernard, here,” Dolly said, pointing next to Eugenia. “Sit down.”
He flinched and dodged as he sat next to his sister, all the while coaxing her to calm down. She cuffed him a few times as she thrashed, but soon enough, Bernard was able to get an arm around her shoulders, and Eugenia finally sat still.

“We’re going to take a look at it. Is that all right, Akka?” Eugenia looked petrified, and Dolly almost felt sorry for her as she raised her pant leg to reveal a small black crescent just above her ankle. “I can remove it,” Bernard said, getting up from his seat.

Eugenia let out a squeal and clutched at his arm. With the threat of another round of flailing, Bernard sat quickly back down.

“I can do it,” Dolly said. “Akka’s more comfortable with you at her side, isn’t it, Akka?” Eugenia nodded and sniffled.

“Very well,” he said. “We’re going to use the long edge – not the point – of one of these needles, all right Akka?” Dolly squatted by Eugenia’s exposed leg. “If you look carefully, Dolly, you’ll see it’s attached at a thin end and a thicker end.”

“Yes, I see it.”

“Take the side of the needle and slide it gently along the skin beneath the thin end – that’s the leech’s mouth.” Eugenia whimpered. “It should release, and then quickly do the same to the thicker end. Then flick it away. It’s completely simple, Akka.”

Dolly passed the needle beneath the creature’s mouth and tail, and sure enough, the thing let go. Two bright beads of blood popped up where it released Eugenia’s flesh, and Dolly flung the leech aside with her fingernail. “Got him!”

“There,” Bernard said. “You’ve done it, Dolly. Well done.” His eyes shone with relief, and, Dolly thought, with respect.

“I think she’s cut me,” Eugenia said. “I’m bleeding.”

“You were attacked by a leech,” Dolly said. “Of course you’re bleeding.”

“You will not speak to me so rudely.”
“Eugenia Akka, I only tried to help,” Dolly said. “Now if you’re ready, we can continue. We’ve plenty of time.”

“Suddenly I’m to jump at your command,” Eugenia said, her voice rising. “You have no idea how impertinent that is.”

Dolly stared at the ground, considering how – or if – she would measure her words. She wondered if Bernard would intervene, but he sat silently next to his sister. On the teashop floor, she saw the vanquished leech, wiggling slowly toward its next victim. She crushed it with her shoe, leaving a tiny slash of Eugenia’s blood along the dirt floor and her shoe’s white rubber sole. “As I said, Bernard,” she took in a deep breath, “when Eugenia Akka feels up to it, I’m ready to continue.”

From Indikatu Panna, the trail became a narrow set of stairs that rose vertically the last few hundred feet to the temple. A banister had been erected in the middle of the staircase, and looking up, Dolly could see the railing wobble as terrified climbers gripped the bowed and rusty metal. To make matters worse, the base of the stairs was shrouded in a thick, white web – the thread of the faithful threatened to tangle unwary climbers as far up as she could see. She walked to the staircase, leaving Bernard and Eugenia to murmur behind her and follow. Though she felt as if the wind might blow her off the side of the mountain, she was glad their conversation could not reach her ears. She plunged her needle into the disintegrating cocoon at the base of the stairs and began to climb.

Trying to keep her attention anywhere but down, she focused on the two sets of lights above her. At the top, of course, was the shrine of the holy footprint. But closer was the last rest stop. The wind gathered strength and now hurled sporadic raindrops against the side of her face. She’d hoped to make it to the peak without stopping, but now, the lights of the rest stop seemed like the only destination that mattered. The rest stop was marked with a sign in English: “Last Hotel,” though it was little more than a stand carved into the rock and a patch of earth with
room for a handful of climbers. Seated on the vendor’s countertop was the little boy from the river. He was bundled up in a new layer of clothes, happily snacking on a bowl of curry and roti. The vendor appeared to be the boy’s father, but there was no sign of his mother. Dolly wondered how the woman had possibly wrestled the boy this far up the stairs, and why she had come so far only to leave him behind.

Eugenia practically fell into the shelter, with Bernard following closely.

“The weather has turned against us,” she said. “We’ll have to turn around.”

“Akka,” Bernard said, “we’ve come this far. You can see the lights at the top. To turn around now—”

“Is the only reasonable thing to do. The clouds have descended, the rain – there’s no use.”

