



Praise for *He Drown She in the Sea*:

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“A poignant, sophisticated and troubling portrait of how class, race and ethnicity determine mobility and fortune on an island much like her native Trinidad, and how the insecurities of social standing are communicated, reinforced and deeply internalized in the individual and collective psyches ... Mootoo works the fine balance between despondency and hope to tremendous effect, infusing the story with yearning, melancholy and bittersweet promise fuelled by the suspense of whether liberation and redemption from class and past is ultimately achievable.”

—Camilla Gibb, *National Post* (Ontario)

“The story is rich in the patois and daily rhythms of the Caribbean. ... One of Mootoo’s real accomplishments is her portrayal of the expatriate Harry. ... Much of the novel is recounted in snippets and flashbacks, from many points of view, which gives the tale a fine-grained, beautifully textured finish.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“A sensual novel filled with tangy descriptions of tastes and smells and sounds.”

—Paul Gessell, *The Gazette* (Montreal)

“Eight years after a stunning debut, a terrified novelist emerges with proof she’s no ‘one-book wonder.’”

—*Ottawa Citizen*

“The incremental dawning of class consciousness and the accompanying shame that ensues are brilliantly evoked. ... Its tricky, persuasive, and sensual emotional terrain makes it more real than anything confined to the two dimensions of a map.”

—*Quill & Quire*

“Mootoo has burst through the emotional boundaries of her previous novel, *Cereus Blooms at Night*. With this new work she takes a more encompassing swipe at life, and the result is astounding.”

—Thomas Trofimuk, *Edmonton Journal*

Praise for *Cereus Blooms at Night*:

“Mootoo has an impeccable ear. ... The plea for tolerance that lies at the heart of this novel is both authentic and powerful.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“A story of magical power.”

—Alice Munro

“The fecund and fertile cycles of Caribbean life pervade this powerful first novel from Mootoo who invokes all the senses ... to portray the town of Paradise.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“The sinuous unwinding of Mootoo’s clever plot will remind many reader’s of Arundhati Roy’s *The*

*God of Small Things*, which this novel resembles also in its plentitude of exotic detail, magical-realist interludes, and captivating language.”

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—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

“Strong, sad and sensual ... *Cereus Blooms at Night* is wrought as deftly as a piece of lacework. ... A confident and lively first novel.”

—*Los Angeles Times*

“Fans of magical realism will revel in the superb narrative power of Shani Mootoo’s debut novel. ... Mootoo is a masterful storyteller who has woven a fascinating narrative propelled by vividly drawn characters who are both achingly human and passionately bizarre.”

—*The Washington Post*

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# **He Drown She in the Sea**

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Also by Shani Mootoo

*Cereus Blooms at Night*

*Out on Main Street*

*The Predicament of Or*

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# He Drown She in the



SHANI MOOTOO



Grove Press  
*New York*

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*For Dhanwatee and Deoraj Samaroo,  
and Essie Boodoosingh*

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*everywhere you are*



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## He Drown She in the Sea

# THE DREAM

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Almost a decade after he left Guanagaspar, a dream he used to have recurs. Though he lives by the sea now, the sea in this dream is invariably the other one, that of his earliest childhood. In the dream he first notices that there are no frigate birds in the sky and that the sea has suddenly and strangely retreated. Then, there are no waves but the ocean undulates, and the level of the water on the horizon rises rapidly. On the exposed floor of the ocean gasping fish slap themselves until, exhausted, they give up and are still. The sea begins to swell, swelling until its surface is smooth and shiny, like a taut plastic bag on the verge of bursting. And he realizes that the reason there are no frigates in the sky is that from there they already saw the magnitude of the ocean's bulge, and, predicting the outcome of its inevitable and imminent belch, they took off to seek refuge.

For several minutes he watches to make sure he is not mistaken. The ocean is heaving now, sighing with its unusual weight, inhaling and exhaling painfully. There are many people on the beach. People whom he previously saw through the windows when the taxi he rode in on mornings with his mother passed through villages on the way to the city. Although all the people have noticed the swelling and are pointing at the sea, they settle themselves on the beach as if to stay and watch. He is the only one concerned. He begins to analyze and strategize. He can see that if the sea continues to grow like that it is bound to split its plastic-like surface, emptying it of its intestines and all that it has swallowed.

He runs up and down the beach screaming to people. They see only a little boy, too young to know anything, too young to pay him attention. When they ignore him, he begins forcibly pushing them off the beach, trying to sound like a reasonable adult, a big man begging them to get back inside and board up their houses, to shut their windows and doors and stuff blankets, newspapers, anything in the cracks. But he is too small, too young, for them to take seriously. One or two groups of people do get up and leave, but not because of his warnings; they have just had enough of a day at the beach. He rushes over to stray dogs and shoos them up the beach. He lurches at corbeaux that are too engrossed in the carcasses of dead fish and other animals to notice what the frigates saw from higher up.

