

the sky-green blues

TANITH LEE

Here's perhaps one of the strangest stories you're likely to read this year, one that takes you to a world where nothing is what it seems for a story that goes no place that you'd expect it to take you...

Tanith Lee is one of the best-known and most prolific of modern fantasists, with more than sixty books to her credit, including (among many others) The Birthgrave, Drinking Sapphire Wine, Don't Bite the Sun, Night's Master, The Storm Lord, Sung in Shadow, Volkhavaar, Anackire, Night's Sorceries, Black Unicorn, Days of Grass, The Blood of Roses, Vivia, Reigning Cats and Dogs, When the Lights Go Out, Elephantasm, and The Gods Are Thirsty, and the collections Tamastara, The Gorgon, Dreams of Dark and Light, Nightshades, and The Forests of Night. Her short story "The Gorgon" won her a World Fantasy Award in 1983, her short story "Elle Est Trois (La Mori)" won her another World Fantasy Award in 1984, and her brilliant collection of retold folk tales, Red as Blood, was also a finalist that year (in the Best Collection category). Her most recent book is a new novel, Faces Under Water, and forthcoming are new novels St. Fire, Mortal Suns, and The Immortal Moon. Her stories have appeared in our First, Second, Fourth, and Sixteenth Annual Collections. She lives with her husband and two cats in the south of England.

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here, the nights were always green. He had filled the garden with lamps of waxed paper, some on poles, some hanging from the boughs of trees. Inside each one was a candle. The manservant trimmed, replaced, lit them, at sunset, going up and down the narrow paths, between the palms and the bamboos, the huge rhododendrons and cunibaia. As light faded from the sky, instead the garden filled with it, as if it had sucked the light down, the reason for night. And in the darkness, as the crickets remorselessly

scratched, the garden pulsed green as jade.

A great moth, with the wing-span of a sparrow, fluttered through the garden, trying to immolate itself in a lamp, any lamp.

“The aperture in these lamps is too small for the big moths to penetrate,” he said with satisfaction.

He liked that, cheating a moth of its suicide.

In the verandah, the single oil lamp made his face very yellow. He was old, about 70, or older, carved with wrinkles, a life’s work. His name was Lohno Tezmaine.

“You’re cruel,” I remarked.

“Why? Because I won’t let the moth kill itself? Yes, Frances, that’s probably true.”

But it was more than that. The carving of his face showed his cruelty. It was cruelty, his 70 or more years of cruel jeers and patronizing smiles and frowns, that had formed its present shape.

I thought, briefly, what would mine show, if I lived so long? Indolence, perhaps, indecision.

But he said, suddenly, “Laitel says the enemy are almost here. Tomorrow, the next day.”

Laitel was the manservant. He heard things when he went shopping in the market for rice, roots, meat and fruit, and other staples of Lohno’s house.

“What will you do?” I asked.

“Nothing. What can I do?”

“Get away. Surely you could.”

“You mean my machine? But where would I go?”

“The coast?” I suggested.

He did not reply.

We were silent. Then he said, "I take it you have no plans to go, yourself."

"I don't know yet. I'm supposed to stay, I promised I would. That is, as long as you do. But when it comes to the point... I don't know."

"As a woman, you're in more danger. At the worst they'll only kill me. I mean, even if they torture me, I haven't much stamina. Soon over. But you're young."

"Forty," I said idly. "Forty-one next month."

"Young enough," he said. "And we've heard the stories of what they do with females. Alien females."

"Yes. I'll run away then."

"Then should you leave tonight?"

His face was beaky and the cruel lines sharpened. As with the moth, he didn't like to let me have my death.

"No. That isn't necessary."

"Do you want the machine?" he asked abruptly. Was this sinister, this offer?

"I wouldn't be able to drive it."

"Laitel could show you."

"I'm not very good with new mechanical things."

"It would get you to the coast. That's where the airlift will be. If there is one."

"I'd rather not." Reluctantly I added, "Thank you."

He raised the crystal bottle and poured another pequa for himself, and next for me.

"Cheers," said Lohno.

We drank, and somewhere at the garden's end, where the cultivated wilderness dropped down in stony levels to the thin surface waters and the glutinous mudtrees of the swamp, a gurracula gave its long hoarse cry.

"Out hunting," he said. "When the enemy come in things will be easier for it. They lose their skills, you know," he added to me, "creatures, when there are wars. A buffet's laid on for them of the dead. They get lazy. But then I've heard the enemy shoot scavengers."

When I was on the outer stair going up to the roof, I looked down, and glimpsed the gurracula, at the garden's end. Its long pale body, half lamplit and freckled by shadows, was nosing in Lohno's rubbish tip. Presently it pulled out a curious thing that looked like a paperbound book. Either Lohno or Laitel or some eccentric neighbour must have flung it there. With this in its jaws the gurracula loped away, its eyes gleaming. It appeared mindless; ugly and beautiful at the same moment. Animals often look like that to me. And, I confess, other races.

Laitel, for example, with his long eyes, the pupil and iris indistinguishable and black, the inner, bluish lid. His face was a perfect oval, feminine in its hairless smoothness. As with many of his people, his tongue was black, and rough as a cat's. He was slightly shorter than I, slim and small-boned, his skin so white that, when I put my hand upon it, every time I felt a transgressor.

Looking at Laitel, all Laitel's race, I could see no soul in them. Or do I mean, no *physical* soul, the personality.

Despite, or because of that, we had been having sex together almost every night.

My apartment was on the roof, an old summer-house of bamboo, with waxed paper shutters rolled up to let in the humid and unmoving air.

I went in and pushed my things about on the table. Then I sat on the sofa and tried the mobex. Nothing came through but static. The firm, excited voices which had asked me if I would stay to see the fall of the city were blocked off from me by some noiseless electric storm high above, or some powerful ray discharged across the sea. It was possible my communicating link would not clear in time to allow me to deliver a report. I would have to record it, then. Sometime they would be able to access this recording, even if, by then, the mobex were a kilometre down in the swamp, and I in some coffle of women, chained at the ankle, and driven southward, in service to the soldiers of the enemy.

Below, the yellow oil-light shifted from the verandah. A patch of darkness formed there, intensifying the liquid jades of the garden.

When I came to the house, to interview Lohno Tezmaine, I had known there would be danger. But I'd wanted to see the city. In the first three or four days, in the mornings before Lohno got out of bed, I'd walked about, or taken the hutshas, pulled by ponies, by men, women or even teams of six children — eight were needed for the heavier traveller. So I saw, and photexed, the old mansions of Flower Street, six kilometres of them, like ice sculptures, and the lush gardens with their blazing winter flowers. Also the temples in Que Square, and the foun-tain, with its columns and serpents, the water playing rather dry and brown that day, but people still drinking from it. I had photexed the Duval Library, the Earth-light Hotel and the Monument to Silence. I did spend one morning in the jush, photexing the shacks and huts, the tin roofs jolly with rust from summer rains, the dyeworks where the swamp is poison-iris-colour. But you see such things every-where. That was only duty.

Lohno never got up till lunch. Lunch was his first meal. Over scores of little dishes — shoots and beans fried in peanut oil, salt mangoes, scrambled eggs and pig meat, rice, bread, jam, coffee, I placed questions before him. Sometimes he answered them.

Everything was nothing to Lohno. He had done so much. His only goal seemed to be this latent intent one — of preventing others from experiencing anything. On the first morning he had said, in answer to my enquiry about his daughter, whether he sheltered her so severely because he feared his rivals would harm her, that he was “good at” living, but she had seemed not to be. He added that most of us, of all races and types, seemed to have “no notion of *how* to be alive.” And so we were best protected from the state.