“No use?” Dolly said. “This is supposed to be a pilgrimage, not a sight-seeing tour. What does it matter if we see the sunrise? Isn’t it the footprint we’ve come to see?”

“I won’t be lectured by a Catholic, certainly not one of your standing,” Eugenia said. “I know bloody well what’s at the top of this mountain.” At his sister’s curse, Bernard cringed, but said nothing.

“My god, Eugenia Akka.” Dolly said. “If this is about my caste, we’ve been through all of that. My grandmother came from a Salagama family – everyone in Balapitiya confirms it. I will not be treated like a coolie.”

“Your grandmother? That fiction about her caste is the least of your problems. Your parents? Your father’s come up in business, and he’ll likely help my brother find a preferable post, but it doesn’t change your circumstances, does it?”

“Amma and Thatha eloped, against Amma’s family’s wishes. All of Colombo knows that – it was a love marriage, but if my grandparents eventually came round, why can’t you?”
“You cannot possibly be so stupid, girl. Why does an 18-year-old Burgher girl elope with a boy fresh out of the village? Because he gets her in trouble. Have your mother and father ever, in your lifetime, celebrated a wedding anniversary?”

Dolly opened her mouth to reply, but her mind began to race backward, trying to recall the gala celebrations her mother would have thrown – must have thrown – to commemorate their wedding day. She could think of none.

“Akka, please,” Bernard said. “There’s no evidence to prove what you’re saying. We’ve talked about this. There’s no benefit in bringing this up.”

They’d talked about this? She got up from the table and walked away. “Let her go,” she heard Eugenia tell Bernard. “Now she knows what she owes you.”

Dolly continued the climb alone. Bernard would get Eugenia to relative safety, perhaps all the way down to Seetha Gangula, and come back for her. She wouldn’t wait for him at the top, but instead would meet with him wherever their paths crossed as she made her descent. At the top of the stairs, Dolly looked for the woman from the river, but she was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps she’d already entered the shrine of the holy footprint, or had walked to the far side of the temple.

The clouds to the east began to change from black to gray, and to the west, the lights of Colombo burned against the cloud cover like still-hot ash. There, 100 miles away, her parents were waiting for her to return, but only so they could give her away. She guessed the marriage to Bernard was something they felt they owed her – a good family, a lavish wedding, a story with a beginning that could be told. The sun would not break through the clouds that day, but one thing was clear: Though she wanted none of those things from her parents, they would be her gift to them.
Dolly had dreamed for months of returning home, but this was not the homecoming she’d had in mind. It was close to midnight by the time they reached her parents’ house on Queens Road. Her mother was on the portico to meet them, gray-faced and strangely calm. Bernard disappeared into her father’s suite at the base of the stairs, while her mother escorted her up to her old room. While her mother arranged her bed, Dolly dropped her hairpins in a jumble on the bedside table. Once she was settled, her mother sat at her bedside, stroking her hair and, as she had since Dolly’s childhood, twirling stubborn locks of hair into pincurls that would unfurl as soon as they were released. She shuddered at the angry rash that wound crazily from Dolly’s cheek, along her collarbone, and then disappeared into the neckline of her gown. “Parangiya, Kotté giya,” her mother said. Dolly smiled at the old expression. “Everything will be fine, baba.” Her mother’s words were accompanied by the quiet click of rosary beads.

“I’m not so sure, Amma. Bernard is very concerned.”

“Of course you’ll be fine. You’ll wait here, and then after the blessed event –” she crossed herself, “we’ll hire your new ayah, someone responsible to care for you both. You needn’t lift a finger. I’ve asked Kanthi to make some inquiries in her village.”

Good help was her mother’s answer to many problems. Perhaps Dolly was still woozy from the 7-hour drive from the hill country or from the round of injections, but the idea of hiring a new servant, someone else to look after her, was sickening. Rushing down from Haputale, they’d gone straight to the hospital. At this stage, Bernard insisted, her German measles could be an absolute calamity – more dangerous for the baby she was carrying than for her. She was no longer contagious, and he didn’t seem hopeful that the shots would do any good. But still, he insisted. She suspected the injections might have the greatest effect on his conscience.
“We’ll have to see what the men have to say,” she told her mother. She wanted some
distraction, and her mother was always willing to tell a tale or gossip a bit. “Tell me a story,
Amma. Tell me about the king’s messenger.”

