

ROMESH GUNESEKERA

Heaven's Edge

An Extract

Romesh Gunesequera's new novel will be published by Bloomsbury, London, in April 2002 (ISBN 0 7475 5813 2). This extract, pages 101-108, is published here by agreement.

The story is set in an unnamed location thirty years in the future, when a third-generation Londoner visits the country his grandfather came from.

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At dawn, the whole camp was on the move. Huts were dismantled, carts loaded, cattle harnessed. Jaz learned that the cry of the banshee-bird was believed to be a harbinger of catastrophe. The women said they had to move whenever the devil's voice was heard. Otherwise they'd be attacked.

'Where will they go?'

'They won't tell me. They think the bird is something to do with us. They are terrified of it.' Jaz kept wringing his hands. 'Even Ismail seems to think it has something to do with me.' His lips, his cheeks, his whole face drooped.

I clasped his hands in mine. 'I guess they have lived in terror all their lives. They can't help but suspect us.' I wished I could do something more for them, or for him.

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Kris was all ready to go; I led Jaz to our vehicle. We left with no farewell, no words, the wind low in the west.

I drove slowly, unsure of the veracity of old jungle omens. The road disappeared from time to time, but I followed Kris's directions and it reappeared in fits and starts under the wheels. The jungle with its fatherless children faded behind us

in twists of temporary oblivion. We travelled through a more arid zone until finally we reached the lush humps of the hill country. The temperature dropped. I stopped the cruiser and suggested we stretch our legs.

'Here?' Jaz shied away from the door like an animal that had been tricked too often.

I said I needed a break and leant back, putting my hands behind my head. The metal tag was still pinned to my ear and I began to fiddle with it. Much to my surprise it came away in my hand; I couldn't stop the smile spreading across my face. 'It's gone.'

'What?' Jaz took a sidelong look.

'It's come off.' I held up the tag like a Lilliputian trophy.

Kris grinned. For a moment he was almost charming. Then he was out of the vehicle, checking the headlamps, the radiator, the aerials.

Jaz leant over and examined the place where the tag had been. 'You'll have such a cute scar, Marc.'

The brief illusion of freedom, unshackled, was bliss. I hadn't realized how much the metal had been affecting me.

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Eldon often invoked the hill country when, as a child, I would help him stir the sweetener in his tea on the patio. 'Tcha, just like in the old days, no? A fine cup of tea, roses, trimmed lawns. The comfort of illusions.' Eldon would launch into a treatise on tea-production, even though for me, at that age, tea was only something textual — far down the alphabet — rather than a matter of taste. 'Two leaves and a bud, that's what they pick, you see. From bushes about the size of you. Tick, tick, tick.' The old man would pretend to pluck them off my head. 'Then it goes into this huge factory with a wonderful aroma, where the leaves are dried and roasted and rolled and packed off to tickle the fantasies of a global network of humpty-tum addicts.' It took me years to recognize the freshness of that vacuum-packed bouquet he was so fond of, and the reveries it induced, but by then the natural product was on the wane and Eldon's quirky disquisition quite out of date.

I wasn't too happy driving at dusk but Kris was keen that we press on. I switched the headlights on. As we swung around each hairpin bend I saw how the roots of stunted tea bushes gripped the earth. We came to a drive leading down to a factory that, in the fading light, looked as though it had been deserted for decades. Without waiting for Kris to say anything, I turned the cruiser in through the entrance.

'What's this?' Jaz demanded, rested and much more himself.

'A tea factory.'

'Oh, how divine. Happy tea?'

'No. Just tea.' He was incorrigible. I locked the wheel and the cruiser lit the front of the factory in full beam. The windows of the building all had grilles but most had rusted through.

'Just what?'

Kris jumped from the cruiser to check the place out.

I began to tell Jaz how tea had been the major export from the island until synthetics made traditional forms of tea production obsolete everywhere. How tea estates around the globe had turned into tourist museums until real-time museums themselves were superseded by more successful resorts concentrating solely on hedonism ...

Jaz seemed to be watching my mouth, more than listening. 'Like our underground Carnival?' he asked dreamily.

Jaz knew so little of what had happened in his own environment, to care so little for the past. I wished I could give him the bigger picture in some easy dose. 'You see, then they became a subject of organic archaeology, and the best of them were remoulded into evocation centres. That is until war made the air of some tea-hills too ghastly to breathe ...' As I was speaking I realized war may not have been the only scourge here; perhaps a reign of autocrats and blunderers coupled to an oligarchy of bloodsucking dorks, as Uva would put it, might have been the bigger curse.

Before I could go on Jaz nudged me, 'Hey, I do like that teapot.' There was a silhouette of a giant teapot at the far end of the factory. 'With a spout like that, it must be happy tea, sweetie.'