“Can you clarify that a little?” I had asked.

“Take yourself,” he said at once. He was like a lot of interviewees, I thought, eager to turn the tables at once and humiliatingly get *my* story. But it wasn't that. “Here you are, millions of miles from home, out on a limb. War all around us. A hostile force advancing to take this city. Everything precarious. Why did you come?”

“To talk to you.”

“But why? Don't tell me there's still any interest in me. There shouldn't

be. I haven't done anything for 30 years."

"Perhaps that's why."

He ignored that. "You came here because you wanted to experience something. A new thing. And that is how most of you are. Either you hide from life or you leap and dive into life. But life is a deep river with a cloudy bottom. There may be carnivorous beasts, venomous fish and rocks, there, under the surface."

"I concede that."

"Do you? This is what I mean. You are all of you amateurs at living."

I said, reasonably I thought, "Then, speaking as a life-professional, how would you do it? What would you do?"

He had laughed. "It's like any creative art. It isn't to be taught. Either the gift is there, or it isn't."

Lohno's daughter, he went on to say, had anyway escaped his protection. She had run off with a gangster, and lived in a mean apartment somewhere, bearing him babies. She had had her tongue pierced, he said. And his cruelty-construct face leered.

"That's significant?"

"Think about it."

"I have. The salience eludes me."

He condescended to ask, "For what is a tongue used?"

"To talk, to eat. In sex."

"And it has no bone, does it. But she's put something rigid and hard right through its softness."

I shook my head. "Mr Tezmaine —"

"Lohno, I told you."

"Lohno. I still don't—"

Then he laughed again. "Forget it."

When I had been with him, the first days, I had the urge always, afterwards, to take a shower. That passed. It was a strange reaction. He was perfectly clean, physically, and I preferred to shower first or last thing in the day.

I was in the shower of the summer-house now, when Laitel came into the room.

He made no noise at all, and by that, somehow, I heard him. And then he switched on the ceiling fan, and I heard that.

When I came out in my robe, he was turning down the sheet on my camp-bed. He had put a dish of fruit on the table. There was always some excuse to come up here, in case I didn't welcome him, I thought, or he decided against it.

The fan made its insectile noise, rather like the blades of the VTOs which would rescue everyone at the coastal pick-up. Or so I had been told.

"Do you have what you want for the night?" asked Laitel.

"Yes. Thanks for the fruit. Is the fan all right?"

"The generator's recharged. Leave it on if you wish."

Apart from the great moths, one of which, or the same one as before, was again sailing anxiously about the green garden, few insects survived in the city. Fallout from communication rays, supposedly harmless to people, had polished most of them off, even most of the striped ants.

I went over to Laitel, leaned and kissed him lightly. We walked to the bed, discarded our garments and lay down.

This sex was always pleasant, easy and rhythmic, without demanding excitement or any conclusion. Neither of us experienced orgasm. We caressed and moved, comfortably slotted together, until we grew bored, then separating, I with a mild sense of something achieved. Satisfied. If he was, I don't know. I thought I had made it apparent I would do what he needed to achieve orgasm, but he too seemed indifferent. Merely we valued the mutual message of our bodies. I suspected that, for Laitel, the climax of the act was of use only with his own kind, and in the interests of procreation.

I made tea for us on the battery hot-plate. It was nice to do something for him. All day and sometimes during the night, he had to wait on Lohno, and now too on me.

We drank the tea.

“Did he throw a book out for the rubbish?” I asked. I wasn’t really interested. But Laitel said, “Yes. One of his own. Now and then he throws one away.”

“I suppose it won’t matter. There are copies of all his books in Optimum, all available on disc.”

“No, it won’t matter.”

“Why does he do it?”

Laitel said, expressionless as he always was, “He enjoys to.”

When Laitel left me, I recorded this fact with the others.

I had asked Laitel, during our first time alone, what he thought of Lohno Tezmaine. Laitel said, “I serve him.”

Although the chip one gets to wear now, in the flesh of the right arm, enables one to understand and be understood in any language, sometimes there are little discrepancies.

“You mean, as his servant.”

“His servant.” Laitel’s voice was not a mask, however. Again, I detected some-thing. I said, “Does he — excuse me, but has he slept with you?”

“Oh no. I don’t mean that.”

We got no further. It had been as enigmatic as with Tezmaine.

Tonight, before Laitel left me, and I recorded his comment on the book, I had asked the more relevant thing.

“Laitel, if the enemy break through, if the city falls — “

“They will. Yes?”

“What will you do?”

“What can I do?” Lohno’s answer. Exactly.

“Come on, Laitel. It’s going to be dangerous. They’ll be merciless to you — won’t they, the enemy?”

“I think so.”

“Do you have a family here?”

“No.” He added, “I was born in the jush. Not wanted.”

“Then you should” —now I spoke Tezmaine’s lines — “get away.”

“I have no papers, Frances.”

“I can print you up some good false ones on the mobex. Enough to pass. Get you to the coast.” His black eyes glanced at me. Beautiful, ugly, soulless. Or solely soul. “Lohno said you know how to drive the machine.”

“I have done so, sometimes, for him.”

“Then why don’t you take it, and go? He isn’t afraid. I don’t think he’d bother if you went. You’d stand a chance, wouldn’t you?”

Beyond the city were the swamps, the secret rivers, mudtrees and boyuns, enor-mous tracts of jungle packaged over the ruins of haunted temples, where white monkeys and coies were the shrieking ghosts.

“But the airlift,” he said coolly, “it’s for your kind, Frances. Aliens who are wanting to escape.”

“It’s for whoever they can squeeze in the transports. Believe me, Laitel, I’ve seen this kind of thing before. And if I give you papers, you’ll be fine.”

“You,” he said.

I took him to mean, why not me.

“My people promised to pick me up. They said me and Lohno,

actually, that was part of the deal. He'd give us the interview and we'd get him out. But he won't discuss that—gave the interview anyway — pretends I never offered it. He doesn't care. Or he fancies the experience of the Vae Victis."

"Will your people come?"

I thought about it. "Maybe. They usually have in the past. But I should have checked tonight, and the intercom is out."

That was all we said.

When Laitel left, after I'd recorded the thing about the book, I lay under the sheet and watched the ceiling fan.

It occurred to me I might be stranded here. I wasn't afraid. I didn't believe any real harm could come to me. It never had, and I had been in many situations of peril. Somehow there was always an escape clause, a stroke of luck.

Suddenly, out beyond the raised paper shutters, a violent white flare exploded in the sky. Then came a wooden bang, which reverberated oddly, making the light furniture in the summer-house rock.

This had happened 15 times before, once for every night I had been here. They were only signal rockets, put up at irregular hours to disturb the sleep of the city. Reminders from the enemy that they were almost here.

The city would fall like an angel, its stones, gardens, and the accretions of all the aliens who had possessed it and hung on it their jewellery of buildings and fountains, streets and malls. In the firelight, after the close-range bombing began and ended, the true citizens would suffer only one more invasion. I visualized long lines of people driven away before the conqueror, like channels of water running from a tap.

I tried the mobex one last time, got static, recorded my thoughts in a sort of embarrassment, these neatly quilted phrases from the handbook of an articulate eyewitness.

* * * *

In the very late mornings, sometimes a local girl came to the house, bringing garlands of white flowers and long-stemmed scented yasti. She would go straight in to Lohno's bedroom on the ground floor, but come out

again after only a few minutes. In the verandah she would stand counting coins, then arrange some flowers about the lunch table.