He thinks of his mother and that if no one else will listen, he must save at least his mother and himself. He races up to his own house and explains to her what he has seen. He tells her that in order to protect themselves they must quickly and carefully prepare their house. His mother listens. She believes him. She goes outside and fetches all the chickens, brings them inside, and they begin to prepare ... he shuts and locks the front door, and she and he diligently seal every space between the door and the rough jamb, finally shoving a table up hard against it. Anywhere light from outside enters their house they shove a piece of paper, a piece of cloth, or nail boards over it. They mostly keep silent, uttering only quick orders. Their ears are trained on the ocean, listening to it as it continues to groan and creak under the strain of its swelling. When they are sure that the house is sealed tight, that no water, light, or air can enter, they sit down next to each other and await its thunderous cracking apart.

Then the quiet descends. The birds and the dogs are silent. Everything is still. Neither coconut, mango, nor lime trees rustle. The breeze that is a constant seems suddenly to have gasped in awe of what is progressing, as if holding its breath in terror. There are no sounds of the other people. The boy and his mother realize they will lose many people they know.

In the dream he knows that everyone else will be swept away by the sea, but it is more a feeling of regret that this will happen than one of panic.

And then the creaking of the ocean begins. As it gets louder, the dogs go mad, and they yelp in helplessness. The corbeaux begin to squeal and shriek and fight each other for space in the topmost

branches of the trees. The wind starts up again, and in no time whips around the houses and trees and through the bushes. Then the humans cry out as they at last see what is about to happen, and he holds his breath and wraps his arms around his mother's waist. She clutches the chickens. He draws her to stand against the farthest wall of the tiny house, fairly certain, but not entirely, that they will be spared. There they wait. Anytime now. But no crash is audible above the din of the wind and the shrieking. The sole indication that the ocean has indeed burst open is the sound of water creeping swiftly up the beach, up over the sea grape vines, into the crocus patch, drowning all the orange flowers, and then up, way up the clay yard. They hear the thirsty clay ground suck at the first taste of water, but suddenly there is so much water rising that the ground chokes and spits and then succumbs in silence. They feel water rising under the house, lapping at the boards. And he knows that he has done the right thing by stuffing the cracks, because the secret to not being swept away is that no water, not the tiniest drop, must enter the house, otherwise it can pry open the boards like a crowbar and rip the house apart. There is one final surge, coming at them so high now that it crashes at half height of the house. But the house is like a rock in the ocean. The sea rises around it and then passes by. The water rolls on up the land a bit, and then they hear its retreat, and when the ground around them crackles dry again, they know it is safe to look out. He opens the door to find that the house is entirely intact, in its place, not budged an inch. It has been washed clean by the salty water. However, all around, the shattered remains of houses are strewn, and in the ocean, now settled back in its place, are floating bodies and wood chips the size of matchsticks: the remains of boats, houses, and furniture. He and his mother make their way to the water's edge and see the bodies of people they know. Uncle Mako in his red merino and blue swimming trunks floats by, and the boy and his mother sigh and shrug and say to each other, "If only, if only."



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# HOW MADAM'S MOUTH RUNNETH OVER



*The Caribbean island of Guanagaspar. Present day.*

It was not yet the end of the rainy season, and the air in the house bristled with all manner of trouble. Even though Piyari had already cleaned everything that same day, Madam took up the dust cloth and wiped counters, pictures, ornaments, and furniture as she spoke. Perspiration glistened on Madam's forehead and upper lip. Rivulets of it escaped from under her uncoiffed hair, slipped down her grayin temples, and pooled about her neck, causing the plain gold-plate chain she wore to shimmer.

“Who would have thought, Piyari, that so late in life a person could get another chance? Look: I have two adult children, and with no warning whatsoever, in what should be the downward slope of life, a light light up, brighter than the sun, to point me in a whole new direction.”

Madam crumpled the dust cloth into a ball, took a quick and deep breath, and pressed the dirty rag to her face. Piyari, startled, leaped forward and as quickly withdrew, realizing at once that it wasn't really possible for Madam to suffocate herself in this manner. She grimaced. How could Madam talk of happiness in one breath, she wondered, and in the next bury her face in that dirty rag full of dust and that white powdery mold that covered everything in the muggy months? But she was becoming used to the unusual behavior. Madam dragged the cloth across her face and, in so doing, erased the thick application of reddish-brown color from her lips. A dark wetness blossomed about the armpits of the yellow silk blouse Piyari had ironed for her just that morning.

“Let me say once and for all: from the day I left my mother's house and got married, nobody has bothered to ask me what I think or what I feel. Nobody in this country can imagine that I might have feelings. Not all those people who like to take pictures of Boss and me and put them in their papers, not even Boss, and certainly not the children. I pass my whole life in the service of those two children and now look: I wouldn't see Jeevan unless I hand out formal invitation to him and his wife. And Cassie? You could understand why my only daughter had to go so far away, on the other side of Canada, to live? Well, if I didn't know better before, better and me have at long last become acquaintances. Everything change, Piyari. I am not stepping backward—I cannot go back to the way used to be. Is time for a fresh start, in truth.”

