

UNWELCOME VISITOR

They sat at a small round table beside a window looking down the length of the defunct airstrip. The two men faced each other: Pettitt with his back to the window, looking into the room, and Harry looking out of the window. Conversation was being forced by Pettitt who was telling Sally about Kanga in a proprietorial way and referring for confirmation to Harry who either grunted a begrudging affirmation or sulkily contradicted Pettitt, carefully explaining the facts to him as if he was mentally retarded. He ignored both women. Pettitt acted as if unaware of Harry's rudeness; his general affability in the face of such an onslaught of grumpy hostility only made Harry look more boorish than he was.

Dolly suffered agonies of embarrassment. She hated both men. She was disgusted that her husband allowed himself to be humiliated in front of a stranger who must think that they were all misfits, exiled in the valley because they were abnormal. She loathed Harry for his arrogant dismissal of her husband. She wanted to strike him and slap his face; she wanted to stand up, pull his hair, bite him and kick his balls. Then he'd have to get hold of her and she could fight him, scratching him until the blood flowed from his face, hitting him across the brow with the wine bottle. She wanted to watch his surprise and pain. She almost laughed out loud as she thought of it because she was so small and he was so tall: she would have to stand on the table to get at him, and he would not even laugh at her up there standing on the table, he would dismiss her as one dismisses a fly, brushing her aside so he could finish his soup. She picked up her knife and played with it.

Sally was intrigued by the situation. She could see quite plainly that Dolly was bursting with anger, furious with Harry. Dolly was like a small, tight, angry bird of prey, chained and unable to fly up and swoop down on an animal she was desperate to attack, to peck and break the flesh; her thick black hair was brushed out in the fashion of the time so that it seemed too heavy for her fine-featured face with its black eye make-up and deep-red painted lips; she looked a bit mad, like an animal that has been caged for too long, knowing only anger and frustration.

Pettitt's calm geniality under Harry's constant attacks was impressive. Yet Sally realised – unlike Dolly – that his very calmness was a deliberate challenge: there was something bloodless and inhuman about it. But Harry fascinated her the most. He was a moody, adolescent schoolboy, swinging between complete mental absence and a vicious meanness aimed at Pettitt for whom he proudly showed his contempt. There was something definitely and disturbingly abnormal about him, yet he seemed more human and more multi-dimensional than Pettitt and, in a way that scared her, she was attracted to him.

“Are you dreaming, Sally?” Pettitt broke into her thoughts.

“Oh no.”

“Well what do you think of our fine planter here who’s determined to show you what a fool I am and who is going to show you the best coffee plantation in the valley?”

“Oh I’m not sure that he wants me, do you Mr Harry? I reckon you just want to get back to your farm without any nuisances.”

To her surprise he looked at her kindly and smiled at her for the first time as if the smile really was meant for her. “I’m sorry Miss, Miss um, I don’t even know your name. I’ve been ignoring you for so long.”

“Smith actually, same as yours, but call me Sally, Miss Smith sounds like someone’s secretary.”

“Sally, then,” and he smiled again at her, but briefly, and his eyes wandered out of window until he pulled himself back with an effort. “I’ve ignored you talking to this nut who’s not a nut really but a very good accountant and we dumb planters would be lost without him. I just shout at him because I have such bad manners, not being used to ladies like you and Polly, Dolly.” He turned towards Dolly now: “Sorry Polly, I mean Dolly. I can’t help thinking of you as Polly, Dolly, because it’s my special name for you.” He finished with a fatuous grin, almost shutting his eyes, so that Dolly was not sure if he was mocking her or trying, in his clumsy way, to be friendly. She gave him the benefit of the doubt. And the charm worked, once they decided to accept it. It was magic, bursting through the fragile atmosphere and drawing them towards him and towards each other. They scarcely realised it but for a moment they all loved him and, therefore, each other. Dolly felt happier than she had felt for months.

“You can call me Polly,” she said, “so long as it’s only you. But I shall call you Barry in return or would you prefer Larry?”

“You can call me Gary.”

She took the bait willingly: “I will; after that awful pop singer who wears platform shoes and has sequins sewn on his clothes. You’re just like him.”

“OK, it’s a deal Polly, but no platform shoes. Do you mind, Saunders?”

“Nope, go ahead.” He was pleased that his wife and Harry were on good terms at last, although the effort of the game had drained all of them of their stocks of humorous small talk. They were relieved when Harry stood up.