That day she came. I was leaning on the roof-rail, drying my hair. I watched her go in, and then, after less than 50 seconds, come hurrying back.

Looking over, I saw her stop still, in the garden just below the verandah, as if undecided. The sunlight shone on her colourless hair. Then she stared straight up at me. The blue inner lids were shut fast over her eyes, a thing that happens to Laitel's race only in extreme agitation or grief. Next second, clutching her flowers, she ran away along the path and vanished in the rhododendrons.

I hesitated. Then I went down. Laitel was away, I thought, still at the market. These excursions had begun to take much longer. As the enemy drew nearer and more near, less food came in from the surrounding countryside, and fewer people remained to sell it.

The verandah kept its morning shadow, only in the afternoon did full sun reach it. The girl had dropped a single yasti there on the floor, as if leaving us a gift.

Inside, the passage, marble-tiled, swept twice daily by Laitel, gleamed in green sunlight. I passed the double bamboo doors of the dining room and came to the carved palmwood door that marked Lohno's room.

He had never invited me in here. I had never been in the room, though I'd glimpsed it. Now the door stood ajar, something that normally never happened until he had risen, leaving the bed gaping for Laitel to tidy.

It was a white room, a dull sallow faded white. He'd never used blinds but curtains of thin white silk, parchment colour now. Things were strewn about, as I'd seen before, glancing in as I passed, a leather-bound book on the floor, others over a straw chair. A water bottle stood by the bed and Lohno Tezmaine was stretched across the mattress. There had been insect-netting, and he had left it hanging there, though unclosed. It looked like cobwebs somehow. Or a spider's web, in which he lay.

When I bent over him I saw what I expected. He was dead. Feeling for a pulse, although I did so, was superfluous, and going to fetch the mobex to check for life signs would be futile. The syringe lay under his right hand.

He was smiling. There might be a lot of reasons for that, the fake amusement of setting rigour, or something in the drug he had used which made him feel good as it finished him. I was inclined to think, though, that he was pleased with himself. A life-professional would assume he knew the perfect moment to die.

His note was under a glass with some dregs of pequa in it. He had written in an obscure picture script that only the chip made me able to read—Laitel, very likely, wouldn't have made it out.

No reason for you to hang about here now, is there? he had written. Take the machine and go. Use the old road. Laitel knows. So long, for now. L.

When I turned, Laitel was in the doorway. If he felt anything, I'd never be sure.

"Of course, he's dead," I announced.

Laitel came and looked. He pointed to the syringe. "He kept it ready. He showed me once. He said, Don't be astonished, one morning."

We left him there, shut the door, and walked back out to the verandah. A horrible whistling note had begun over the city. They were testing the sirens as, during the last two or three days, they had sometimes done, at midday and late in the afternoon. Birds in the garden screamed, fell silent, and abruptly flew off with great clappings of wings.

"I suppose that's it," I said. "Could you read his note?"

"No."

"But you can guess what it said?"

Laitel spoke slowly. "I'm to take the money and papers in his safe. Then drive the machine along the old road through the swamp, to the old wall."

"I see."

The sirens shut off. The quiet was a relief. Somewhere a frog croaked and then there was another noise.

Instinctively we looked up, beyond the verandah to the heat-drained emerald of the sky. There was nothing to see, but the droning rushing sound grew insis-tently louder.

“That wasn’t a practice,” I managed to say before the concussion blasted out. The flash was only a flicker, simultaneous. The earth trembled.

Somewhere not too near, faint cries, a temple bell ringing.

We waited. Nothing else happened, and the cries gradually diminished, the bell stopped.

“That sounded like the commercial area. It was a Sing rocket,” I said. “Popular everywhere.” Suddenly I laughed. To my surprise I seemed very slightly hysterical. “I could do with a bloody drink.”

Laitel reached out as if to take my hand. His touch would be cool and calming, for a moment.

“Everything’s happening at once,” I said.

But I had evaded, withdrawn my own hand, and now ran along the verandah, up the stair to the roof.

The mobex gave me an immediate clear connection.

“Hi, Frances. What’s the news?”

I told them.

“You don’t say? Then I guess you’d like to leave ...” A patch of static came, not really interrupting the hiatus.

I waited.

The man’s voice said, “Tricky. Storms. How long before they get to you? Our reports give a unit, ten days even.”

“No, less. It could even be today. A rocket just came down. They fire a few Sings, don’t they, to get us in the mood. Then they march in or chute down. Both.”

“Yes. The city government’s fled. Guess you know. That was two days ago.”

“I know.”

“Night pick-up. Private VTO, usual stuff. Nice. Listen, Frances, keep the line open.”

Over the summer-house, sudden, with no warning, rushed a vast roaring pter-odactyl. Instinctively I threw myself flat. The detonation came next moment with a flash like lightning. The house, everything, shook. Things cascaded from the table. The chronic untidiness of war.

“That was another. Quite close.”

“Heard it, Frances. Keep the line open. Speak to you soon.”

The mobex went silent, save for recurring patches of static.

No sirens now. They hadn't bothered. I crouched by the camp-bed, while three more rockets tore over, and three more thunders opened the city.

Finally time passed with nothing. Crickets had started again. I got up. The sky was bruised. Smoke from the bombardment rose in three or four thick columns beyond the palms and sul trees that shielded the front of Lohno's house. Screams and wails still rose irregularly up in it, and long glissandi of tumbling glass.

I took the mobex with me when I went down, and dumped it on a straw chair in the verandah. Laitel was putting dishes on the table, rice and spinach, slivers of meat in sauce, the big bottle of Pinot Greve Lohno always had at lunch, in a cooler.

After a moment, Laitel said, “They will come?”

“I don't know. Yes. I'm not sure.”

I sat down, picked up my napkin, looked at the food.

Laitel poured a glass of wine for me.

“Please sit down, Laitel.” He looked at me. “Oh sit down. He's dead. The city's being bombed. Have some fucking lunch with me.”

He sat and ate, and drank a little wine. It seemed familiar, as if I had

somewhere seen a photograph of him eating at this table, and so wondered if he had, with Lohno, quite often, before I arrived.

Although I drank two or three glasses of the wine, it made little impression on me. Laitel rose and went into the house, and returned after ten minutes with coffee. He served me, then sat again. He said, "A boy came to the front verandah just now. He had a dead aie bird. He said it was killed when a rocket hit one of the gardens." I looked at Laitel, not comprehending. "He said we could have it, for food. No payment necessary."

"So?"

"He was staring all the time into the house, to see who is here. We are only two or three persons. He will tell others, and they'll come back."

"I see. Looters."

"Taking what they can, before the enemy come. And they will know about you."

I glanced at the mobex, half reached out for it, and let my hand fall.

Over Lohno's walls and trees, a new dim sound was beginning to well through the city. It was febrile, almost festive. I'd heard such noises before. I pictured the crowds on Flower Street, windows that had survived the Sings, smashing.

"Will you take the machine, Laitel?"

"Yes. I've seen the papers in the safe. They will do."

"Can I come with you?"

"Yes."

I got up. "Let me put a couple of things together."

"Don't be in a great hurry," he said. "They won't come back until it's cooler. Maybe not till sunset. I'll see to the machine."

It didn't occur to me he would go without me. I don't know why not. What was there between us? The palest sex and a communication chip.

As I stuffed my bag I thought of the flower girl. I was sorry for her. I wondered if Laitel were washing the lunch dishes, the glasses, carefully by hand as he usually did, but when I came back down, they were still on the table, and a tiny contingent of ants had appeared, crawling over the plates, drowning in the last centimetres of wine.