Piyari had learned to spot a story coming. She slid one of the caned high-back chairs away from the dining table and plopped herself down. An hour or two could pass like this: Piyari sitting, turning her whole body sometimes, sometimes just her head, to face Madam as Madam hustled, cleaned, and talked. And the more Madam provoked her future with stories of the summer past, the harder, the faster she swept, dusted, and polished furniture, cleaned cupboards, threw out old and long-unused household items. Madam's confidences bestowed much importance upon Piyari, but she knew well that such a privilege had the potential to one day prove burdensome. Still, this revolt brewing in her employer's house, right before her very eyes, she relished. And besides, the house, Piyari noticed, had never—at least not before that summer of which Madam babbled—been so spotless.

Madam put down the cloth and picked up a ceramic vase rendered in the shape of a fish that had leaped out of the sea high into the air and was captured by the artist just as it hit the water on its

arched back. She lifted her head to the ceiling, closed her eyes, and ran a finger along the pale, curved belly line of the fish, and a fingernail into the deep blue iridescent grooves of its well-wrought tail fin. The high-pitched squeal of fingernail against glazed ceramic broke her reverie. She squeezed the unyielding fish with both her hands, then shook the vase. There was a sluggish, guttural swish of old water. It had been almost a month since there were fresh flowers in the house. The water was at least that old, and surely bitter with the odor of rotted chrysanthemum remains. Madam put her nose to the gaping mouth of the fish and sniffed. Piyari straightened herself, ready to answer to the accusation, ready to get back to her business of housecleaning, of doing chores like washing out that vase. But Madam did not even wrinkle her nose. Instead, with sudden swiftness, as if she had smelled a revelation in the belly of the fish, she gathered up and twisted her shoulder-length hair into a bun. With pins fetched erratically from the pocket of her skirt, she secured the bun, whipped the cloth off the table again, and began wiping, wiping, wiping every ornament in sight. Piyari made a mental note to wash out the fish vase.

Madam executed a sharp about-face and marched into the kitchen. Piyari jumped up and followed. Madam opened the door of the freezer compartment and stared for a long time at its contents. Piyari knew if she stayed still long enough, Madam would begin to reveal more about that holiday on the west coast of Canada and that the refrigerator/freezer would be as clean as the day it was bought, without her having to lift a finger. When Madam started pulling out frozen packages of meat and plastic containers of leftovers and piling them up on the kitchen table, Piyari leaned up against the counter and relaxed.

“What we keeping leftovers for? Throw them out. Look at this fridge. Throw everything out. Don't keep a damn thing. I have to say it yet again? Is time for a fresh start.”

When the freezer was emptied, Madam looked around. Piyari anticipated her need and quickly fetched a bowl of soapy water and a sponge. Madam dipped the sponge in the water.

“Christmas round the corner, Piyari, but summer—like it was only yesterday—that summer just past was the candle burning bright on my future. And today, today-self, the future is unfolding.” She turned back to the freezer.

“But let not one-man-Jack have cause to say I spoil their Christmas. I, exemplary wife, will make no waves before then. We will put up the tree—tell the yard boy to climb on top the cupboard in the storeroom and to bring down the white plastic tree, not the green one, but the one that nice and white and look like it have snow on the branches, and we will put out some ornaments. We will set the table for Christmas, usual as usual: turkey, ham, pastels, sorrel. But, mark my word, come New Year's, it will be a different story, because I am finished with ‘exemplary.’”

Piyari perked up and, for the sake of the possibility, as slim as it was, of taking a little holiday time off, risked interrupting the flow of Madam's thoughts.

“You planning something for New Year's, Madam? Is best if I know all now so, so I will know what days off you giving me. But all what so will be happening, Madam?”

“All what so is happening? All now so, you see me standing here in front of this fridge, things happening. You asking? I not afraid to say, you know—not 'fraid, that is, to say to *you*, but what I have to say is not any and everybody business and is not to travel, eh. You hearing me good?”

Madam looked in Piyari's direction, but Piyari knew that she did not really see her. Madam inhaled and breathed out long and hard, then slowly shook her head as if regretfully resigned to the weight of what she was about to say. “Now, you must know, and you must know good, that until I was sitting right there in Cassie's living room in her apartment in Vancouver, with the telephone on the side table next to me, until the moment that I did it, I had had no plan to see the Eggman again. You

know who I talking about? Ent you remember the Eggman?"

Piyari frowned. She did remember him. She was eager to hear why her Madam would telephone a man like him. She had heard that he had done well for himself up there, but still, it was strange that Madam would look him up.

"It was the same day that Boss left. You could well say that I waited for Boss to leave and then I ring the Eggman, and you would be right. But to this day the Eggman has not made any judgment whatsoever about me ringing him so. He say to me that if I need to go anywhere, if I want to shop, to see sights, to visit anybody, he was ready anytime to take me. He wanted to come that same day. But say, I busy. I wasn't being truthful. After all, what I would be busy doing up there? Life up there was quiet-quiet, and I liked the change from this place. I wasn't busy one bit. Still, I didn't think it right to behave too-too eager."

