

ENTERTEXT

Coloured

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Abstract

'I first read *Small Island* as a book club read and instantly my inner academic (trained in postcolonial theory) was hovering over my shoulder on each page. Levy deals with issues of identity, colonialism, and race in her writing, proving as we've known for some time, that literature can be just as powerful a lens for understanding ourselves and others. It is in this spirit that I have written 'Coloured,' a short story about a British Indian man who finds himself misidentified by the Jim Crow laws while on a visit to Texas.'

—Mohanalakshmi Rajakumar

Coloured

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Ganesh walked in the intense Texas heat, wondering how on his first trip to America, the land of opportunity, he managed to miss the grand vistas of beaches and mountains shown on the BBC and instead only found dumpy cityscapes similar to the outskirts of Calcutta. The dry dust of Houston held little promise of fulfilling Ganesh's desire for the blue sparkling water of American beaches, warmer in the Gulf of Mexico than the frigid waters of the English Channel. No, locked by land, and doomed to boredom, he had one more night to suffer.

Ganesh had come to Houston with the address of the only person he knew on the North American continent, Simon O' Shea, a childhood friend who wasn't even American. Nor, as it turned out, was he here, in the country. Simon, in typical unpredictable fashion, was back in Ireland on a holiday.

'Look me up mate, if you ever leave this sorry rock,' Simon said. He tipped his hat to Ganesh. The last time he'd seen Simon, over two years ago, after graduation from Oxford. Bound for his next adventure, Simon left Ganesh standing on the train platform at Paddington Square, squinting against the fading sunlight. This was one of the first times since boarding school the two were separated. After breathing in the last of the train fumes, Ganesh loped home, ignoring the pitying gazes of the household, and he went straight to his room.

Of course, once there, the next easiest thing was to pull her out. His blunt fingernails searched for the discrete lip signaling the small compartment he'd carved in the rich sandalwood of the bed. Finding it, he used his pinky nail, the one that drew unending looks of disgust from his mother, to pry it open. Inside the inches of space hid his secret treasure. He lifted her out, a slip of the full woman, his redhead.

At first he'd been scandalized when Simon brought the books into his room, the pictures of fleshy naked women, hair of all different colors, their penetrating eyes meeting his own in the way an Indian woman never would, as if they knew the strange whirlpools swirling inside him. Simon laughed at his astounded expression and then the slow blush creeping up his light brown neck and over the tops of his ears.

'Look, there's heaps more to be had at home, mate. Heaps. Some even on the telly.' Simon snorted at Ganesh's trembling hands, and pushed his friend's shoulder with a meaty white palm, wiry hair sprouting from the knuckles, as his light blue eyes showed only merriment.

'Honestly mate, I know your parents have a girl picked out for you and everything, but before you settle down, they should let you go on last ride. See the world. Taste the world,' here Simon gave Ganesh a wink that tinged his face red.

Ganesh, unable to subdue the centuries old Brahmin blood running through his veins, couldn't keep the entire magazine Simon insisted was a present. So he selected his favorite woman, peeled her from between the slick pages, and placed her under his pillow at school. When time came to go home, guilt knocked loudly at the thought of his mother finding her, and so, apologetically, Ganesh separated his love from her considerable assets.

Sweat trickling down the inside of his collar, Ganesh sighed. Swearing and women aside, Simon had been a prize to know in school. All alone in the world the minute his parents set sail for the return journey to India, Ganesh had been mercilessly teased by the boys at prep school. His soap, scented with the lightest of sandalwood, drew wrinkled noses from the other boys and although Ganesh was a sure bet for a full meal on fish and chips night or kidney pie and liver, it wasn't until Simon's arrival and companionship that Ganesh made into the secret societies.

'Let's tie one on, old chap,' was Simon's favorite line, whether they were in the midst of studying, or unnecessary boredom, as he called it.

'Man wouldn't survive on his own,' Was another of Simon's sayings, 'without the power to tie 'em on and forget the rest.'