I picked up the mobex: static issued from it. I spoke my plans into the recorder-relay, the plan of Lohno's machine and the journey to the coast, then turned it off. I knew they wouldn't have come.

Over the sky a narrow flying craft leisurely drifted. It might have been a spy-plane of the city, but I thought not. Enemy reconnaissance. The sun was passing over and the shadows lengthening out from the cunibaias, where lemasets were playing now, the silvery boughs dipping and swaying as they sprang.

Laitel appeared below. "We'll go now, if you're ready."

"Yes."

He had nothing with him. Perhaps he had nothing of his own, wanted nothing that wasn't his own. But he said, "The machine is primed. I've loaded it up with food, and gas. I've put Lohno's gun into the compartment."

We walked along the narrow garden paths, threading between the waxed-paper candle lamps, which tonight nobody would light, the moths searching in vain for death. Death instead would be in Lohno's bedroom, with tiny trickles of ants foraging over him. Or the gurricula might get in at a window.

Or the house, ransacked by the neighbors, the boy with the aie bird, might be burning, so giving the moths a chance after all.

Out of its port, the machine squatted below the stone levels, on the edge of the old road where the swamp began. It was camouflage green, sky green and green-tawny, like the jungle-forest, the mudtrees and boyuns and palms. It had a look of power, armoured, muscular and big-snouted like some beast. This vehicle had been regularly cared for, oiled and exercised, its batteries charged and fed. Not wild, only savage, then, an expensive dray animal.

I went up the metal ladder and swung into the cab. Laitel took the driver's seat. He closed the machine's transparent armoured lid.

The house was invisible from here. A great quiet, a *Sunday* quiet, had descended over the city, which might only have been resting, dozing after an opulent family meal. Starlings flickered across the sky, two lemasets cackled in a giant rhododendron.

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Before I came to the city, since I hadn't read any of Lohno Tezmaine's books, I had to use a preprogrammed tutor to speak them over to me in sleep. Following these sessions, consciously I hadn't at first remembered anything, though my sleep had been peppered with dislocated dreams. Gradually the input settled. When it came to the interviews with him, I had enough to ask the right questions. Nev-ertheless I was fairly sure he suspected my method. Had he despised me? Probably not. He was indifferent.

As we went deeper into the jungle, only then, did I begin to see Lohno's books, as it were, made flesh. Obviously, the ones he'd written after he came to live in the city.

On my arrival I hadn't seen much, only a map-like image unfolding under me just before the swift glide-down to the airstrip. A modern subway capsule had run me into the city—Europeans built it, this subway, the Grande Metrolux. They'd been proud of it once, like their library and the handful of mansions in period style, which they planted on Flower Street. But everyone had left markers there, Rus, Statesiders, Afro-Celt, Exastra.

Once war had washed over, destroying and processing small, the jungle itself would lay claim to the city, and then the city would go back to being like the rest, like the landscape we had now entered.

At first the old road coiled through the swamp, and then came a shanty town, the tin roofs and huts like the jush, but better, worse, broken up by trees and water and bubbling marshes railed with clacking reeds. The old wall carved across everything, ruined, and ancient almost as prehistory. Strong lemon light of a dying afternoon slid on the stones as the machine, oblivious, bumped through a gap. Our treads made nothing of the little shards and large smoothed pebbles. A tur-quoise fisher-bird stood sentinel by a pool, staring at us as we left the city behind and entered the funnel of the forest.

At first, impressive, the huge flags of apparently tarnished, heavy bronze, the leaves of plantain and gigantic, full-grown boyun. Flags indeed, banners sweeping and scraping on the machine's dome. Towering trees

roped with lianas that would eventually strangle and pull them down. In flights of firework brilliance, parakeets went spraying up between, to be lost in the higher thinner canopy, where still, for about half an hour, glimpses of sky were visible, luminous yet flat-looking, like *trompe Voeil*, a painted ceiling.

Then the overhead vista closed.

The machine ploughed on without pause, breaking through tender angelica creepers, snapping the boughs of cunibaia and black fig. Here and there, the automatics, meeting tougher growth, produced a whirl of blades and sliced vegetation. Green blood sprayed on the front screen of the dome, and was instantly wiped away.

Shade had deepened to the night-day of the jungle-forest. But hours had passed. Soon true night would come. Darkness.

“After dark we’d better stop, Laitel, had we?”

“Yes, I think so. Certainly tonight.”

The machine lights were vital. Their heat if not their beam might be detectable by anything watching from the sky. How dedicated the enemy were to detaining all peoples in the city I didn’t know. Perhaps not very. With me, an alien, they had no real quarrel. But I was on my own, and travelling with one of the enemy’s enemies.

It seemed such an easy rule to follow, to turn off the machine once night came, crawl through into the rear compartment and sleep until sunrise. Not even any awkwardness. We had slept together, in both senses, many times already.

Claustrophobic, though, the jungle-forest. And then, every so often, a sort of agoraphobia —a break in the forest with a view of cascading rock and leaning, half-falling trunks, bamboos like waterfalls of liquid fabric, some defile far below, twice with a tribe of blond monkeys, their shouts of alarm clearly audible above the machine’s low humming, the steady soft pump-pump of the gas mixture.

I had asked if there was enough fuel to reach to coast. Laitel told me he thought so. Besides, we might be able also to charge the solar panel in some clearing, when we were farther from the city and possible surveillance.

Once, kilometres, years, behind us, there came a faint prolonged boom. But it might only have been some liana-slain tree collapsing in the forest, deceiving us, natural and quite near.

Night fell. No, it seeped, like water. Exiled from Lohno's green night garden, here the blackness poured and filled our cup.

We switched off the machine and went through to the rear on hands and knees. After using the chemical toilet, I did stretching and loosening exercises on my mat. Laitel, moving on his knees as if accustomed to nothing else, put out some cold food and uncorked an evening bottle of wine.

Later, we lay down. By some mutual reticence, after all not together. We would have little private space during the journey. Only lying alone on our mats, a couple of metres apart, could we achieve any.

We hadn't spoken much. Now I said, "The travel-time computes as four days. Five, if vegetation makes for very hard going."

"This is the dry season. Growth is less. Four days, perhaps."

I said, as he had, previously, "There's plenty of time. They'll wait."

They would, because we would be among the first of the last groups. For the records, rescue must be shown to be at least partly effective. Even if they didn't wait, from the open land by the ocean escape must always be easier. Even my people would come, there. I had asked Laitel to let me see the papers Lohno had left for him —and not mentioned in the post-mortem note, presumably having promised earlier. They were good for anything, I thought. I'd been startled in a way Lohno had bothered. Then not startled. He had been so very conscious of our amateur status.

Soon I heard Laitel sleeping, the slight rustling in respiration he made, asleep. I lay on my back, and through his breath and the shell of the machine, I heard the crickets, and now and then a sharp scream from the forest. I thought of gurracula circling the vehicle with neon eyes. The jungle was alight with such eyes. Eyes hung in trees and the bodies of moss sloths, scrambled and leapt in the heads of coies and monkeys. The pinpoint spangles of rodent eyes scuttled over a floor of roots and bones.

Visualizing it, I saw them in a speeded-up motion. As in those old photographs of traffic on the Champs Elysees or torch-bearers running on Ho Lilly Way. Streaks, streamers crossing and re-crossing, radiant threads

in a labyrinth.

* * * *

In the morning, at first light, we went on.