The main body of the refrigerator took longer to empty and sponge clean. Piyari, not too surprised that she hadn't received an answer to her sideways plea for time off, helped with this only so much as to give the impression of keeping busy, but reserved her movements to a minimum so as not to distract Madam's chatter. She thought of the Eggman coming to the house before he emigrated, in his rusted-out and rattling car to bring a basin of eggs, or a side of a goat, or a fowl plucked clean. If, when he came to the gate, the children were in the yard playing, they would run inside to call their mother, and well enough away from his seeing or hearing, they giggled and teased her about him.

Madam rested a bowl of rice on the table. Piyari picked it up. She removed the plate that covered it, smelled the contents, covered it again, and then, with the cloth she continuously clutched for good effect, she wiped the condensation that had formed about the bowl. She set it back down exactly where Madam had put it. Madam examined a little piece of lime in cellophane that had gotten lost at the back of the second shelf. She handled various vegetables as if making a decision, and then, her decision seemingly made, put aside a celery stalk, a sweet pepper, and two hot peppers.

Piyari thought of Boss. He had laughed at the Eggman, too, for coming around so often and getting no more, naturally, than a five-minute conversation with Madam, and even so with the gate drawn between them. Boss used to make good play of being jealous, but of course this never amounted to anything. And Madam herself used to laugh at the Eggman. Still, she always seemed pleased by the teasing his visits engendered.

"I didn't ring him again. I didn't want to appear overly forward. Then two days pass, and thank blessed God I didn't ring him again, because just as I was opening my phone book, it was *he* who ring. He ask if Cassie and I had already made plans for dinner that night. I tell him I would have to wait and ask her when she return from her work. Like he didn't hear me, he asked if *I* had plans. But I realize now that he well hear me. I say again I had to wait until Cassie come home before I could really answer. He laugh—he has that way of laughing, you know? He say he would ring back later.

"When Cassie came back, I didn't say a thing about his phone call. Time pass, and since he didn't ring again, I start to prepare dinner, and she and I eat. To tell the truth, I was disappointed. But as I was cleaning up the kitchen, the doorbell ring. It was his voice on the intercom. Well, Piyari-girl, I get confused. Cassie raise her eyes, she put her hands on her hips and say, 'It's the Eggman, Mummy. I didn't know you were expecting him.'

"She let him up, and before he arrive at the door, she went straight to her room. Well, I get vexed with her for leaving me like that. I went and tell her to come back outside and sit down. She talk back at me, that child, grinning like a grouper, 'He didn't bring any eggs with him?'

"She reckless too bad. I had to put my finger on my lips to hush her up. Sometimes she has no sense, that child.

“I don't think he came to see me,' she answer me back, and she turn to face the computer screen. Well, she rile me up for so, but she is not a child. When they living abroad so, by themselves, they change plenty-plenty, you know. You can't make them do anything anymore.

“I standing up here in front of this refrigerator in my kitchen telling you this, and I can remember exactly how it was when I see him. All these years pass, and he didn't live an easy life like the kind of life people we know does live—his life wasn't all that easy—and still he never turned into a hard man, you know. He remain kind. And he was always good-looking, in a soft way. His skin lighten in the cold weather. He used to be dark-dark here. But he got a little fairer, and it suits him.”

Madam sucked her teeth as if in resignation and added, “He would have made nice children, but he never had any. Not one. He would have made a good father, yes. I used to like the harder look in a man, but suddenly I see Harry St. George as a kind man, strong in a quiet kind of way. Not mousy, but not full of himself, either, and not bad-looking one bit. I offer him a sandwich, but he say he wasn't hungry. In any case, I still make the tea and a cheese sandwich and put it on the table in front of him.

“When Cassie finally make an appearance, he ask if she wanted to take a drive through the city and then up a mountainside road to a place they call Cypress Park. He wanted to go there so she and he could show me the city, all light up, from there. She say she had work to do but that it was definitely something I should not miss. It was like she eat hot pepper and her mouth wouldn't stay shut. She say she needed to concentrate on her work, but the weather was just right for that kind of sightseeing, and so I should take the chance to leave the house and get a bit of fresh air. She didn't wait for an answer from me; she take a set of keys off a hook on the wall and give them to me, saying not to worry about time, that I should just come and go as I please. Well, I can't tell you how vexed I get with her. I follow her back to her room to ask her if she gone mad. I tell her that her father would kill me, and I ask her what would people say back home if they knew Shem Bihar wife had gone sightseeing with a man at night. She say, ‘And how would anybody know? Who knows you up here? Guanagaspar is not exactly a place that people are too concerned about up here. Go and enjoy yourself. For once, at least

“So, I change my clothes. I put on a nice-enough dress and a little color on my lips. I daub cologne behind my ears. I wrap a cardigan around my shoulders, and out I went. You know, it was the first time since I married that I went anywhere with a man other than Boss.