“It’s time Sally and I were leaving,” he said. “Come on Sally, have you got your bag?”

He wanted to make Sally feel welcome and after trite farewells they left the husband and wife to their coffee. Dolly sat up straight in her chair, close to the table, looking into her coffee cup as if she saw more in it than she ever hoped to find in her husband. He leaned back in an expansive mood, surveying the room and greeting other members who were coming in for a late lunch after a Friday session at the bar. He felt that the morning had gone well, he had enjoyed his lunch and he believed he was beginning to understand Harry almost

as well as he believed he understood his wife. “That went well, didn’t it, Darling?” he said.

“If you mean that you got that poor girl to go off with Harry Harrington-Smith to goodness knows what, then it did.” Dolly looked up and past her husband. She looked out of the window. “But I can’t see why you’re so keen to get them together, he doesn’t want her and anyway he’s too odd for a nice girl like that. He’s funny.”

“What on earth d’you mean?” Pettitt was indignant for his protégés. “There’s nothing wrong with Harry. He’s just shy and spends too much time alone on his own which I agree is not healthy. What he needs is a good woman. Sally will probably do him a lot of good.”

“That’s disgusting. He might do her a lot of harm. I don’t suppose you’d thought of that, had you? And what gives you the right to decide what is good or not good for Harry? Why do him any favours? He only tries to make you look stupid.”

Pettitt was offended because he knew his wife was right and that he had probably misjudged the situation: “He doesn’t, he’s just socially inept, that’s all, and Sally is quite capable of looking after herself. She’ll take him or leave him. He’ll probably strike her as a character out of a Somerset Maugham short story. He is rather a character after all.”

But Dolly was having none of her husband’s illusions: “He’s more than a character; he’s definitely odd with his sudden changes of mood. When he first came in he was frozen and he ignored Sally and me and attacked you for no reason. Then he starts to charm the ladies but he didn’t take me in or Sally either I’m sure, he just wanted to backtrack that’s all.” She was getting cross.

“You seemed to cope with him well I thought, all that Polly and Gary business. Say Dolly, did he take you in?”

“I’m just not going to let him walk on me that’s all, he calls me Polly to annoy you and why you let him when he’s just one of those planters I don’t know.”

“Come on Sweetie, cool down.”

“I will.” She wanted to cry.

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Sitting beside the odd man in the strange-smelling car, Sally caught herself feeling not afraid but not confident either as she usually did in these excursions that were the staple of her life. Sally Smith, always able to deal with any situation, was here at a loss and a little nervous of being unable to strike up a conversation with this man who had clammed up as soon as they had taken the road out of town. She tried to look at the countryside that passed by but her mind filled up with silly frightening thoughts that had never occurred to her before. Why would he not talk to her? Why did he stare straight ahead, his face set and his hands holding the steering wheel high? She tried again.

“Is it far?”

“We’re about half way.”

“It’s pretty country,” she said, knowing it was a stupid thing to say.

“Yes.”

“How long have you been up here?”

“Years.”

“Do you like it?”

He did not answer and Sally blushed. Obviously she had said something so patently silly that it was not worth an answer. Possibly he’d not even heard but she felt, quite suddenly, that she no longer existed. It was like the office again: she had to look at herself to check she was there. I’ll keep my mouth shut, but as they moved on she felt more and more desperate to prove her existence. When they turned off the main road between densely planted coffee trees she blurted out as if she did not know and they had come across something unusual: “What are those?”

“Coffee trees.” He laughed. She was alive after all but it was a cruel laugh.

They drove through more coffee trees, up a hill between brightly coloured hibiscus hedges and came to a halt before a formless old bungalow, gloomy under tall eucalyptus trees. It was smothered in bougainvillea which instead of giving it colour and joy seemed only to make it sombre and unloved.

In the shadow of an open door, half lost in the overhanging vegetation, stood a very black man. He was small but nonetheless seemed to be bursting out of his white shorts and red tee-shirt. He came to meet Harry, who had apparently forgotten Sally as he got out of the car. The man’s right eye was missing but that did not spoil the smile he gave Harry: full of such warmth that Sally felt both jealous and sure that Harry must be worth such adoration. She began to like Harry again but as she climbed out of the car the expression on the face of his accomplice changed swiftly to one of suspicion and contempt. His one eye now made him look threatening. Harry noticed and laughed again in a hostile way as if inviting the man to laugh at her with him. She had no doubt, this time, that she was there, but she felt she was a freak and undoubtedly an unwelcome outsider. She felt no better when Harry started talking about her to the man as if she could not hear: “Don’t look so worried, Wanei, I didn’t buy her in town. She’s only going to stay the weekend. Miss er, whatsyername?”