Of course, she knew the story already. Parangiya, Kotte giya: Like the Portuguese went
to Kotté – a wild, untraceable path.

“Kotté was a glorious fortress city,” her mother began. “There, the Sinhalese kings
exchanged cardamom and cinnamon plants for the silkworms brought by the Chinese.”

“And the shadow-people?” Dolly sat up against a wall of thick pillows her mother had
plumped up to protect her from the mahogany headboard.

“Just wait, child. Don’t struggle there. Now, the Chinese brought tales of ghost-ships
and ghost-men who ate stones and drank blood. But Sinhalese king would be ready when they
arrived. He posted messengers to await whoever dared to anchor in the harbor, and sure enough,
one day, the ghosts appeared. But they were not ghosts at all.

“To the king’s messenger, the Portuguese sailors appeared to be shadow-people – too
faint to be human, but too ridiculous to be divine. They asked the messenger to take them to the
capital – they promised friendship and riches, but the messenger could see their hearts beating
falsely beneath their translucent skins.”

Dolly thought of her grandmother Nalini, who’d also come from the sea, a toddler
washed ashore and adopted by nuns. Despite growing up in the convent, according to the family
lore, Nalini had never been a Catholic – she’d found a way to remain a Buddhist. Though her
mysterious origins cast a shadow over the family lineage, Dolly found her story utterly romantic
and had begun to think of her as a benevolent spirit, the sister she’d never had. As she nodded
off, she imagined the tiny pink heart, racing wildly alongside her own – the strange cacophony
had rattled within her now for four months, disrupting her own steady pulse. She wondered if
the competing rhythms sounded out the shadow-people’s lies or if they promised something
true. It was strange that she was expected to produce a life when she had never lived one of her own.

She woke to the nattering of the crows.

Though the Amarasekaras’ house presided over one of Colombo’s busiest intersections, the belching lorries never scared off the scavengers that had awakened her each morning since childhood. Despite longing for the city each day of her hill-country exile, she’d never registered the absence of this most familiar chorus – not until she came home. It was strange to think a part of herself had slipped so easily away.

From her window she heard the low growl of cars headed back onto the boulevard, their drivers dispatched on other household errands while the men gathered. She supposed her uncle Hiram, her father’s younger brother, would be among them. A physician, her uncle was called upon to advise the family in any medical emergency. His marriage had been a love match, like that of Dolly’s parents. But Hiram and his bride – almost ten years his senior – hadn’t needed to elope, since the match was beneficial for both families: he married up in caste and was sent by his wealthy in-laws to medical school, while she was saved from being the family spinster.

Dolly and Bernard’s courtship and wedding had been carefully orchestrated, though not mandated, by their families. They’d married only five months before, and since Bernard’s new job in Haputale began days after the wedding, her mother had been denied throwing the extravagant homecoming party that was traditional after the honeymoon. They’d gone straight from an awkward week together at Kandy’s Royal Palm Hotel to their cramped, damp quarters in Haputale. A few weeks after the wedding, her monthly bleeding was replaced by morning sickness and a thickening middle. And now, German measles.

As the crows’ morning chorus subsided, Dolly noticed a stillness in the house. Bernard had already risen to meet the other men downstairs, but the quiet was somehow larger – it was
the absence of servants. Her father would have given the staff a few days to return to their
villages because of the unduvap poya. She supposed the driver, who did without holidays
because the family couldn’t do without him, was the only servant in the house. Wimalasena was
most likely out in the back, sarong hoisted and tied into a practical ambudé, washing the shining
new Peugeot that had replaced the ancient model her father had given Bernard and Dolly when
they left for Haputale. The driver would likely send away the fishwife who came each day to
peddle seer or cuttlefish. With no cook in the kitchen, the Amarasekeras would be eating out.

Dolly enjoyed the silence as she anticipated the day’s first wave of nausea. At the house
in Haputale, the slightest noise had reverberated against perpetually cool, damp walls. Here, the
heat seemed to absorb sound and thought, rather than amplify them. Typically, the crows
heralded the approach of Kanthi, who had worked for the family since before Dolly’s birth. Her
mother liked to tell guests that the old woman had worked for them since the meager years in
Negombo, where Dolly had been born. “We had nothing,” she liked to recall. When their guests
asked how the couple could possibly pay domestics through it all, her mother would simply say:
“Even when we were poor, child, we had servants.”