“And he know the city well. After almost twenty years of living up there, I suppose it is to be expected. He give up some of his Guanagasparian ways, though, you know. He used to be so quiet here—almost frighten-frighten to come in our neighborhood—but he is a man of his own making now, you know. He has his own business, and he employs people. He really come up good, and with not one bit of help from anybody. If you see where he was born, where he and his mother used to live when he was a child. Well, the evening I speaking about, we drive—we drive so much that if we had done that over here, we would have circled the island a good few times in that one day-self. And you know, nine ten o'clock in the night it is still light—nobody in their house sleeping—everybody outside—the streets full of people walking, eating ice cream, window-shopping—and your head turning this way and that, nonstop, because the place pretty-pretty—you can't help but watch everything! We pass through a park that was bigger than Marion. Stanley Park, I believe they call it? And we cross bridge after bridge after bridge, to all kinds of different neighborhoods, one area they name Chinatown and another they call Gastown, to a market where, in the daytime, they sell fish and meat and yet the market clean-clean-clean and it don't have no bad smell whatsoever, and as I telling you, everywhere we went, he had some story to tell. He tell me the history of this and a story about that—but this history business is of no interest to me, in truth, yes. So I wasn't really listening to what he was saying. I mean, what is the point in knowing so much detail about a place you are not from?

“In any case, I thought Mr. Harry was just showing off how much he know. I say to myself he onl



interested in hearing himself speak, so stay quiet and let him speak. But a few times he ask me a question. And when I nod instead of answering his question, he realize I wasn't really listening. It was then I come to know that he was talking to me in truth, and not just to hear himself.

“So I try my best to listen. But is like you have to learn how to pay attention. It takes energy to pay so much attention, in truth. You know what I mean, Piyari? It make me uncomfortable for so to know he really addressing me when he speaking.

“For all the talk he talk, suddenly, driving up the mountain, he get quiet. I get the feeling his mind was on me, me sitting there in the car with him. It was a strange feeling. I was uncomfortable, yes.

“At a pullout halfway up the mountain road, he stop the car and we get out. It was so high up, Piyari. It was like looking down at a city from an airplane window, a city shimmering with lights.”

Piyari, not having been in an airplane, couldn't imagine it at all.

“Even with the cardigan I was wearing, it was too cold to be outside so. But he don't miss a thing. He noticed me gripping the neck of the cardigan, so he went back to the car and he return with a small blanket, a piece of flannel they call a throw. He open it out and throw it around my shoulders. It was nice and soft. And the minute it touch my skin, I stop trembling, it was so warm. It was then I realize I wanted him to keep his arm right there. Around me, I mean. But he didn't keep it there longer than it took to wrap the blanket-throw around me. Look how much time pass since then, and I can still smell the blanket. It smell just like him. The aftershave he wear. Like lime. I didn't want him to move away.”

A sweat broke on the back of Piyari's neck and her upper lip. What she was hearing was, on one hand, better than anything she had ever seen on one of those late-late-night movies on Guanagaspar's only television station. She couldn't help being curious; she wanted, in truth, to hear if Mr. Harry had kissed her Madam, and how they had kissed. But it worried and frightened her, too. Something about Madam revealing all of this to her wasn't right, wasn't fair.

“On the way back to Cassie's apartment, he ask if I wanted to stop and get a hot chocolate and dessert. I say, ‘You're hungry, eh? You didn't eat much for dinner.’

“He say, no, don't worry about him, he is fine. He talks nice, you know. Like Boss. You could still hear that a little bit of this place remain in him, but he sound Canadian. Is a good thing Cassie is up there. She speaks nice, too. Well, you have heard me—you know I can speak like them, too, if I want or if an occasion calls for it. But is different over here. We more relaxed over here, and besides, what you going to speak like that for on an everyday basis to people who don't know any better, and all you end up doing is making them feel uncomfortable and like you are plenty higher than them?

“As I was saying. He say, ‘I thought you might like a hot drink to warm you up.’ My mind went to Cassie. She might be worrying about me, I say to myself. And what, pray tell, she would be thinking of her mother taking off like that, staying out so long and so late, I wondered. So, we find a phone booth, and I ring her. You know, she wasn't there! She had work to do, my foot! She left a message on the machine saying ‘we’—boldface so, you know! *We*. I knew immediately it was that woman she spending so much time with—‘We went to the movies.’ The message finish up with that casual way she pick up over there, ‘Take it easy, now!’ She bother to worry herself about me? But one good thing about that message: if her father had called looking for me, he would think that same *we* meant she and me.

“So I take hot chocolate and he take a soft drink. He ask what dessert I want, and I ask him back which he liked. He laugh, that same laugh again, like if he know something you don't know, and he say, ‘Which do *you* want?’ Piyari-girl, I come so accustomed to accommodating everyone else's wishes that I didn't even know I myself had desire. A simple thing like a dessert and I didn't know

which one I wanted, but still, I say the first thing that jump in my mind—cheesecake. And is that we had.”