She was intruding where she was not wanted and there was no way out. Flatly she answered: “It’s Sally.”

“Sally, Sally, Sally, I’m so sorry. I was miles away, thinking of the bloody coffee.” He spoke as if she was the only person in the world who mattered. Maybe he had been miles away and she’d imagined his hostility but his rapid changes of mood wound up her nerves.

Wanei, either because she had imagined his hostility or because he now realised she was not a threat, was suddenly more friendly. He smiled at her and she liked him: his one-eyed face made him look cheeky and funny like the pixies in her childhood books.

“Sally,” said Harry, the warmth of his voice enough to bring them together, “this is Wanei, who will look after you, show you to your room, give you some coffee and generally be your devoted slave. Won’t you Wanei?”

“Yes Sir,” replied Wanei, exaggerating the sir and laughing good-naturedly.

“Take Sally to her room Wanei,” said Harry playfully, hands in his pockets, beaming at them as nicely and as normally as any man she’d met. “Wanei will show you to your room, Sally,” he continued. “Make yourself entirely at home. I have to see to the pay. I’ll be back in three or four hours.” Adding: “Bye-bye,” as he winked at her, then climbed back into the car and was gone.

Wanei led her into the house that was even gloomier inside than it had appeared outside. They entered a long, dark corridor with a cement floor and turned left into an enormous dining-room, lacking in definition, cheerless and dominated by an expanse of table that spread across it like brown fungus. Sally followed Wanei around the table, watching it nervously. The place was not a room but rather a hopeless void in the centre of the house made all the more hopeless by having only one narrow window that squinted at the wonderful view of the mountains.

The room in which she was to sleep led out of the dining room and although it was dingy, damp and looked as if it had not been used for years it was refreshingly small and well defined, snug even, compared with the space outside. It was a refuge with a cheerful view looking into a busy kitchen area with hanging washing, chickens and then coffee trees and the sky beyond.

Wanei announced he would make her some coffee. Left alone, she laid her things out on one of the twin beds, washed in the tiny shower room and then lay on the other bed to rest.

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She was walking along a straight dusty road on a dry, yellow, treeless plain. The sun, from a bleached-white sky, made her head ache. She frowned at its hard glare. Her limbs were heavy and she longed for a rest but there was nowhere to stop. She had to trudge on towards the isolated rocky mountain ahead. She must keep going. There was no going back. She felt as infinitely lonely as the last person left in the world which was no longer worth living in. She began to cry, big heavy sobs rose from her stomach like painful bubbles which broke out of her but did not make her feel any better. And just as she felt that she must die from the anguish, a man walked up beside her and took her hand. It firmly enclosed hers making her feel

comforted and safe. They walked on in silence, her feet becoming lighter. She turned to look at the man who was like Harry but his face was softer and less tense. He looked at her with his blue eyes and then led her off the road into a green, morning landscape and towards a house that was like Harry's bungalow, only the walls were gone and it was made of the bougainvillea. She could see into the house, into which they entered. It was filled with sunlight. They sat at the shrunken dining table, holding hands across it.

She woke up to find Harry sitting on the bed beside her, his hands resting on either side of her. She could smell the warm hairiness of his arms and chest. And as in the dream she looked into his blue eyes, which looked back at her full of tender loving desire. She reached up to touch one of the eyes and as she did so it shrank back into his head; the eyelid closing over it. But it was still dear to her, so she touched it lightly and felt the deep hollow beneath the skin. She loved it and wanted to kiss it. Then he laid his full weight upon her and she took in a deep breath in satisfaction and happiness as she felt his long brown legs push in between hers.

Then, Wanei came into the room and stood beside them showing no surprise. They both looked at him and he beckoned to Harry, who followed him out immediately, leaving her alone. Again, she felt the great anguished sobs rising up out of her. She woke to a knocking on the door and she could not believe that she had not cried out aloud.