'Let's do tie one on,' Ganesh mutters to himself, glancing down either side of the street. Down to the left, a few slow moving men confirmed that Ganesh was not the only one affected by the heat. Their worn shirts and faces weren't unlike those in the John Wayne epics he would sneak out to while his parents thought he was at temple. The thing was he *would* go to the temple; after the stolen cinema, arriving in time for the priest to sprinkle holy water, smelling faintly of roses, on Ganesh's bent head, contrite amidst the other worshippers. He would receive the sacred ash mark, grey, and then the small red stripe with a contrite soul. His cupped palm accepted the *prasad*, the food blessed by Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth and the temple's patron deity, a blessing he later transferred a small banana leaf to take to his mother. In this way Ganesh felt no conflict between going to the temple and making time for his John Wayne movies. As he knew from watching Simon's juggling of daily Mass and neighborhood pubs, a smart bloke knew how to manage his time.

At the moment, however, the temple, his mother, and their blessings were far away from what he was about to do. A good thing, since his mother would have been horrified at the thought of hundreds of years of Brahmin lineage riding his shoulders into a Texas bar.

He headed for the nearest bar, swinging the door open with one hand. He had wanted the swinging doors of the movies, but it appeared there were none to be found. So he did the next best thing, strode into this bar, holding this torso straight so as to emerge in a broad muscular expanse like the hero of a Wayne epic. But the door was heavier than expected, much sturdier than the sandalwood exterior of his youth. The dark wood of this particular saloon turned, how unexpected! Inward. Ganesh crashed into it like a young cow.

Why would they put a handle on something you have to push? he wonders, trying to ignore the fact his arrival into the bar was reminiscent of a Western, only he was playing the role of the gawking newcomer, rather than the debonair stranger.

Nevertheless, entrance aside, he managed himself to a seat without further incident.

He smiled to the left and right to reassure people that he was all right, but was met with unblinking flat-lipped stares. He found it unsettling being the sole object of attention under these unflinching orbs of different colors. He wondered how John Wayne overcame the stymieing gazes. How could Ganesh draw life into the heavy stone that his heart had become? His nerve had sunk like ten tons to the bottom of his liver. Chin up, Ganesh reminded himself, chin up, swivel legs in, and order. You've seen this done a hundred times. He coughed into the stillness.

A sharp memory of Simon's voice, crisp, cool, and mocking, helped him regain his bearings. 'When you're in a pub, the world over, you're the boss.' Simon's voice came from over his shoulders, poking into Ganesh's hunched shoulders.

The two were out of school for the winter holiday, ostensibly to visit Simon's parents in Manchester, but they'd chosen to stay in their dormitory at university instead. Simon's parents, traveling on business, hadn't bothered to inquire why he'd elected to stay, and Ganesh's parents, holding implicit trust in their only son, hadn't reason to question his visit to his classmate's home. The two boys had full range of the empty hostel, save for the eldest proctor who kept to himself, a drunk, Simon cheerfully explained. Simon, set on finishing out Ganesh's 'proper education,' included pub etiquette in the course of the weekend's education.

'I'll have a gin and tonic,' Ganesh said, happy to hear firm tones rather than the quaking he felt in his vocal chords. The man behind the counter lifted an eyebrow. Ganesh began to doubt himself. Despite the room's dank interior he felt himself go hot under his arms. Gin and tonic? Was that in fact what he meant? Was it a woman's drink he'd just ordered? Brahma save me, he thought, ignoring the fact that his desire to drink American alcohol was the least likely of a Hindu god's concerns.

Ganesh felt the room contract around him. What would Wayne do right now? he thought, seeing the watching group of men in the corner shift their stance.

The man behind the counter said nothing, just flicked a small towel at the bar top where Ganesh was resting his arm. Ganesh blinked.

'I beg your pardon?' this time he heard the dreaded squeak. There were guffaws around the room. I've turned into my namesake, he thought, Ganesh, half man, half elephant. Why won't this man serve me? Ganesh looked across the counter into the bar mirror, half expecting to see an elephant head in place of the top half of his reflection. No, instead all that stared back at him were his own brown eyes, and, he realized, the eyes of everyone else in the room.

He wished the stone that had been his heart, now hiding in his liver, would stop beating so he could fall down dead.

Somehow she appeared, there was no other way to say it, she appeared at his elbow, and her hip perched on the lip of the counter, skirts full and blue. A blue so sharp it hurt his eyes, encasing a slim but flared waist traveling up to so much exposed white flesh, Ganesh felt a different kind of heat tingle his earlobes.