Each morning since childhood, Dolly would await the muffled click and sulfur smell
that signaled her bath water being warmed. Even after she was old enough to light the rickety
gas heater herself, she had one of the servants handle the task. She loved to see the burgeoning
flame dance at the tip of the match, count the seconds as the gas cylinder inhaled the flickering
blue spark. But the small, contained explosion that followed never failed to terrify her: The
instant of combustion seemed to linger in her ears long after the heater had done its job, and she
was certain the stubborn ringing was a portent of something larger, louder and out of her
control.

This morning, however, no familiar sulfur smell lured her to the washroom. A cool
shower might do her good, but she was just beginning to savor the simmering Colombo heat.
Pulling herself out of bed, she felt stiff and sluggish, as if her joints had swollen even further in the night. Her dressing table, in front of which she had fretted and preened during her courtship with Bernard, was still covered in the girlish lace doilies of her childhood. Her hairpins had been meticulously arranged on the tabletop: Bernard’s handiwork, the finicky insistence on order she’d only recognized after the wedding. She ran a fingertip along the bright pin-prick trail that wandered circuitously across her cheekbone and along her jaw, winding from her chin to the center of her chest: Parangiya, Kotté giya.

After washing up, she dressed quickly, draping her saree’s headpiece to obscure the offending rash as best she could. Her mother, who slept like the dead, was out cold in the adjoining room despite the crows, the awakening traffic and the incursion of men into the house. Even the occasional shrieking of red-eyed kohu would fail to rouse her mother from slumber before she was ready. Dolly decided to go downstairs before breakfast and disrupt the noiseless morning at her piano, which she’d given up since the wedding. Bernard had bought a second-hand piano for the house in Haputale, but she felt foolish practicing Mozart and Rachmaninoff when Bernard preferred to bang out baila tunes after he’d had a few drinks. Stepping into slippers she’d left behind on her wedding day, Dolly made her way down the grand staircase and paused on the landing. Wisps of smoke and the clinking of ice cubes escaped her father’s open door at the base of the steps, and Dolly sat down to hear the men debate her fate, and that of the fluttering – almost imperceptible – in her swelling belly.

“The astrologers did not predict this, brother.” Dolly recognized her uncle’s warm, high-pitched sing-song. “This is no joke, Oliver. The child will be damaged – if not stillborn.”

“I made my offerings to the priests,” her father said, his tumbler clanging hard against the bedside table. “What of Bernard’s injections?”

“If the child survives infancy, he could be an invalid. If you are lucky, he will be deaf or blind – not both. This, your first grandchild? This cannot be left to chance and superstition.”
“Superstition? Emma is the one who is lighting candles, clutching at her bloody rosary, muttering prayers. She even rubbed Dolly’s bed with ambalangoda – did you see the leaves she’s strung over the doorways? I say, give the girl the proper medical treatment and carry on.”

“Think of the consequences, Oliver. Think of raising such a child – in your situation, with the elections coming next year – shall ours be seen as a house of ill fortune? And Bernard, I need not remind you of those who snickered at an Amarasekera marrying into your family of physicians.”

“I had German measles as a child,” Bernard said. Dolly imagined him worrying at the skin on his knuckles, tracing the faint veins running over the back of his hand, a nervous tic she’d found endearing during their courtship. “It’s virtually harmless in children. I shouldn’t have been seeing patients at the house – I should have sent them to hospital.”

“That’s hardly helpful,” Dolly’s father said. “It won’t help anyone blubbering about work now. Your hospital stipend is absolutely inadequate – I’m sure your… your home office helped somewhat. Even if the rules state otherwise, you must take care of business, isn’t it? Listen, Hiram. You talk about the most dire result as if it’s a certainty – give me the odds and we can make a reasonable decision.”

She envisioned her father gripping his Racing Times in one fist and shaking it at her uncle and Bernard. Even in the midst of this crisis, the newspaper would already have been studied and marked up with the day’s wagers for races held in Colombo, Nuwera Eliya and even the British tracks. All this commotion, the riot underway in her body, reduced to a simple score, a mere calculation of odds. The idea was as appealing as it was infuriating.