We talked, even exchanged confidences, that day. It was from boredom, a sort of makeshift antidote to the slight panic I felt keep rising in me, a restless fear of enclosure, inactivity and ennui. For him, the same? Perhaps he talked only to humour or help me. Did he need to talk at all?

Neither of us, I thought, had anything very original to reveal. Our stories were inevitably products of our places of birth, conditioning, natures. To harshness, tied by rules of social etiquette and religion, and, of course, deprivation, his nature responded, it appeared, with acceptance and calm, nearly uninterested. I suppose for me too, the rules and the dragging up, though different ones —wanting things I couldn't have — material things, but also glamour, power, success. And my nature was very unlike his. First resentful and at last "sceptical." A still-hot, calloused nature, though even now wanting, slyly, life to woo me back: See, we didn't mean it, here is the reward, the prize. And knowing too I didn't deserve the bloody prize. So. Laitel shone translucently like a dim white pearl. Frances was more garish, costume jewellery, just tinged with jaundiced yellow. Once in a bar someone who claimed to see my aura told me it was shot with anger the colour of fire. Rather than chasten me, I'd been proud of that. Anger, why not?

After we'd talked —memories, insignificant events —a first bicycle (his), the first date (mine), our work —which had produced both bicycle and first date — servants, both of us, too, in differing, humiliating ways, although he was not humiliated, only I was—we became silent again. But we had got rid of another day.

Then it was time to crawl into the rear of the machine. And something was disgusting about it now, the proximity, and the smallness of the space. Our smells — mine chemically wiped and deodorized for "freshness," turning stale, his odourless. A *smell* of odourlessness. Disturbing. His race don't sweat. Or if they do, not as my race does. His face, Laitel's face, was becoming almost genderless to me, exactly like the face of the flower girl who had run away from Lohno's body, and all the other indigenous faces in his city. Only when they were old, incised by wrinkles, the white teeth, which had no canines, falling or pulled out, only then had there been any look of *living* in the faces of Laitel's people. Not really even then. Ugly, beautiful. I thought of the old, old woman I had seen dip her clay cup in the soiled

water of the fountain in Que Square. Shrunken small as a European or African child, she might have been sculpted from almond wood, an artefact, those lines and fissures made deliberately by skill, for artistic admiration, not randomly out of pain and age.

Somehow we edged—or only I did—our mats further apart. We had drunk no wine. The rice had been sticky, and despite the storage unit, hard. A packet of luxury biscuits a sickly cliché out of place.

His whisper-breathing, when he slept, irritated me. I wanted to wake him up, shut him up. I heard unintelligible words in the whispers, then sounds in the air between them. But there were no real sounds that night. Crickets sometimes. A vague constant rumble we had heard from the moment the machine was switched off, a great waterfall, he said.

Later though something jumped onto the dome, monkeys or lemings. Thumps and skitters, the squeak of claws on impervious transparency.

The equation on the mobex had informed me there was only one more day needed to reach the coast, and Laitel had seemed to think the noise of the fall—the Water-Mama, he called it—confirmed this. But that would mean the mobex's first computation was wrong. So why not this one?

* * * *

When I woke again, it was late in the morning; instinctively I knew. And once I had crawled forward, I saw. One of those breaks had come, this time a vast clearing. The machine was stopped on its edge, screened off only by clumps of bamboo, a flimsy curtain of vines. I hadn't noticed, somehow, the previous evening, in the failing dusk.

Here, the perimeter of the clearing was richly green, but running to tobacco-brown farther off. The jungle only came in again, I thought, over a kilometre away. Some little deer were feeding in the middle distance, and there was a ripple of heat haze. The sky was very bright, cat's-eye colour. Almost midday then. I could no longer hear the fall.

Neither of us had left the machine before now. There was no need to. Every psychological need to. But without discussion, both of us had seemed to decide to go outside was foolish. The jungle-forest, in Laitel's language the lunga-rook, is treacherous. Quicksands, poisoned plants and snakes, gurracula, boar ... an end-less list of don'ts.

But now, Laitel had gone out. He must have done, because the machine, including the toilet and the storage space, was empty. I opened the front compartment. It was filled by batteries and tools for the upkeep of the machine. Lohno Tezmaine's gun lay slimly alongside.

I sat in the front seat, turning slowly, looking through the dome into the clearing, and the forest behind us, what I could make out over the machine's stream-lined back.

Laitel had left the vehicle, and was not to be seen. Had vanished.

A story I hadn't bothered to tell him: when I was a child, in my own city, unthinkable wastes of time from here, I'd been left with some relative for an afternoon. I was about five. As it turned out, the relative, an aunt, either real or titular, hadn't been reliable. Rather like wicked female kin in fairy tales, she had taken me to the park, gone off to buy something, cigarettes I seem to recall, and not remembered to come back. Unnecessary to itemize the stages of my bewildered and tearful panic, the gibbering little near-foetus I eventually became, under those pruned cedars of Hurlingham. Near closing time, a park warden found me. He took me with some trouble—I'd been told never to go with strangers—to the park admin. Here I was rescued presently by a parent.

It shook me, sitting in the machine, sitting there with the blistering near-noon sunlight coming through the dome, shook me. Laitel gone, and I was that child again. The park, the jungle, the lunga-rook. Don't go with strangers.

For God's sake, I couldn't drive this thing. I didn't even know, and couldn't work out, which button would polarize the dome and stop the glare.

But come on, I'd been in worse situations. Hadn't I? Seldom quite alone though. My own kind had been with me. Or another sort of stranger, the sort one believes, for that short period, is an ally, a companion. Or I'd known my way. Had a vehicle I was familiar with, a terrain I was accustomed to or had learned from a tutor. Or no, no, surely there had been times like this. That cellar in Shovsk, that farm at Penn—had I been another person then? Yes, because now I was the child.

I pushed my panic down.

He hadn't gone far. Why would he? Perhaps to verify the fall was there. I could just hear its rumble after all. Somehow the intrusion of other senses—sight, dis-tress—had blocked it out. What reason could Laitel

have to leave the safety of the machine in any permanent way? It was his ticket to safety, as it was mine.

Then again, perhaps he had meant to be gone only a few minutes and some-thing had happened. One of those *don'ts*, the reasons for never straying outside.

I picked up the mobex. Static was worse, as it had immediately become once we entered the jungle. I recorded Laitel's disappearance. My voice sounded steady, unconcerned.

Then I crawled back into the rear compartment. I'd eat something. Prepare myself. . . About ten minutes later, as I was nibbling a bread cake, I heard a noise on the ladder, then at the cab door. An animal? The door opened, as it only would to a registered handprint.

I was going to yell out. Relief was flooding through me like boiling then icy water. I paused, and called quietly, "Hi. Where were you?"

No one answered.

Then I was frightened. Not the child, other horrors. Was it possible—some battalion of the enemy—Laitel taken, leading them here ... I scrambled forward, wishing I'd thought to keep the gun with me.

Sunlight still blared through the cab. The driver's door was pulled wide, and below, among the cream and green of the bamboo, Laitel was waiting, looking up at me. Alone.

"What in Christ's name are you playing at? What do you mean by it? Why the hell didn't you wake me—tell me you were going to go out? Why don't you speak for Christ's sake?"

"Come and see the fall, Frances, the Water-Mama."

"Fuck the fall, what—"

"It isn't far, Frances. Come. Come with me."

Irradiated in my mind, four words: Now he is crazy.

Was he? He seemed the same. Enigmatic Laitel, gentle Laitel, the blink of his black tongue between the pale slender lips, the herbivorous teeth of a race that, however, ate meat. The blue inner lids were well raised,

only an ink-drawn rim about the eye's white, the inner black. I'd better be reasonable?