'There ain't nothing here for the likes of you, colored,' Ganesh heard someone mutter as he admired piles and piles of rich, red hair.

Never in real life had he seen red hair –

The flick of the cleaning towel in his face broke Ganesh's line of vision just as he caught sight of two of large blue eyes. They reminded him of the Queen's commissioned coronation crown, with sapphires rumored the size of robin's eggs.

'Colored?' Ganesh echoed, then sat up with a start.

Something in his mind, something that resisted the pull of the liquid blue he was dissolving into was working. Grandfather's stories of rough treatment at the hands of the British; when he couldn't ride in the same train car as the whites, when he couldn't apply to be a civil servant because all those jobs went to the colonials. A world he'd never had to experience, walking on certain sides of the street, not being allowed to travel, an India subject to the British crown, his family managing estates and never owning them. These legacies from another era tingled at the back of his neck.

Ganesh laughed, knowing the reason for the strange silence since the moment he'd walked into this establishment.

'I'm not colored, I'm English!'

His proclamation, his brisk tone, elicited no change in his observers.

'English?' the woman was the first to ask. He tilted his head toward her, imagining raising her hand to his lips, the back of her palm cool and fresh against the dryness of his mouth. Under her full attention, he could only nod.

'You from England then?'

'I moved there for university,' he said, feeling the inside of his palm itch. The palm knew what lie underneath those layers of cobalt blue skirt, knew the shape, color, and sweetness of it sitting only six inches away. 'From India,' the last rushed out in a sigh.

'What's it like?' She asked, the rims of her pupils expanding so that blue encroached on black.

'England? Or India?' He imagined her draped in a Bernassi sari, gold, purple and pink, soft silk rustling against her skin. Red was even more vibrant when not printed on paper.

'Either,' she said. Was it his imagination or was she learning her torso towards him?

'Indian. That's the same as colored to me,' the bartender's voice rumbled into Ganesh.

The red haired beauty at his side pouted.

'Now Jack, you stop it. This here's a man living in England. He's our guest. It's an honor sir,' she said flipping her arm at the elbow and presenting her hand to in a flourish Ganesh. He was so close to her he could see slight marks around her wrist, little puckers as if she'd been tied up.

Ganesh reached for her hand whose slender fingers were fluttering in front of his parted lips.

'Touch her and you'll die, dirty nigger,' the man, Jack evidently, was closer now, edging into Ganesh's eardrum. He saw the watching group on the move; they seeped toward him, eyes hooded.

'Jack!' she protested but let her hand drop to the counter. She glanced down at Ganesh and this time there was no mistaking the fact, she was inclining her head forward, as if she were tossing her hair over the crown of her head. It was a slight motion but Ganesh thought he saw purpose in those firm pupils.

She swung her crossed legs in a wide arc, and was down off the bar in a rustle of fabric. Underneath the sound of taffeta moving she hissed entreatingly, 'Get out of here.'

For a second he blinked, not sure if he heard the actual words or his mind was putting words into the fabric. She jostled his elbow as she swept past him and cut her eyes past his shoulder toward the door so that this time there was no mistaking the message. She was telling him to leave.

'Now Melba, don't get in stuff you don't understand,' Jack, who it turned out was a rather large man, said, as Ganesh stumbled down from his stool. His shoulders were massive, made for pulling the ox cart. Large club-like hands, unsuited for mixing drinks, hung at his thick waist.

I'm done for, Ganesh thought, knowing Simon's duck and weave boxing instructions were pathetically moot, as he watched a human semicircle form between him and door.

'Jack, sweetie, you don't want to harm this man, who's our guest, now do you?'

'Melba, I'm warning you. I saw him. He was about to touch you. Touch a white woman, that's all they wants. And who knows what would have happened next.'

'I think I seen him last night, hanging around the fire escape, waitin' to break into one of my girls' rooms.'

There was a collective growl at this declaration and Ganesh felt light headed. Trapped in a pub, no weapons, over a misunderstanding—this was the fate of his karma, for being a disobedient son and loose Brahmin.

'Oh, y'all stop it now. Why, I've never seen him before in my life,' she, whose name was Melba, laughed, full of rolling musical tones.