By this time the refrigerator was cleaned and everything put back in an orderly manner. Madam wasn't finished, so she walked over to the oven. Piyari opened the cupboard under the sink where the oven cleaners and the mitts were kept. She took them out and handed these to Madam.

“After, he drop me home. He is a decent man, so he ride the elevator up with me. I push open the door, but I telling you, in all sincerity, he didn't even put a foot in the doorway. He waited right there while I turned on lights. My good-for-nothing daughter wasn't back yet. I was worried he might want to come in. If he asked, how I could say no? He had come such a distance to take me out, so kindly. But he had the car keys in his hand dangling, ready to leave. How long you think he stayed? Only so long as to say I should call him, that it still had plenty place he want to take me. But, he say, he didn't want to make a nuisance of himself, so it was I who was to call. I was sorry after all, yes, that he was so quick to leave. But I couldn't bring myself to invite him to come in. I was worried he might think bad of me. But that is another thing—if he had come in, I wouldn't even have known how to behave with him. That is young-people kind of thing. I remind myself I am a married woman. Married with two full-grown children. Imagine me thinking this way, and in my own daughter's house?

“I say to myself I will just step forward, give him a hug, quick, nothing too meaningful, you must understand, just to say thank-you and good-bye, but he was halfway down the hallway heading for the elevator. Well, Piyari, I went inside the apartment and I was like a high school girl. I only hearing his voice in my head, and remembering how he asking me questions about myself and waiting for answers, and how when he look at me in my eyes I could hardly look back at him, 'fraid he see how I watching him. And I couldn't get over how his hair was black and soft. When he used to live here, he used to grease it up. Ent you know how fellows like to slick down their hair with grease? Well, he sto that, and I was surprised to see how thick and soft his hair get. And in a little breeze, the front part lift up nice-nice. And is a full head of black-black hair, you know, not a bit of gray in it. Oh Lord, that man confuse me for so that night. Piyari, you know what I like about that place? Nobody minding nobody business. I could sit down in a public place with a man like him and eat a piece of cheesecake and enjoy myself and there was nobody watching my every move, ready to run their mouth off.”

Suddenly Piyari straightened herself and looked toward the back door. She had heard the car. It hadn't yet pulled into the driveway, but she knew the particular hum of its engine as it rolled in front of the neighbors' houses toward the back gate. There was a time when Madam would have heard it, too, from well away, even as it entered the residential area from the highway. But not these days. Piyari lurched toward Madam, pushing her away from the oven and taking the cleaners from her. “Madam, that can't be Boss come for lunch? I didn't know you was expecting him.”

The car horn sounded—three sharp hoots.

Piyari's hands flew to her hips, akimbo. “That Dass. Who he think he is, blowing horn like that? He is the only one of the court drivers who does blow up the horn when he come here. He too important for himself. And today, just because he driving the attorney general, he will be so full of himself. I have to give him lunch, too? But Madam, lunch not make yet. What to do so?”

Madam pensively fingered the gold-plate cross on the chain around her neck and calmly ordered Piyari, as if there were no urgency, to take out a can of beans and a can of sausages and to heat them up. Piyari cupped her face with her hands. With her eyes wide in disbelief, she contradicted her employer.

“Sausage and beans, Madam? Can food you want to give Boss? I hope you forgive me, Madam, b is best I fry up some salt fish and edoes, and it have a coconut bake in the freezer. Or you throw it ou

Five-six minutes in the microwave, and the bake will thaw out. Otherwise I could lose my job this day for myself. ~~Why you didn't tell me Boss was coming home for lunch, Madam?~~

Madam walked away from the kitchen calmly, smoothing her hair. "Lord, in truth. What I was thinking? Is a good thing you here with me, yes. Don't worry yourself. Your job safe. He can't fire you but over my dead body. Who else I would talk to if not you? Who else would listen? Relax yourself.

"Don't forget to give Dass a plate of food. He have attitude, is true, but is lunchtime; he will be hungry. And you eat, too. I am going to take a little dip. If Boss ask for me, tell him I was feeling hot. That I in the swimming pool."

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# A HOUSE BY THE SEA



*A coastal hamlet in southwestern British Columbia, Canada. Present day.*

Harry heads to the retaining wall wearing his waterproof work jacket and rubber boots. Only a narrow strip of Howe Sound's ivory-colored water in front of his house is visible. A curtain of mist and clouds, hanging in the fjord for weeks now, blots out the shore on the far side.

In the past week he has left his property in Elderberry Bay only once. That was some days before Christmas. Kay had telephoned him several times, insisting that he spend Christmas Day with her, have lunch with her family, but he declined.

He wears heavy work gloves and carries a long rod and a steel pick for swinging into and catching the logs. The odor of the sea, its floor churned and spat up by winter storms, saturates the air. At the side of the house, pine needles and twigs and small boughs brought down in the storms threaten to bury the truck. It has been almost two weeks since he and his men stopped work for the season. He should have scrubbed and put away the lawn mowers, shovels, wheelbarrows, but they remain mud- and sapencrusted in the back of the truck.