"Laitel, come back up. I shouldn't have shouted — I don't know how it translated. Sorry if it sounded like I was insulting any of your gods — I wasn't. Only mine. Let's talk. I was having some breakfast."

"Don't be afraid, Frances. Over there, through the trees, you can see it."

My hand had touched open the front compartment. It slipped quickly around metal. I couldn't drive Lohno's machine, but I could use his gun. Weapons, somehow, were always easier to learn. I raised it, as if examining the barrel.

"Laitel, I think you should come and have some coffee. Did you eat?"

Then Laitel laughed. I'd never seen him laugh, not even in sex, or from nervousness—but then, when had he been nervous? The laugh was musical. Like music. He turned and walked away, back through the loose net of creepers, which he didn't break, on to the verdant periphery of the clearing.

"Laitel! *Laitel!*"

His profile over his shoulder, half looking back. He shrugged, and walked on, away from me. The way someone does with someone else who is being stupidly obstructive or recalcitrant. Someone not bad, but impeding, for those moments. Someone who you'll probably forgive, later.

"Oh God."

Only, otherwise, the deer in the clearing, grazing.

I kept hold of the gun. The door had established my handprint as it had Laitel's, so I closed it when I got out on the ladder. I jumped down.

The ground was hot. I could feel it through my boots, and the humidity was intense, far worse than in the city or the garden. Water-drops formed at once on my hair and lashes, trickled down my face —perhaps too it was the nearness of the waterfall, which, out here, seemed suddenly to roar.

He wasn't moving fast. I soon caught up to him.

“What is this, Laitel?” He didn’t speak now, or look at me, but he was slightly smiling. “Why is the fall —the Water-Mama so important?” No answer.

When we got free of the stands of vegetation, the noon sun was overpowering. The haze rippled, rippled, so the singed grass was like a lake, and the feeding deer seemed to be floating or swimming in it.

But we got closer and closer to the deer. They didn’t stir. Hadn’t they seen us? Scented us? Especially the scent of an alien —

“Laitel, why aren’t the deer — “

“It’s all right,” he said.

And then, we were walking right by a deer, a mother, feeding with her fawn beside her. The baby didn’t look up; *she* flicked us one glance, her ears, full of the juice of youth, fleshy, like leaves, twitching once. Then she lowered her head again.

We walked between all the deer. Some, this one, this, were less than half a metre from us. And now, compelled, I put out my hand, softly, disbelieving, ran it over the harsh velvet of deer haunches, and the head turned slowly. I glimpsed the long, purple eye —careless, returning to the grass. They smelled of grass, of herbs and fresh dung. Not for a second of fear.

We were in the middle of the great clearing. Above, the sky, singing out its daffodil green heat. The rumble-rush of water. Some sort of tension in the air, beyond temperature, or haze.

“Laitel... *what is it?* — what?”

His hand came out and took my hand, my left hand, which had stroked over the hide of the deer. I hadn’t let that happen at the house. I’d let him kiss me, lick my skin, penetrate me, but not hold my hand in his. He was cool as melon, his palm not dry, not moist, the long fingers wrapping mine. And in my other hand, the hard gun.

Where the trees and shrubs began to close in again, he turned left, drawing me with him. And then we went down an avenue, a kind of path, like the paths in Lohno’s garden. It might have been some lane or by-way of the city, a grassy walk off Flower Street. As we moved along it, a gurracula paced out of the trees on one side, crossed the track before us, and went

in among the trees the other side. It was like a shadow, almost I seemed to see through it, but it was real. The size of a large dog, full-grown. It could have killed both of us with ease, or also I could have shot it, I suppose. It hadn't spared us a look. And we —neither of us —had slowed down or hesitated.

The avenue ended and the trees opened out, giving way to slender shiroyas with their dainty paper-chains of foliage, and beyond the land hollowed, dropped, and there, hung in vastness and distance, and below, a cliff of malachite wreathed in steam and haloed by spray, and the great fall of Water-Mama, a woman's crumble-white hair combed down and down to a shining river like an olive serpent half the world beneath.

It was beautiful. And the noise of it, and the taste of its spume, mineral as iron on the mouth.

We stood, looking. What else. It seemed, as I'd meant to be when trying to call him back, *reasonable*. This mattered. Or rather, nothing else did, much.

To one side, Laitel's side, the rock shelved up, with the shiroyas clinging, trailing their streamers. One of the old derelict temples was there, with the beehive tops I'd seen in photex prints of Calor Eye, or Angk. Stone galleries wove in and out of the rock, trooped by statues, their faces mostly smoothed away by time and wet.

As I stared, birds flew up and swirled across all the faces, the statues', the temple's.

Our hands had let go. At the same instant I must have dropped the gun. It lay in the fern at the ground's edge.

Laitel knelt down, his knees and calves folded under him. I gazed at his hair, that colour which is no colour I can name, the hair of his race, which never changes even in extreme old age, one hundred, one hundred and fifty of our years.

I felt very tired. I wanted to sit, too. So I sat, beside him. I crossed my legs and leaned my elbow on my thigh, my chin on my hand, curved forward, gazing over to the narrow river like a snake.

When it began to get dark I don't know. Sunset, presumably. I must have slept, but I hadn't moved.

Firebugs burned softly in the bushes, darting about like all those gleaming eyes I'd imagined, but now unencumbered by heads or bodies. I had an urge to coax them to my fingers. Would they come?

Stars were strewn over the sky, hardening as the light disbanded. But the sky is always less dark than the world. The starry night of space. So, could I coax down the stars?

"Laitel, we should go back to the machine."

But when I looked at him, once again, he was no longer with me.

* * * *

Lohno had described this spot, or another like it, in several books. The image was recurrent—the Water-Mama Fall, the temple. Therefore, I must have seen it in post-tutor dreams. It was subtly familiar. However, I'd only realized this when I woke there, and again found Laitel had gone.

I picked my way by quite an easy path, not even very slippery from the spray, up among the trees, to the temple's first terrace. Through squat-bellied pillars, inside a cave-like hall, an eerie lamp was glowing. And I knew, as I'd known suddenly about the path, that this wasn't as bizarre as it seemed. A great globe of translucent vitreous had been set, centuries ago—as in these most ancient jungle temples now and then it was—over a small fissure, under which flickered or flared a pocket of gaseous phosphorescence from some underlying swamp. Marshfire. An intermittent yet ultimately constant light, which needed no tending.

Yet, it looked like a huge dull opal, the lamp, shimmering, magic and super-natural. I make this point because it wasn't. It had a prosaic if inspired explanation.

When I went into the cave-hall I could smell bats, and sure enough, beyond the lamp, they hung thickly in grape-or-orchid bunches from the carvings. Of the carvings themselves, I couldn't see much. I couldn't take them in. A plethora of details and also a lot time-rubbed away. Stone hands and limbs, stone smiles. Eyes lost in shadow.

Beyond the hall a shallow flight led upwards, and here two of the roofs had fallen in, and starlight shone. A tribe of starlight white monkeys sat all up the stair, one or two creatures on each step. They looked at me, but scarcely moved. One mother groomed her baby. Another female reached out and gently plucked at the hem of my loose shirt, like a beggar

requesting arms. But when I turned, she softly drew her monkey fingers back and sucked them thoughtfully.

At the top of the stair was a sort of cloister, a gallery, with more blurred statues, which passed around a court below. But one side of the court had dropped away, and there one saw again the perfect view of the fall.