'Naw, it was him alright. Greasy bastards, reaching above their place. Try our women? Not in this life.'

'You heard they had a nigger over in Johnson County actually rape a woman.'

'Paul Hilbarn's wife. Whoever that coon was, he touched a man's wife, d'you believe it?'

This time the grumbling was accompanied by hands rubbing across mouths and pant legs.

'You cain't teach 'em. Nothin' can teach these bastards.'

'Nothin' but a good beating. All coons need that once in a while. To remind 'em of their place.'

'Or a good lynching,' the meat cleaver said, spitting on the ground.

Ganesh's blood ran cold and he felt an irresistible urge to relieve himself.

'Lynching?' Melba laughed again, this time twirling out into the center of the room, filling up the space between Ganesh and the men with the shifting flares of her skirt.

'Don't your boys have enough to do? Bored with me already?' she pouted, a fat red lip lolling toward her chin, her shoulders moving flexing, showing off all her rounded places.

'Melba, you move out the way,' an older man said, rubbing his knuckles together, over his worn blue jeans. His long sleeve shirt had seen better days since a few missing buttons had been replaced with safety pins.

'This here is men's business. You get upstairs until somebody's ready for you.' His hair was thinning so even the dim bar light reflected on his shiny forehead.

'Hugh's right, Miss Melba, you're new here, so you don't quite know the way of things. The men do the picking, you see? Not the girls,' Jack said.

'You know once we're done here with the coon, we'll explain everything to you, right proper,' the older worn looking man, Hugh, said.

Melba's mouth turned down into a frown and she shook her skirts and stomped a heeled foot against the wood floor so that it rang out.

'Well, I guess tonight's not the night after all.'

She made like she would flounce back toward Ganesh.

'Night for what?' Hugh asked. She glanced over her shoulder but then turned around, and shook her head.

'Night for what?'

She had her hands winding through her hair, braiding it, which was promising. She flashed a smile and cocked her head to one side.

'I know times are tight boys,' she said, fingers raking through her long locks. 'I know those wells aren't easy to find and many of you are a bit light in the pockets.'

'Melba,' Jack said, his voice sounding feral, a cat searching for its prey.

'Tonight I'm feeling a teensy bit wild,' Melba said.

'Maybe like I could do my routine, right here on the bar, like I used to do, before the country tightened up its rules on us dancing girls,' she pouted.

Several men, Hugh and Jack in front, moved forward, but not toward him, Ganesh realized.

Toward the white, white shoulders in front of him.

The shoulders and torso rising out the taffeta dress, more flesh emerging by the second.

'One condition.'

They were staring transfixed, Ganesh included, as the ivory fingers roamed down the length of her waist to flip up the edges of her skirt. He could see the back curve of her leg, and was shocked to see patterned black stockings criss-crossing up her legs but stopping at her thigh.

The stillness of the moment surrounded the rolling of those long, long tresses until they came to rest on top of her head. Now everywhere the eye looked there was white, white.

'One condition,' she said. Her hands paused at the front laces of her gown.

They took a collective swallow.

'You let him go.'

All of sudden, the energy in the room snapped back to Ganesh. Across a perfectly rounded valley lay his escape. And suddenly the world outside the pub was the last thing on his mind.

'Nigger lover,' Hugh hissed. The words exploded in the small bar. Hugh, surprisingly meaty for his age lunged forward to grab Melba. She screamed and halted mid-strip routine as Jack and a few others began to close in around her.

Ganesh froze, even though he may have gotten out undetected. They were about to desecrate his love before his eyes. He counted their number.

Ten.

Ganesh stepped forward.

Melba retreated until she bumped his chest. She whirled, spinning to face him, but instead of relief in her eyes, he saw panic.

'Idiot,' she hissed, this time without affection.

Idiot?

But he was going to give his life to save her.

'Run,' she screamed, shoving him forward. Ganesh looked down and saw blood where she had so recently stood. Then she bolted past him toward the door, but Jack grabbed her by the hair and jerked her to the floor.

The last vision he had of his love, before feeling the cool night air, was of her brilliant hair fanned around her, spreading around her, on the floor. Red was the color he saw as he ran. Red, red, red; the night was still and dark before him, a deep black, deep enough to be violet. And the moon was an ivory almond barely hanging in the sky.