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Wanei served her coffee in the big empty living room. Then he left her alone in the house explaining that he had things to do elsewhere. He would put on the generator, he said, before it was dark. She sat beside the windows, which took up most of one wall, looking across the valley at the mountains, now black with gathering clouds. Two weeks ago she would have wanted to take a photograph but the country was so full of spectacular views, always dominated by mountains, that she no longer bothered: she could imagine her friends back home groaning as she showed them yet another photograph of mountains all looking the same, tamed by frames of white card. Anyway, she was beginning to find the ever-present, brooding mountains claustrophobic and oppressive: she was homesick for the bright, dry, wide horizons she had left down south, even more so now she was in this sombre house.

She finished her coffee and wanting to get out walked to the double doors that led onto the terrace. Rain was beginning to fall. The doors were locked so she wandered back to the patch of books stranded in the sad, empty spaces of the bookshelves that covered the opposite wall. They might tell her something about the man who lived in the house, if indeed he did live in it; perhaps he merely camped in its vacated spaces. The books were dominated by texts on coffee, on agriculture, on the country and surprisingly, on architecture; many were

older than their owner, falling to bits, mouldy and eaten by cockroaches. There was a children's book: 'Wonders of the Modern World'. She picked it out and read the inscription inside which said: 'To My Darling Boy from Mummy, Christmas 1953.' She had not thought of him being a little boy who had been loved unconditionally. She wondered who loved him now and if Mummy was still alive and why there was no Daddy. She put the book back and looked on: there were few novels and none were modern: Dickens, HG Wells, all the well-known nineteenth-century Russian writers and Edgar Wallace. Then the three Gulag books, the first well read, the others untouched.

She had entered the living room by a small lobby which linked it to the dining-room, to the rest of the sprawling house and to a pair of front doors, also locked and bolted. Almost incidentally, there was a narrow door in the corner of the lobby. Sally tried it and to her surprise it opened, taking her into a short passage with more doors, one of which was open. It led into a bedroom: an austere impersonal room, cool and white but not sad like the living room or hopeless like the dining room. The room's very austerity was comforting. Its large naked window looked out onto the garden, down over a wide sloping lawn, between healthy shrubberies, dipping to a sea of green coffee above which floated the branches of fine feathery trees, and then towards the mountains, an angry but real presence now through thickening rain. Thus, the fresh outside was brought into the room or rather, being in the room, Sally felt she was outside the house in the open which was, perversely, a reassuring refuge from the house. The large room was dominated by a wide, low bed dressed with a clean white sheet and one small flat pillow, the other bits and pieces in the room insignificant. A thin, folded, faded-grey blanket had been placed on the corner of the bed. The floor boards were bare.

Sally laid herself down on the clean white sheet, feeling entirely real and embodied for the first time during that strange day. She sighed and stretched, spreading her limbs out across the bed deliberately thinking of Harry in order, she hoped, to define him to herself better. But he remained an enigma; she could not remember what his face looked like, all she got was his long brown hairy legs and the sense of his indifference and distance. She turned over to smell the pillow and then worked over the entire surface of the bed sucking in deep hungry draughts of air. She got nothing but the scent of sun-bleached cotton and the sight of one tiny curly black hair. So she got up and looked into the cupboards, at the hanging garments, at a pair of shoes and at the folded clothes lying in neat piles on newspaper. She closed the cupboard doors quietly, went back to the bed and fell into a deep sleep.

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She had no memory, this time, of dreams. She could barely make out the dim room in which she lay. The incidental rain drops on the tin roof only made the silence of the house all around

her more dense and impenetrable. Men's voices carrying up the hill from the road below came from another time and country more memory than reality. If she, the ghost on the hill, called out, they would not hear. When she got up she was not sure if she'd brought her body with her and again the sense of unreality pervaded. She smoothed out the sheet nervously, expecting to find herself still lying on the bed. Have I been abandoned? I can't stay here, on his bed. I'd better get back to my own room. But on leaving the room she left what little light there was behind her, entering a thick darkness that was not only total but also unhelpful. She lost her bearings immediately, stooping under the weight of the darkness, one hand feeling the wall and the other held out to ward off the darkness itself and to protect her face from whatever might be lying in wait for her. Thus she worked her way hesitantly into the dining room. But when she left the comparative comfort of the wall to find the table the treacle-like darkness enveloped her completely. She bumped into the table, which had spread out to receive her earlier than expected, and screamed, surprising herself as she did it. She wanted to laugh for a moment. Instead she took a deep breath.