I hesitated halfway along the gallery, because a night bird was singing. It was the nightingale heard everywhere in Europe, Asia. Here? Perhaps the song was different in certain ways. Some notes stressed or distorted, bell-like, strident. But that bubbling trill, just the same.

Another of the phosphorous lamps burned down in the court. Some fluctuation of the gas made this lamp flutter, and the temple stones shifted, *seemed* to shift. And Laitel was there, walking towards me. He wore a white tunic and white pants, just as he had my first days at the house in the city. But he hadn't worn such clothes in the machine.

"Come this way, Frances."

What was the point in saying anything? I followed him on along the gallery, and partway around the cloister, and then into a roofless, narrow corridor. There were, in the starlight, many doors of carved sul-wood, burnished like dirty amber. Laitel opened one, and I saw into a small bare room lit by an oil lamp on a table that was otherwise covered by books and papers. At the table sat Lohno Tezmaine. I knew at once his ochre parrot face, of cruel aged-in-the-wood malevolence.

I wasn't dreaming. As infallibly, sometimes, you know yourself to be clearly awake in dreams, somehow, when awake, your very unsureness proves this is the woken state.

"How are you here?" I asked. I was casual.

"Where else? Besides, where is Here?"

"Aren't you dead?" I casually asked.

"In one form," he said.

I had the idea that of course he wasn't dead. That Laitel had stored Lohno, perhaps sedated, in some extra hidden compartment of the machine, at the same time that he stored the food, fuel and wine. Why?

“Our interview was fairly naff,” he said, old-fashioned still, “wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“You weren’t really interested in me.”

“No?”

“You only inclined to see the city and be involved in the horrors of downfall. At least somewhat. Come and look at this.”

I didn’t want to approach him, but that was foolish, because he was just an unpleasant old man sitting on an upright deck-chair, in the cell of a ruin. So I went closer and he pointed out the papers in front of him.

“What about it?” I said.

“Read it. Oh, I know you never read my books. But this is my latest work.”

“Continued after your death, too? That should be very interesting, a great po-tential commercial success.”

“The first book, certainly, I’ve written for over 30 years.”

The full light of the oil lamp was on the manuscript. I leant forward, and read the paragraph written there. It said:

“She didn’t want to approach him, but that was foolish. He was simply an unpleasing specimen of masculine old age, upright on an inappropriate canvas chair, the kind once set up on the decks of liners for the elderly and sick, so they might enjoy some ocean air. But Frances was that intransigent and irritating thing, a survivor. So she went straight up to him and, when he asked her to, read the paper on the table.”

I said, “You’re writing about me. That’s actionable, Mr Tezmaine. You’ve even used my given name.”

“Lohno.”

“Mr Tezmaine, I find it impossible to believe that all this is an elaborate hoax, arranged simply to make a fool of me and the people I work for—”

“Lohno. You don’t understand. You probably will not, will *never* understand.”

He drew another paper out from the untidy stacks on the table. He held it up to me. When I didn’t look or take it, he read, “ ‘She had always wanted to see the city; that had been, really, her only reason for agreeing to interview the old man. In the first days, in the mornings before he got up, she would walk about, or take a hutsha. Being of fairly light build, a team of only six children was needed to pull her along. She always tipped them well, but not so extravagantly that they clamoured or brought others to clamour. She had learned long ago, in the cities of Asia, to be careful of such things.’ “

He let the paper fall and pulled out another. He read, flatly, “ ‘Sex with Laitel was always strangely satisfactory. There was never any frantic struggle towards or-gasm. It was a politeness between them, a social massage. But Frances suspected Laitel reserved climax, and the expulsion of seed, for women of his own race, in the interests of procreation.’ “

“All right,” I said. “Am I supposed to be affronted? Disgusted? Upset? What? You tell me.”

“Yes, I would have to, wouldn’t I?”

“Because I’m an amateur at life?”

Laitel was in the room. He was pouring pequa into two glasses, and then he brought them to us, handing Lohno Tezmaine his drink first.

I took my glass then put it down. I put my hand on the papers and pulled out, at random, another sheet, lifted it and read, from the filled, scribbled page, “ ‘As a child, she had been left with an unreliable aunt, real or titular, who, going to buy cigarettes, forgot Frances in a park. Under those pruned cedars of Hurlingham, Frances experienced the first of her massive disillusionments. But life would never encourage her to learn its true ways, instead slapping her down at every opportunity. And yet, still, she unwisely wished that life would change its mind and woo her back. There was still time, she was only 40, 41, for life to give her fame and glory, the crown of laurel, the undying name.’ “

“How do you know?” I said. I felt blank and stern, almost righteous, not at all unnerved. As if I was playing a part.

“How do you think I know? The same way that I know that Laitel was born in the jush, an unwanted child though a boy. And how I know that, at seven years old, he saw a white tiger, in a cage, and thought it was a demon, and that he still dreams of this tiger; which species isn’t, of course, normally found here.”

“You know that then because Laitel must have told you. But I — “

“Laitel told me. You have told me.”

“No.”

“It’s self-evident. How else can I know, Frances. And your mother’s middle name, say. Or the story about the three little mice that made you afraid when you were nine. Or how many men you’ve slept with.”

“I don’t know that myself,” I said archly.

“You do. If you think about it, you do. Otherwise I couldn’t know.”

“Telepathy, you’re saying then.”

“In a way, I suppose. A sort of telepathy.”

Laitel spoke quietly. “He does know, Frances.”

“He’s dead. I tried his pulse. He’s dead so how can he know anything?”

“You never read my books,” said Lohno again, and again without the usual authorial arrogance or contempt. “You had them read to you instead by a mech-anism. You’ve forgotten, or didn’t notice, that sometimes I include myself in my books, as a character. I write first-person, and am addressed by various other char-acters as Tezmaine, or Lohno. Preferably the latter. I am, after all, so familiar with my characters. Any writer is. Indecently so, though inevitably. The least I can do, Frances, is generally to insist they *call* me in the familiar way, by my first name.”

I stared at him. Then I glanced at Laitel. Laitel took no, notice. He must, I thought, have heard this speech, or a similar speech, before. How had he responded? He hadn’t. Of course he hadn’t. The concept of an all-seeing, motivat-ing, pitiless God was bad enough. But this effrontery—there could be no reply.

I picked up and drank the pequa, then held out my glass, and Laitel came back and filled it up.

Lohno Tezmaine sat smiling, smiling, like the smiles left, Cheshire-cat-like, behind on the stone temple faces below.

No reply fitting. So what to say? All my adult life, and perhaps earlier, searching doggedly for the punchline, the summing-up, quick, quirky and clean. Award-winning phrases that had never earned a mention. Too glib, or too good. What-ever. Whatever is it with me? Forever shut out, or left behind. Too late or early. Or merely redundant.

“So I’m your invention, Mr Tezmaine —oh, excuse me, Lohno. And Laitel, too?”

“All of it, Frances, actually. Here, there. City, jungle, home. Everything.”

“Then you’re God.”

“Naturally not. Or, that is to say, only on paper.”

I drank down the pequa. It tasted foul.

“Prove it,” I said. “Go on.”

“That would be too easy, Frances.”

“Ah yes. Obviously. Oh then, you mustn’t, must you.”

He turned and squinted up at me. He had had, or still had, excellent eyesight, assisted by all the right contemporary medication. But now his eyes, though glit-tering and malign as knife-points, were slightly unfocused. He swung back over the table, took up a pen, and wrote swiftly. He handed me the paper.

I read, “ ‘Frances looked back, and saw, there in the doorway of the cell, Laitel’s white tiger.’ ”

My hair stood on end. That hadn’t happened in a long while. I dropped the paper on the table.