A quiet gasp surprised her – the sound of her own sharp inhale. Her chest burned, and a wet, red streak shone across her fingertips; she’d scratched open the rash on her chest. She doubted the men had heard her, but to be safe, rose from her perch and hurried up the stairs. She followed a muffled snore into her mother’s room. There, her mother lay sprawled beneath a thin
coverlet, limbs extended toward each corner of the bed – the luxury of a woman who’d slept alone for as long as Dolly could remember. Her mother had found herself in a similar situation in the months after she and her father eloped to Negombo when she was just eighteen. She told Dolly that her auspicious birth – she always swore it was a full year after the marriage – had given the newlyweds passage back to Colombo and back into the lives of her fashionable Burgher grandparents: “How could they resist a child so lovely and fair?”

On one side of her dressing table lay a bible, a medallion of St. Anthony and a shining black rosary that Dolly knew her mother never prayed over. But a set of battered wooden beads peeked out from beneath her pillow, an ancient rosary she prayed with each morning and night. As her mother slept, Dolly noted the roots of her hair had grown out to reveal the natural copper she’d always dyed to match Dolly’s own enviable jet-black locks. “Blessed with your father’s color, but none of its curl,” she would sigh over Dolly’s head. On the other side of the table were a tangle of U-shaped hair pins and a raggedy condé, the bun-shaped mass of human hair that her mother pinned beneath her own to create a fuller chignon. Disembodied there, the hairpiece made Dolly’s stomach lurch.

She turned her attention to a porcelain saucer, which held a key so dainty it seemed absurd to think its lock could to secure the almirah towering over her mother’s bed. A hairpin, she had discovered as a child, had opened the lock just as well. She took up the key and opened the wardrobe’s heavy wooden doors, grateful the servants kept its hinges well oiled. In the bottom drawer were rows of velvet boxes that held her mother’s jewelry, as well as several sets of Dolly’s. The collection’s most recent additions were the sovereign-gold pendant and earrings Dolly had worn to her engagement, the extravagant diamonds from the wedding, and a ruby-and-emerald set she was supposed to have worn at the homecoming her mother had been denied.
Reaching behind the boxes of gems, Dolly pulled out a silver toffee tin. Her mother kept a stash of rupee notes, as well as coins that she’d carefully washed in the bathroom sink. The toffee tin funded bonuses for the servants and other small projects her father wouldn’t approve of. The thought of her father, downstairs weighing his odds, made her cheeks flush with anger. The broken skin on her chest throbbed, and looking down, she saw the shadow of a stain beginning to rise through the right shoulder of her saree jacket. There was a Muslim-owned shop a few blocks away; it would open despite the *poya*, and she could get a sticking plaster there without having to ask her father for one. She grabbed a handful of bills and slipped down the stairs, past her father’s curtained doorway – and across the threshold. She was almost at the Queens Road roundabout when she realized that, for the first time in her life, she was alone on the streets of Colombo.

She drew her headpiece close to hide her face and watched her slippered feet make their way along the gravel and garbage on what passed for a sidewalk. Her toes were like her fingers, long and bony – she thought they belonged on someone taller, a real Dutchwoman who hadn’t inherited her mother’s five-foot Burgher frame. Her mother’s feet were perpetually encased in open-toed high heels, so much so that it strained her shortened Achilles’ tendons to walk barefoot from the bath to her heeled house shoes. Dolly’s feet gathered dust along with the hem of her saree, which dragged along the sidewalk unhitched.

She thought of the king’s messenger as she walked. Though Kotté was only a few miles from the harbor, the king’s servant had taken the shadow-men on a wild journey that lasted for days. First they headed south, which the sailors calculated by reading the sun. But the first night, the monsoon clouds hid the stars, and the Portuguese could no longer map their progress. They became disoriented in the wetlands, and once the rains began, even the streams they followed seemed to change direction with each passing storm. This detail of her mother’s tale came to Dolly with every hard rain – as the gutters filled and the first new streams sprang up in
the garden, she always watched to see if the waters would turn tide, as if wishing could make it so. By the second night of their trek, the shadow-men simply fixed their eyes on the messenger’s back and hoped the capital would come quickly. Parangiya, Kotté giya. Like the foreigners went to Kotté – an impossible route, impossible to retrace.

She counted her steps along Queens Road and made three rounds about the traffic circle before she decided on her route. Kicking at the papery mess of fallen bougainvillea blossoms, she turned away from the road leading toward the shop. Instead, she headed for the track.