At this I lost my temper. I banged the heel of my hand on the steering wheel. 'No, no, no.' I slapped the dashboard. 'This is an ordinary tea factory. Out of commission. Dead. Don't you understand anything? Don't you care about anything?' I shouted at him. 'What the hell am I doing here, I don't know. I am tired out driving this shitty little wagon, trying and trying to give you something of your own miserable history to understand. All to no bloody avail. I just don't want any more sweetie this and darling that from you, sitting there, stroking yourself like God's own head is stuck in your pants. No more, you hear, no more.'

Jaz had recoiled at the outburst. He leaned towards me when I stopped and patted my shoulders gently. 'OK, there, there, simmer down. I was just trying to keep our spirits up, you know. That's all.'

I stared at him, feeling both sorry and upset. It was impossible to stay angry with him. He looked troubled; his flamboyant mask besieged by a thin fuzz of mannish bristles sprouting out of control. I thought again about how the last two days could not have been easy for him. But I was fed up too. I wanted to be alone. I wished I was back in my mousy flat, where I could bask in the comfort of drip-feed dreams and deep screen insulation. It was too late now. I was tired. 'We have to stay here tonight. I'm sorry. I need some quiet. I must sleep.' I didn't care if I sounded like a flatulent old grouch, I wanted to be still.

'Yes, swee...tea. Yes, you must.' He spotted Kris skulking around the building with his flashlight. 'Kris will discover a way in.' He perked up. 'He'll find us somewhere inside to sleep.'

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Kris identified the bunkhouse at the back of the factory and broke into it. I followed him in, brushing aside the cobwebs and gunny flakes. The room was empty. Jaz retreated at once into a corner. He dusted a bit of the floor and sat down with his torch. He started to file his nails using the tiny emery board he always carried with him. Kris offered round a packet of biscuits from the cruiser's emergency rations and then settled into a private meditation of his own, nodding to the rasp from Jaz's fingers. I bit into the digestive and let it slowly disintegrate in my mouth. Our plight had blunted my hunger. Jaz seemed too subdued now. I wanted to comfort him but didn't know how. What would become of him? He was not a cross-country trekker, whatever his origins. And Kris? Always so aloof. What would he do when we reached our destination? Uva, I realized, was the only one who could merge us into any kind of a community.

'This hill road will take us over the central mountains to Samandia, won't it, Kris?' I tried hard to stop my voice from betraying my concern.

Kris, fiddling with his butterfly knife on the other bunk, looked up as though thwarted or something, but then quickly regained his composure. Nothing else gave in his eyes. Watching him open and close the knife I wanted again to hold it; draw closer to her through the metal clone. 'She knows the way there, doesn't she?' I asked, seeking some reassurance. 'Uva?'

From the other side of the room Jaz stifled a yawn. 'Uhuh, sure she knows. She's always been one for the great outdoors.' He put away his nail-file. 'But a rainforest is not really for me, you know. I like a place with a little electricity. A shaving point at least. Some indoor life.' He let out a heavy sigh. 'Your Samandia is not exactly famous for its bars, you know.'

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The next morning the sun was a smoky grey. I made my way on to the main factory floor. The place was gutted. All the machines had been removed, but the interior still smelled of tea. It rose out of the floorboards and off the walls and seemed to stain the air with the odour of old ghosts.

In its heyday who would have been here? Sometimes it is so difficult to remember who belongs where, when. Or why? Whose was the labour, and whose the capital? There would have been blasts of hot air and the noise of dryers and rollers; wheels turning, the smell of burning, roasting tea. Narcotic sweat. There was a time when the sound of machines would have filled the air all around the hills. Factories in full swing. A steam train chugging up to the central hill towns. Eldon loved to recall those scenes, complete with sound effects: the clacking of wheels, the hoot of the engine, the constant gabble of conversations between strangers. It was a land full of talk, he would explain. 'Everyone always wanted to *place* everybody else. People would speak to bridge the gulf between them. We had hope, you know, in those days. We all shared the same vision, the same sense of order even if not all our wealth.'

Sanctimonious claptrap, I suppose, but for me that morning there was no sound in the factory, or outside, other than the sound of my own breath misting the air. No words, no birds. Nothing. It seemed as though there was no one else left in the world. Not that I wanted hordes; all I wanted was Uva. A life that was our own.