It is supposed to be eagle season, a time when one expects to see them by the hundreds, perched in the highest bare-topped trees along the shore or cruising the length of the Sound as they scan for salmon carcasses. They should be easily spotted on the water, poised on spinning deadheads, a whole fish squirming between a beak or flapping in the talon of a raised foot. But, with this rain one minute wet snow the next, the fog and the mist, not one eagle is to be seen.

In spite of blowing rain, Harry has propped the front door and left a few windows slightly open; should the telephone ring, he wants to be sure to hear it. He is tired, but the clump of deadheads banging against the retaining wall needs to be pried apart.

The New Year is just around the corner. Surely, he thinks, she wouldn't make him wait until then. If only she would telephone and they could speak, even briefly, he would be freed, better able to celebrate the New Year. Otherwise, likely, he would spend that holiday waiting and alone, too.

But he wasn't entirely alone on Christmas Day. Anil, his first friend in Canada, had made the long drive from Vancouver to Elderberry Bay in the wet dark morning, his two grandchildren in tow, to pay the Christmas Day visit, a tradition now.

They sat on the enclosed verandah and watched wet snow fall. Harry warmed milk for the boys. They had brought him Indian sweets, which he put out on a plate and offered back to them. The children had expected that Harry, whom they knew to be a landscape designer, might have set up the yard with colorful prancing plastic reindeer, and the roof with a gift-laden Santa, one foot already down the chimney, but he hadn't. They pestered him with questions about what decorations he had in his shed, about why he hadn't put out any, about the neighbor's decorations, about those of his clients, and more. Their disappointment was eventually diverted by the competing prattling of the lovebirds he had received as a present that summer past. Harry had become so used to the birds and their mess that straightening the living room where they were kept, any more than piling an array of landscaping and garden magazines and seed and equipment catalogs neatly beside the couch, hadn't occurred to

him. The boys were intrigued by the sour, salty odor of birds inside the house, by their scatter of seed hulls and flecks of paper the female used in nesting. They lost interest, however, when one of them opened the cage and, attempting to coax a puffed-up reluctant bird onto a finger, was nipped so hard that an inverted purple-colored V-line blossomed instantly just under the surface of his skin. They left within an hour of arriving. That is how he spent Christmas Day. That and waiting. He had expected, hoped, that Rose would call, but she didn't. The last time Harry had taken it upon himself to ring, the spoke less than five minutes—she, whispering, nervous, from her bedroom, until Shem picked up the receiver in the den. Rose in an instant said, "You have the wrong number," and hung up on her end. He heard Shem say, "Is someone there? Hello?" and Harry, without saying another word, awkwardly put down the phone. She had asked him not to call again, promising to ring every other Friday evening when Shem was away playing poker with friends. And now several Fridays have passed with no word from her. He tries to understand, tries not to resent that he is not free to be in touch with her when he wants, but rather, must wait on her.

Whatever made him think he could, by himself, fish out the logs, he wonders. If he were to fall into that frigid salt water crammed with mountain-slide debris and logs escaped from booms, he would be beaten to a pulp so fine that he could be formed into the newsprint on which his obituary would be announced.

He turns back toward the house; he will wait until after the New Year, when he will call on one of his workers to help.

It would be good to see an eagle. Weeks into the season, and still not one is visible.

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## PAUSES AND OTHER GESTURES



He lies on one side, his side, of the unmade bed, hands tucked behind his head. There is no food in his refrigerator. He has no choice but to drive into Squamish today, but he will lie here, wait, that is, just a little longer. He does not look at the phone on his side table, but is as aware of it as if it were a trailer parked at his bedside. He stares at a dolphin-shaped water stain on the ceiling and indulges in a particular remembering. He conjures up the same few moments time and again. While the several other occasions have blurred together, he keeps this one intact and clear. He had fetched her from her daughter's apartment in Vancouver's West End. They were to go to Shannon Falls and then beyond, to the art gallery in Brackendale to see paintings of eagles done by members of the Brackendale Society of Amateur Painters. But he knew, even before he had gone to pick her up in Vancouver, that when they reached Elderberry Bay, some distance still from Shannon Falls, he would stop at his house, the excuse made that he had forgotten his camera there.

Although he knew precisely where the camera was to be found, he told her as he pulled into the yard that he had to look for it, and invited her to come into the house with him. She hesitated, and he thought, with some surprise, that she was about to accept his invitation. She said, however, that she would remain in the car, quickly adding, as if needing to justify her decision, that she wanted to watch the high-tide waves form and roll in. He did not press her, but her hesitation loomed large in his mind.

He entered the house, his heart racing, his brain as if it were on fire. He could barely think. He returned to the car without the camera. He walked directly to her side of the car and opened her door. She stared ahead at a wave forming. Neither spoke. The swell erupted and splayed its foam far out on the surface of the water well before it reached shore. She looked up at him. He uttered a word: "Please?"