The first race had not yet run when she arrived at the Turf Club ten minutes later. She was grateful for the bedraggled state of her saree, as she’d be less easily recognized at the track, and though the air was still and hot, she kept her head covered. She bought a racing form and tickets to the open-air stands – still a level up from the free seats populated by the very poor. Though she’d seen her father’s horses run many times, she’d always sat in the box seats above, where owners and Colombo socialites mingled.

A day after the poya, the Turf Club was packed with gamblers hoping to get their fix. Most were men, of course, a very few with wives in tow. But these men did not have the luxury of wiring their wagers to England as her father was able to do, so this was a day they’d been waiting for. She took an empty seat on the aisle in the second row, just at the top of the stretch. From there, she would see both the start of the race and the final turn. She had expected to be harassed by the men in the stands, but those who didn’t have their heads buried in a racing form were hustling toward the betting window, or perhaps to the paddock to take a closer look at the beasts that would decide their fate. She studied her racing form and breathed in the green air rising from the turf, trying to calm the strange pulsing that raced beneath her heartbeat. At the track, every man was a soothsayer – the racing form, his astrological chart. Picking a winner, Dolly’s father had always told her, was the easy part.
She needed to see the horses. Dolly pulled her cotton shroud more firmly over her head as she approached the paddock, where a throng of gamblers jostled for the best views of the horses. There, she saw familiar faces – her father’s peers and competitors strode about, sweltering in their suits and ruining freshly shined shoes in the paddock muck. It was easy to see why Battlebridge was the favorite among the bookmakers. A gleaming gray, he stood a head taller than any of his competitors. To keep him cool, the paddock boys squeezed spongefuls of water against his coat, and the water streamed down the furrows of his muscled haunches. Even his hooves seemed to float above the grass, as if buoyed by the thick black tape around each of his ankles. While the other horses kicked and whined, Battlebridge carried himself like a champion, saving his energy for the race and giving an occasional snort. The horses lined up for the post parade. Her father was right: picking a winner was simple.

There was no real money to be made, however, on Battlebridge with the odds so high in his favor. The most successful gamblers, her father had told her, did not rely solely on the bookmaker’s statistical song and dance. Rather, success depended upon a man’s ability to divine the public’s whim up to post time. It was people’s confidence in the bookmaker’s story that separated favorites from longshots. And the interpretation of a single variable – the track condition or the color of a jockey’s racing silks – could win or lose a fortune. Everything could turn upon one single note added to the bookmaker’s score.

Before leaving to place her bet, Dolly whispered to the men crowded next to her: “The trainer’s boy said the horse was limping this morning – see the tape?” A murmur radiated out into the crowd, and Dolly felt a rush of excitement. She took a meandering path toward the ticket window, making a quick circuit through the lower grandstand. Her paddock rumor had preceded her, and she helped it along as the horses made their way toward the starting gates. As she whispered through the upper grandstands, the crowd there seemed to buzz with renewed attention to Battlebridge, and the lines at the ticket windows grew longer as post-time
approached. She imagined Battlebridge’s odds ticking down like seconds on a clock, as each disenchanted gambler placed his money on a different horse. And as his odds plummeted, she calculated, so rose her profit. She imagined counting out her winnings, tucking the grimy bills into her jacket. Perhaps she would hire a taxi to drive her back to Queens Road. Her cheeks burned with excitement as she waited to place her bet, and the pin-prick rash throbbed against her chest.

“Excuse me, madam.” She was horrified to see a grubby young man sidled up next to her. How could he be so forward? Had he recognized her? She ignored him and waited for him to vanish, but he persisted. “Madam, pardon me. I think something’s wrong there.”

He thrust toward her an oily-looking handkerchief and pointed at her right shoulder. Her headpiece had drifted to the side, and there, on the strap of her saree jacket, was a blooming red stain. She grabbed at the dirty cloth and pressed it against the wound; she walked away from the man without a word. As the chaos of the betting windows seemed to fade away, she felt a foreign, rapid-fire pulse pushing back against her fingertips. From across the turf, she heard the bells and the break of the starting gates.

The mighty gray finished first, of course. But there was no ticket to cash, no winnings to count – just a stack of stolen bills pressed against her left shoulder, and now a soiled and stolen handkerchief on her right. As she made her way toward the exit, she heard a group of men angrily noting the sorry return on their wager: Even odds, they complained. Battlebridge had gone off the favorite – despite her efforts. Nothing had changed. Nothing at all.