I tried to picture her journey. Would she have a vehicle? A cart? A bullock? Anything? Survival with no provisions, only a knife for a weapon, I feared would be impossible however close to the earth she might feel. For an instant then I even doubted if she had understood the plan that had seemed so clear to me. But she must have thought as I did: Samandia was our only hope. I remembered the scent of her body as though she had just passed by, leaving a spoor — an urgent pheromonal odour — for me to follow. But is our lake a pool of sorrow now? I see her curled up in a basket of leaves; her head turned in, her neck bared. My arms are empty; they encompass nothing but air, thinning with each passing moment, and yet I can feel the shape of her being from our last embrace: imperfect but strong. The warmth seeping from her leg curled around mine, the curve of her back, and the painlessness of giving in, falling into a new-found deep, dark past. If I could live my life again, I would wish it to be shorter. Let it end with her, quickly, rather than last so long — these interminable hours of her pain; my vigil, remembering, giving breath to our loosening lives.

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Jaz appeared. 'Cuppa tea?' He did an extravagant pirouette across the other end of the factory hall.

'You find some?'

Jaz beamed. 'There's this packet.' He held up a small green carton framed by decorative gold leaves. 'It's full of black stuff. Is it original toasted tea, do you think?'

My heart skipped. Eldon's tea.

'Kris will help me make it. I'll bring the tray out to the front.'

A tea tray?

*

I was just twelve. I wanted to be the first one up in the house. A low snore like the whistle of a turbine emanated from Eldon's room, but by the time I got down the stairs he was already shuffling out. 'Good morning,' he greeted me in a stage-whisper. I followed him to the kitchen which was filled with sunshine. He stood in the light, blinking, then shambled over to the sink and turned on the cold water tap. He let it pour into a plastic washing-up bowl which had streaks of red curry fat stuck to the rim. After the statutory two minutes, he filled the electric kettle and switched it on. He opened a Twinings tea caddy and picked two tea bags and put them into a white teapot. He didn't bother to warm it. 'I am not a slave to habit,' he mumbled more to himself than to me. 'In any case it is nearly summer,' he observed, as if it made a difference. The beauty of spring and summer for Eldon was being able to spend time in the garden, in the open air, making up for a winter indoors where the central heating dial was permanently fixed at 24 degrees Celsius. His skin would become drier than tissue paper, until the summer allowed it to heal again. Eldon said even the blood flowed around his body a little easier after the honeysuckle bloomed on Mayday. The robin was on the window sill, staring in. 'Hungry, are you?' Eldon lifted a microwave dish cover and picked at the fried belly pork that Cleo had saved from the previous night's dinner. He opened the side window and the robin hopped a couple of steps back, staring defiantly. Eldon placed a charred piece of rind on the window sill. The robin immediately hopped over and picked it up. After another quick stare at Eldon, it flew away, whirring. The kettle bubbled to a roar and clicked itself off, the water subsiding like a passing jet. For some reason I became conscious of his tremendous age then. I felt anxious watching him pour the hot water into the teapot. After a quick stir, he closed the lid. He got two cups and saucers out, making more of a clatter. 'This is my test,' he grinned at me. 'Carrying a tray with two cups, one for me and one for your grandma.' He had invested in extra large cups so that he could carry them half-full, with plenty of margin for spillage during the bumpy ride upstairs, and yet retain enough liquid for more than a single sip in bed. It meant the tray was substantially heavier. The weight should be helpful, he explained, for finding the centre of gravity, in keeping his hands steady. But that morning his wrists seemed to show the strain. He grumbled about having to do too many infuriating calculations to work out what was best: reduce the volume of tea and thereby the weight; walk faster and reduce the time but increase the risk of a missed step; take one cup at a time. Drink his first, then take Cleo hers, or vice versa. He looked for a moment like a harassed captain of an aircraft, constantly redistributing his payload for optimum lift in a journey from nowhere to nowhere.

I offered to carry it for him.

Eldon snapped back. 'No, no. I can manage. I could fly a jumbo once, you know.'

That afternoon, while I was still at school, he had been rushed to hospital. He had died before the ambulance had crossed the gates. In the coffin his hands were cold and rigid; unshakable. Unfairly steady.

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Jaz sipped the brew and screwed up his face in disgust. 'I can see why they've gone out of business.'

In front of us the hills formed a troop of bowed green heads. The once tightly curled tea bushes, slackened with neglect, seemed to be stretching out for freedom. I breathed in the cool air; the fragrance of the infusion, the blend of Uva and my grandfather, was like hope released. I saw Eldon restored with his cup and cigarette; a mist rising, warm and pungent, his eyes lighting up cheered by each bittersweet sip; his hands strong, puffed full of life once more. All the pointless exclamations and vacant phrases that he used to punctuate his days with — his *Ah ... Bliss ... I like a cup of strong tea* — slowly began to make a safe and meaningful world again. A lost world of small true affections. One I was just beginning to recover with Uva.