

Nayomi Munaweera



ISLAND *of* A  
THOUSAND  
MIRRORS

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The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory  
against forgetting.

— Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*

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To my parents  
*Upamali and Neil*  
who made it all possible  
  
and my sister  
*Namal*  
earliest and best beloved reader

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## PROLOGUE

I lie in the cave of his body, fluid seeping from between my legs. Shadows spin slowly across the sky-blue walls of this humid, airless room and my limbs are heavy, weighted with exhaustion and frantic, war-like lovemaking. Sweat beads on our skin, it runs in thin rivulets between us so that we are stuck together, glued one to the other, conjoined twins. He sleeps with an arm thrown across his face to block out the silver threads of dawn, the sugary-sweet film soundtracks rising from the neighbor's radio, the roaring of that fierce and relentless ocean. His lips move. From the drowned depths of his sleep, it is my sister's name, the single syllable of it that emerges over and over. A whispered keening of the sound I bestowed upon her lifetimes ago. I stay perfectly still, perfectly quiet, my hands folded on his fluttering heart. From here, this close to him, I can still hear her breathing on the other side of him.



It is 1948 and the last British ships slip away from the island of Ceylon, laboring and groaning under the weight of purloined treasure. On board one such vessel, the captain's log includes: the tusks and legs of elephant herds, rubies, emeralds, topaz, fragrant mountains of cinnamon, cardamom, mustard seeds, forests of ebony, teak and sandalwood, screeching peacocks, caged and pacing leopards, ten-foot-long monitor lizards whipping their razor tails, barrels of fermented coconut toddy, the jewel encrusted thrones of Kandyan kings, the weapons of Chola warriors, priceless texts in Pali and Sanskrit, Sinhala and Tamil.

At the foam drenched stern, a blue-eyed, walnut-burnt sahib searches for the vanishing island and says to his pale young wife, "A shame really. Such a nice little place."

And she, only recently having left Manchester for the colony and now returning in triumph, a husband successfully hunted and captured, says, "But so hot! And the mosquitoes! It will be such a comfort to be home again."

The Englishman contemplates the meaning of this word 'home', remembers decades of waving palms, soft sarongs against his thighs, the quick fingers and lithe embraces of burnt brown bodies. He has not seen the dome of St. Paul's for ten years. On his last visit to the frigid metropolis, he had felt an odd creature, neither fish nor fowl, smirked at

by elegant ladies, his skin chaffed, fingers stiff, and unable to determine between fish and salad fork. A sort of anger rises in his throat.

He tells himself that he will no longer dream of palm trees and sunshine. His wife takes refuge under his arm, her breast knowingly close to his fingertips. She utters a quick, coquettish laugh. She knows she has sufficient charms to distract him from his island memories. He turns his head resolutely away from the fast disappearing island and towards the other, colder one ahead of him. His eyes are bone dry.

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Behind the retreating Englishman, on the new nation's flag is poised a stylized lion, all curving flank and ornate muscle, a long, cruel sword gripped in its front paw. It is the ancient symbol of the Sinhala who believe that they are descended from the lovemaking between an exiled Indian princess and a large jungle cat. A green stripe represents that small and much-tossed Muslim population. An orange stripe represents the larger Tamil minority.

But in the decades that are coming, race riots and discrimination will render the orange stripe inadequate. It will be replaced by a new flag. On its face, a snarling tiger, all bared fang and bristling whisker. If the idea of militancy is not conveyed strongly enough, dagger clawed paws burst forth while crossed rifles rear over the cat's head.

A rifle toting tiger. A sword gripping lion. This is a war that will be waged between related beasts.

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Blissfully unaware of the departing Englishman, my seven-year-old father-to-be, Nishan, cavorts on beaches he does not know are pristine. He dives into an ocean unpolluted by the gasoline-powered tourist boats of the future.

In the months before the thunderous monsoon, the ocean tugs at his toes, wraps sinuous limbs about his own and pulls him into its embrace, out until it is deep enough to dive, head first, feet overhead, inverted and submerged. Eyes open against stinging salt, he sees coral like a crowded, crumbling city, busy with variously marked, spotted, dotted, striped, lit, pompous and playful sea creatures. Now and then, he encounters the curious, swiveling eye of a small red octopus emerging from secret passageways. Approached recklessly, the octopus blanches a pure white and with an inky ejaculation, torpedoes away. So he learns to approach slowly, in rhythm with the gently rolling water, until the creature coming to know this stick-limbed biped is lulled enough to allow his quiet presence.

Further out beyond the reef, where the coral gives way to the true deep, at a certain time of day, a tribe of flat silver fish gather in their thousands. To be there is to be surrounded by living shards of light. At a secret signal, all is chaos, a thousand mirrors shattering about him. Then the school speeds to sea and the boy is left in sedate water, a tug and pull of the body as comfortable as sitting in his father's outspread sarong being sung to sleep.

When he emerges dripping from the sea, it is to find this father, the village ayurvedic doctor, perched on an upturned catamaran, deep in conversation with the fisherfolk who squat on their heels before him. The fishermen wear sarongs splotched with octopus ink.

Their hands are leathered by handling rope, mending nets, wrestling sharks by their tails onto the beach. They are ruthless with the flesh of the creatures they catch, upturning gentle sea turtles in the sand to carve off chunks of the living flesh. The turtles bleed slowly, drip salt tears from the corners of their ancient eyes. In this way the meat stays fresh for days, the fishermen explain. For similar reasons the fishermen grasp just caught octopuses and turn them inside out, exposing delicate internals that flash through cycles of color. Decades later, in America, when my father sees Christmas lights for the first time, he will astound us with the observation that they look just like dying octopuses.

The sun drops fast, blazing momentarily crimson on the horizon. Father and son wander home. At the front door, his mother waits, a lantern in her hand. In her other hand, she grips the shoulder of Nishan's twin sister, Mala, who by dint of her girlhood is not allowed on beach wanderings. Beatrice Muriel ignores her husband. She is angry that they have spent the day with the fisherfolk, listening to fisher songs, picking up fisher habits, coming home covered in beach sand. It is too dark to bathe, she scolds. Cold well water after the sun has set will result in sneezing and a runny nose. "Running here and there, like a savage. One day I will find you up a coconut tree with the toddy tappers! That's the day I will skin you alive. Wait and see if I don't."

As she scolds, she pulls the bones out of fried fish with deft fingers, mixes it with red rice and coconut sambol into balls, which she pops into the mouths of her children; a bird feeding its chicks. Her monologue ceases only when the plate is empty.