She’d been foolish to think a girl could sway the outcome. The cries of vendors outside the racecourse suddenly seemed directed at her, and the traffic seemed threatening. She wished she could close her eyes and be back in the safety of her own bed, her mother stroking her hair and promising that everything would turn out for the best. The traffic seemed to close in on her, and Dolly turned off the busy street to follow the quieter Rajawatte Terrace back toward Queens
Road. Though the road led past her mother’s church, she couldn’t bear the thought of swallowing exhaust all the way back to the roundabout near the house.

By the time Dolly reached St. Marguerite’s, the morning mass was well underway, and even the latecomers had been settled in their seats as she walked past. She and her mother had lit candles here in the days before the wedding, which was officiated by an influential Buddhist priest and held at Colombo’s finest five-star hotel. No one had noticed the pianist’s chubby pinky finger, which failed to reach with authority a distant key. The repeated chord contained just an instant of dissonance, and now, Dolly was surprised she could not remember which notes in particular were awry. The organist at St. Marguerite’s, however, was not hampered by such small concerns. As he hammered out the music with more gusto than skill, Dolly felt the strange flutter. A tiny pink heart beating a response to the organist’s ridiculous pounding. In that moment, Dolly knew the child’s senses were perfect.

The music made her temples throb, so she walked past the chapel and into the quiet courtyard behind the main building. An unfamiliar smell, hot and metallic, arose from a dingy workshop behind the nuns’ dormitory. Peering into a window flung open to the rising December heat, she saw a small woman who had abandoned her bulky habit on a low table. Laboring in a cloth and jacket, the woman was marking some kind of black resin, which she had applied to the skeleton of a grand piano. Dolly was startled at the sight of the instrument’s exposed stringboard, and the woman looked up from her work to find herself being watched. She toggled her head slightly and lifted her chin – an invitation. By the time Dolly found the open door on the far side of the shed, the woman had taken up a sharply pronged tool and was notching the wood she had lacquered and marked. It did not seem possible that such a slight woman had the strength to excise the divots so precisely, so perfectly, but Dolly could see the emerging spine of the skeleton’s flexible bridge, which would eventually hold the piano strings just so.
The woman did not pause from her work, but nodded toward the keyboard. Dolly approached and pulled up a dusty bench to sit at the piano’s mouth. Letting the veil of her saree fall away, she stretched her fingers against keys unmoored from their hammers and strings. She thought of her grandmother Nalini, who’d been raised by the nuns but never submitted to their faith. Nalini, who’d found her own way – even if it led only as far as Balapitiya. Dolly felt a tiny vibration, the woman’s fingers working against the tender stringboard, and she began to play. The silence boomed with unheard music, a composition of her very own, and she imagined how the keys would sing out once the woman’s work was finished. For the first time in months, she heard the beating of her own heart.

By the time Dolly rushed back to Queens Road, she thought it wise to enter the house through the back. The men could have emerged from her father’s rooms for ice, to stretch their legs on the veranda, or – worse – to call for Dolly and her mother. The driver had gone, most likely to fetch the morning curries, and she slipped upstairs unnoticed. In the bathroom, she carefully unwound the six yards of damp silk from her body. She wrapped the stranger’s handkerchief in a tissue and threw it in the wastebasket – the bleeding had stopped. Taking up the matchbook with dusty fingers, she watched the fire rise up against the match head and inhaled deeply as the gas cylinder drew in the flame. She clocked, as always, the moments leading to combustion, but this time the heater’s exploding to life seemed a simple equation. Dolly waited a moment, stepped into the shower, and let the lukewarm water rinse the dirt and sweat from her skin.

Changing into a clean saree, she draped the headpiece across her left shoulder and pulled the excess material snugly toward her hip. The morning walk and warm bath caused the pinpoint rash to bloom against her fair skin, winding a crazy but clear path from cheek to chest. She fashioned a clumsy bandage to hold over her scratch, though the wound seemed to have settled. Bernard would be shocked to see her skin had been maimed. She pinned her hair in a
perfect bun and walked to greet the men, who were still holed up in the suite downstairs.
Despite her father’s bullying, she knew her husband’s word would be the last in the matter.

“Bernard – ” she said, unheard music still ringing in her ears. “I’m certain something is wrong with the baby.”