“Turn round,” he said to me, Lohno Tezmaine.

“There’s nothing there,” I said. I looked at Laitel. “There isn’t, Laitel. Or if there is, it’s some illusion —hypnotism, some drug —mhash in the oil lamp, maybe. We’re suggestible. Everyone is, given the proper scenario.”

Laitel nodded. He smiled.

So I turned. Nothing was there. The doorway was empty. Then —

Something pale, that flicked, once, twice, tail-like, lashing, where the lamplight hit the stone of the corridor. A trick of the eyes.

“I didn’t see it.”

“That’s true.” Tezmaine leant forward and crossed out the last line he had written. “Sometimes the author makes a mistake. He pushes a subject to do some-thing that doesn’t fit, a thing either not in character, or too *intransigently* in char-acter. Characters seldom act in character. This is the measure of a human thing, whether real or invented. A true writer will generally realize his balls-up in time. Not always. One shouldn’t ever contrive. The flow of the narrative, the being of the characters themselves, they must be allowed to live their lives, and from that the plot springs, all its events and scenes. Also the landscapes, figurative and men-tal, in a correct book. You see, the writer need do nothing, or very little, merely observe and listen, and then factually report.”

“A journalist? But that’s my job, Mr Tezmaine.”

“Lohno. Yes, you’re right.”

He raised the amended paper and read out to me, “ ‘But when Frances turned to face the animal in the doorway, she was only in time to glimpse the last in-conclusive flick, flick of its slowly lashing tail.’ “ He laid the paper down. “More pequa, Laitel, please. Have some yourself. It’s liberating to be out of the book now. I was getting weary, so I killed myself off, and moved into the third person, only writing about you, Frances, and about Laitel. The rest of your two lives, which I shall contrast and compare, piquantly, I hope, as we go along. No, I can’t predict your lives —or very little. You’ll live them, and then I shall find out. The time-scales are different, evidently, but you won’t be aware of it.”

“But we’re *amateurs*,” I said. My voice was full of rage and bitterness. It surprised me. As if I believed him and resented him as, naturally I’d have to, if it were a fact. But then, I was playing a part, playing a game. Acting.

“Yes,” he said, “but *amateur* means ‘lover’, doesn’t it. You have a *love* of life, you *amateurs*, that we professionals have to give up, when once we begin to do it, not for love, but money.”

I felt a wave of tiredness sweep through me. “I’m tired,” I said. “And I still need to get to the coast. Is Laitel going to drive me there?”

“I don’t think so. I think he means to go back into the forests. Do you, Laitel?”

“Yes. I’m sorry, Frances.”

“Wonderful. So what now?”

“There’s an old road that goes straight to the coast,” said Lohno, off-hand. “You’ll find it and take it in the morning. That much is arranged. It’s what you’re good at.”

“Planning to kill me off? What’s it to be, maestro, a gurracula? Snake-bite? Heat exhaustion?”

“Oh, no, Frances. We’ve only just had *my* death. Too many are bad form, since this isn’t a crime novel. You’ll find the trek not too bad. A few hours walking, in the shade. You may see some animals, they’ll ignore you. And of course, Laitel will give you a lunch-box.”

I started laughing. Tezmaine threw back his old snake’s head and laughed too. Only Laitel stood in the shadow in his white clothes, silent, demure as a brides-maid.

In the doorway, I glanced back. “Tezmaine.”

“Lohno, please.”

“Lohno, *Lohno*. Am I pregnant?”

“Are you? How interesting. By Laitel, you mean? Despite non-ejaculation, some potent drip. It could be. Yes, I think you might be. Yes. What an inspiration. A child of such mixed blood, so rare. I’ll enjoy this. Yes, Frances, yes, you are. *Thank* you. A girl? Almost. . . almost definitely a girl.”

I walked out and went along to the end of the cloister, where the ruin

had come apart. Under a leaning statue, with a smile and hands, I curled up to sleep. Presumably I wouldn't topple over the edge. Unless he decided to write me out, after all.

The stars were so bright, so scattered and patterned, numerous, planned. I've never lost my amazement at things like the stars. The pequa said to me, Nothing matters. A mad old man, Laitel in his white clothes he left behind, never packed, what I'd have to do tomorrow, walking through jungle-forest, the lunga-rook. If I did have to. My race and Laitel's, we don't, can't interbreed. Though the precautions I'd taken not to menstruate during this assignment would anyway make conception unlikely. Yet, something, some tremor, like the movement of the second hand on an antique watch. Crazy.

Once in the dark I woke. There was no reason. Nothing stirred. Only the rumble of the Water-Mama, constant as time, but a delusion because, in the end, the cliff would wear away, the waterfall decrease and become only the river.

* * * *

Next morning, no one was there. Laitel wasn't, nor the old man, or his ghost, no one. The monkeys had vanished back into the jungle-forest to feed or fight or slumber. The pitted statues had lost their mystery with the light. I found some food and a bottle of water lying beside me.

I knew how to find the road. That was from his books, it must have been. It was an old processional way, used to link long-lost villages, or some ancient city of the jungle, to the temple. Curiously it wasn't very overgrown. Perhaps more modern villages kept it clear out of respect or superstition. I met with no one. I saw lemasets, and once a boar digging at the roadside with his tusks. They paid no attention.

I admit it was cooler in the shade, and the water bottle, although I economized with it, lasted me until the forest began to break up and move away from me. Then came bridges over swamp, some of stone, some swaying horizontal ladders of rope and liana. Because this was some sort of game, or because I'd temporarily gone mad, I felt it would indeed turn out as Lohno Tezmaine had told me, and it did. Beyond the swamp and the scrub was rocky land that went up and over and finally, in the afternoon, ran down to a pocket of glistening, greasy sea.

The shore was covered by people, humans of all races, like something biblical, I thought, gathered tribes, the end of the world. I stood

staring at them, realizing they were there, while the sweat and the water of the air washed down into my eyes. But the transports were there too, the VTOs, and every so often a swarm of them would lift off, or another swarm of them would come in over the bay, putting down on the plasto-steel strips laid out over the water.

Before I even started to climb down, a party of soldiers found me. They were foreigners, but biologically nearer to me than the people of the jungle or the coast. When I tried to answer them though, I found I couldn't, the chip in my arm had malfunctioned. We communicated therefore in sign language, but they were cheerful, braced by their issue of performance-enhancing battle drugs. One of them kissed me on the cheek, another fondled my breast. Nothing worse. And so months after I knew that the child, for there was to be one — a boy, did Lohno change his plotline?—was Laitel's, none other's. But at that moment I might gladly have let these men do anything. They were real, they were reality. All they did was get me down to one end of the beach, then push me through the churning mass of flesh, and heave me up into a VTO, among the crying, serious, or jab-bering women of their race, mine, others; among the babies and small domestic animals, and the sad or loud men, already playing cards or tuk, as if for the stake of this place, or their own best chance of existence.

Once we were on our way, a big dark soldier emerged, and sat beside me. We spoke each other's language, the now-useless chip unneeded. I was more glad of his company than I could say. He put his arm around me. We stank of sweat, both of us, and of the wet greenness of the geography we were leaving. But at World's Edge, whoever gives a damn about such things? We didn't make love, have sex. I think it was once called heavy petting, what we did, millions of lifetimes ago, or last year. Plenty of others were doing the same.

Under us, the heavy bounding drone of the VTO, solid as granite up in that space beyond all else.

My soldier left me once only during the journey, and returned with a bottle of whisky. "Drink this," he said, "take a good big drink. Cure all your blues."

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