"Anyways, I've got it," she said to herself as she edged her way around the table towards, she hoped, her room, realising too late that it had no defining corners and she might go round it for ever, never knowing where the beginning was, or the end. She wanted to push herself away but the table was nonetheless more reassuring than the abyss beyond. She had an idea that lying on the table there was the body of a dead animal, an enormous animal, like the famous picture, swollen and putrefying. She was sure she could smell it and hear the flies buzzing. Is this how people go mad? She looked hard into the dark, hoping that there might be some reference but there was none and she felt the darkness that was no longer closing in on her but rather pulling her apart wanting to make her a part of it so that she would disappear altogether. Bring me back to life; bring me back to the light; let me see something. And in answer to her prayer, out of the dark came what looked like the disembodied head of a mummy. It moved towards her and she screamed as loudly as she could.

Immediately the thing stopped moving and let out a responding cry, the lights came on with the friendly burst of the generator, and she found herself standing beside her bedroom door facing a terrified man with a bandaged head. The two of them stared at each other for a few seconds and then burst into relieved laughter as Wanei ran into the room with the generator starter handle in his hand. At the same time Harry came into the room looking worried.

"Sorry I'm late," he said. "Are you alright Sally? Did I hear screaming? I had to sort out some pay problems. Has Wanei been looking after you?"

"I'm fine," she replied, "I was walking through the dark and I met your man here in his bandages. I thought he was a ghost. I screamed and I frightened him, just as much as he

frightened me.”

“Well,” said Harry, just failing to touch her, “Grin’s face is ugly enough to frighten anyone. But you could’ve seen a ghost. This hill used to be a cemetery, I’m told.” Then he pulled Wanei towards him holding him between himself and Sally: “But why weren’t the lights on, Wanei, you bugger?” He then gently placed the unresisting man on the floor at Sally’s feet placing his stocking foot on his chest to keep him down.

Wanei looked up at him smiling, squirming with obvious delight: “Grin didn’t fill up the fuel,” he said, “so I had to carry a jerry can all the way from the workshop.” He held on to Harry’s foot biting it gently and deliberately.

Grin had sat on a dining chair by this time and there began a friendly wrangle between the three men in the pidgin that Sally was unable to follow. The free intimacy impressed her and although it excluded her she was relieved to be in the real world again. But this time Harry remembered her. He put up his hand to stop the chatter, his foot still resting on Wanei: “Stop. We have a guest. Sally, go get ready for dinner,” he ordered, “while I kill this man here so’s we can eat him. I’ll meet you in the living room in about an hour. We’ll have a drink. There should be hot water, I hope, Wanei.” He looked at the grinning man on the floor pressing his foot down harder.

“Yes Sir, Yes Sir, Yes Sir.”

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The evening she spent with Harry was as relaxing and enjoyable as any she could remember. He needed to make no effort to entertain her, apparently enjoying her presence and glad to have a guest. When she entered the living room, dressed in her one smart dress, she noticed that he had arranged the corner of the room near the record player more intimately with a crude standard lamp, a couple of armchairs and a low table set up with drinks; some light classical music was playing and as he rose to greet her she noted that he was wearing a long-sleeved checked shirt and a tie which made him look young and defensive. It all made her feel grown-up.

He formally shook her hand and showed her to a chair.

“Gin or beer? It’s all I’ve got, I’m afraid.”

“Gin please.”

“I hope you like classical music, it’s also all I’ve got, there’s nothing modern; I’m a bit square.”

“It’s fine, is this Chopin?”

“No, a Schubert impromptu,” adding: “But it is like Chopin, this one. I’d never thought of it before, you’ve got a perceptive ear.”

She was flattered: “Do you like classical music?”

“I love it.”

“Why?” She wanted to hear his voice; she wanted to hear him talk.

“I don’t know,” he replied, “but when I hear this or a Beethoven violin sonata, something personal like that, I feel as if I am listening to the voice of God quite directly. It catches something too big for a mere man to write; it’s as if the composer was being used as an instrument by God to speak to us: the still quiet voice and all that.”

She did not want to break in and she let him continue.

“All mankind can understand this” – he waved at the speaker – “it’s universal, you just have to open your mind and listen and if we all listened then I really believe the world would be a better place. How can you hear music like this and then put someone in a gas chamber? I once came home to find the house in darkness with a Schubert mass blaring out and Wanei was lying on the floor listening to it. He was listening to God.”

She wanted to keep him going: “Do you think Schubert knew he was an instrument of God?”