He allowed her to lead the way to the house, stepping ahead to open the door only when they arrived at it. They walked quietly, he again behind her, down the hallway to the kitchen. He walked toward the refrigerator. She had positioned herself against a far counter.

"Will you drink something?" he asked. "Something light? Or, I can make coffee."

She did not answer. He tried to read into her silence. Finally she whispered, "No. I am all right. What do you want?" In the quiet of her voice he had heard her composure, and his uncertainty vanished instantly.

These days he replays in his mind, over and over, the moments that followed.

He leaned against the refrigerator, his hands pressed behind his back, and in the quiet save for the electrical humming, he muttered, "This is strange, isn't it? Being alone with you, I mean. It's good. Are you all right?"

She nodded, and so he stepped forward. But she raised her hand and shook her head, gesturing *no* to his advance. He continued and she stepped sideways, raising both hands firmly in front of her. She said, softly but sharply, "No, Harry. Don't. Stop," but he mirrored her step and caught her hands in his. She seemed weightless when he pulled her toward him. The heat of her body and the form of her

breasts, the unbelievable fact of them against him, caused the light in the room to seem to dim, and a quivering to climb his body, from his feet to his reddening face. She had suddenly seemed to relax, and so, trembling unabashedly, he loosened his hold. She remained there, lightly, against him, and that surprised him, as he knew she would have, through the thinness of her summer dress and the coarseness of his khaki trousers, felt his burning.

It was under the duvet of the same bed on which he lies alone, the full width of which he is still unable to reclaim for himself, that the two of them rocked their way into each other. But the point of his constant reliving of this time is always to arrive at the moment when, as if a decision had been made, Rose opened herself wide and, curling her body, drew him in.

Other occasions haunt him, too: the day she was in the water in front of his house, floating on her back, waving at him to join her. He had been watching her as he hosed down the path in front of the house. He had turned away long enough to shut off the hose and reel it onto its rack. When he returned, she had disappeared. Horrified, he ran into the house to fetch his binoculars. Through them he saw her walking on the gravel beach, with no towel to dry herself nor robe to wrap around her. When she reached him, she was tired but exhilarated. She had spotted a child in difficulty off in the distance and had swum to the child and taken her directly to the shore. She had been so at home in the water there, he imagined her content in Elderberry Bay.

His mind flits, too, to the time he had recounted for her his beginnings in Canada, the days when he drove for a taxi company so that he could put himself through school. He had wanted her to understand how he had risen out of adversity and with no family name or inheritance to ease him along, with no assistance from any arm of government—he had, as far as he was concerned, triumphed. He remembers her response: “I am married to a man who comes from the same background as myself, but it is a man who was once a taxi driver, and is now a gardener, who makes me happy.”

He tries to understand why, on returning to Guanagaspar, she drove herself to the run-down village of Raleigh, where he was born. She looked up the old couple who were like his family. She was surprised that they had remembered her. How could they not have? When she was a child, she had visited the fish market with her mother. Uncle Mako had wrapped colorful footballer fish in newspaper for her.

On her return from that visit to his friends, Rose immediately telephoned Harry. She told him that the old people, wiry and a little age-bent, wanted to know if he was happy, how he was managing, if he had good friends, kind neighbors. Tante Eugenie, in her unchanged style, slid fresh carite slices into hot oil, and the three of them ate. They wanted to give Rose everything they had; Uncle Mako went to the back of the house and returned with a bundle of dasheen bush, milk dripping from its fresh knife cuts. He went down to the beach and returned dragging a crocus bag full of live conch. The bag was so heavy that it took him and Rose, both lifting it by its corners, to put it in the trunk of the car, which she had to have cleaned the instant she got back to her house. Before Rose left, the old lady took her hands in hers and said, “Child, we old now; we going to dead and gone soon. But until then, we here for you just like we was for him. If you need anything, you come to us. We don’t have much, but whatever we can do for you, we will do.” She removed a chain with a cross pendant from around her neck and handed it to Rose. “Take this. Is for you to hand to our Harry, but you wear it until, God willing, next you see him.” It had been a gift from Harry’s mother to Tante Eugenie, a piece of costume jewelry worth only the memory of an uneventful Mother’s Day decades ago. Rose told Harry over the phone that she had not yet removed it, nor would she until she had the chance to give it to herself.

All of this and then, so abruptly, no contact.

Was he no more than fuel to light a spark between her and her onerous husband? Was he, Harry, a good presence for them? In the silence that exists between them these days, such thoughts occur to him often.

Rain pellets flick hard at his window. He must go into Squamish before the shops close. He is bound to run into Kay in Squamish. After turning down the offer of Christmas lunch at her house, he dreads seeing her. But he does not have a drop of milk in the house, nor bread, nor eggs. He turns on his side and stares at the black piece of plastic that is his phone.

He picks up the receiver and listens. It works. In all of this rain, it still works. He replaces it quickly.

New Year's Eve is just around the corner.



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