“I don’t suppose so. He just wrote music: heaps of it and it’s all sublime. But he believed in God and in his time he would have had no doubts about God or the nature of God, unlike our hyper-educated selves. Listen to this.” He went to change the record. “Here’s a man, younger than me, knowing that he was dying and in the year of his death – he was only thirty-one – he writes this sublime music. How can it not have been God? Listen, it’s the opening of the credo in his last mass, I’ll switch off the lights.”

The music opened with a lightly bouncing sort of waltz and then a clear, strong, man’s voice joined it, then another so that the two dominated the orchestra but gently. A third voice joined, a woman’s, and the music was lovely in its cooperation of the voices, the violins just keeping them afloat. They were happy in the one-two-three rhythm, but poignantly happy like a farewell to life. And death itself seemed to be announced by the hushed chorus as if saying: ‘Do not be afraid but take this seriously because you will be meeting Me very soon.’ Sally thought about her own life.

The music stopped and immediately Harry jumped up, switched on the light and clapped his hands.

“Right, let’s go and eat, I’m famished.”

The dining room had been made more welcoming by having the lights switched off and by the use of candles, although they had to sit beside each other as if at a counter. There was a bottle of wine and the food was surprisingly good, served by Wanei, impressively got up in lap-lap and a necklace of pig’s tusks resting on his naked chest. He was pleasantly savage despite his slight build. Afterwards they played more music and Harry showed her photographs

of his life, explaining how he had been born in the country and how he spent his early years on a coastal plantation owned by his grandmother because his father had disappeared in the war. She did not press him for anything, letting him tell her what he wanted as he sat on the arm of her chair, his arm across its back as if symbolically protecting her, pointing to pictures in the album on her knees. She liked it and as Pettitt had foretold, Harry seemed like someone out of an earlier age.

The generator went off without warning and they were left in the dark. She hoped that he might bring his arm round her and kiss her: her lips parted and her head tipped back slightly in anticipation. But he got up immediately.

“Hang on, I’ll get the torch,” and a second later he was shining one in her face.

“Follow me,” he said, sounding like a scout master. He led her to her room.

“Here we are.” Again she wanted him to kiss her. She wanted him to kiss her and to feel his arms around her, just friendly-like, so that they could comfort one another, alone in the mouldy old house. But he pushed her into her room, said good night and was gone before she could even answer him.

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She could not sleep: her brain was alive with the music, the photographs and the man, lying on his own also, somewhere on the other side of the dining room. She got up, switched on her torch, left her room and crossed the dining room where the table was so solid, so large with its there-ness that the torchlight was lost and pathetic on its surface. The beam picked up the ludicrous, sagging old sideboard which she had not noticed before. One door was hanging open and she briefly saw a jumble of dining-room effects: a pile of plates, some egg cups, a toast rack and a salt and pepper set.

Harry’s door was closed but not locked. She opened it to a room filled with silver moonlight. The man, lying on the bed, stretched out on his back, was shimmering in the ghostly light. The garden outside was as clear, still and colourless as if carved out of ice but as she lay down on the bed, beside the man, moving his left leg in a little to give herself room, the garden disappeared so that all she could see was the jagged, black outline of the mountains and the stars above, faint in the moonlight.

She turned onto her side to look at his profile wanting to learn it. Then she rested her hand on his smooth forehead for a while before drawing down to his nose, touching its tip with her forefinger, and lightly stroking the centre of his face, his lips, just parted in breathing, his chin rough with stubble and then his throat. So lightly did she touch that only the tiniest bit of her fingertip touched his skin. She opened her hand flat on his right breast feeling the wiry hairs beneath her palm and then followed the hair line down to his navel and rested there

feeling its gentle rising and falling. She opened her hand wide and gently pressed, thinking of his foot upon Wanei.

The breathing stopped for a second with a sudden in-drawing of breath; the stomach-muscle tensed. She knew, without looking, that his eyes were wide open, staring at the mountains far away. He did not move an inch but he radiated hostility, roaring at her to leave him alone in the dead silence of the night. The ice-cold hands around her neck tightened as her body withered and shrank. Her dead body, she knew, would be flung into the middle of the table which would swallow her. She would become anti-matter in a black hole, an eternal nothing. He was willing her, not away, not dead, but out of existence. He wanted her to have never been.

Her hand lay dead on his stomach and when she dared to look at his face his eyes were closed again and his body was still; he barely breathed. She left his bed, without looking at him again, she walked back through the dining room, carefully avoiding the table, back to her own room where she curled up in the bed and squeezed the worthless tears out of her eyes.

