

ULLSWATER

ROMESH GUNESKERA

RANJIT SAID HE wants me to feel at home so he took me to a pub on the road above the lake. It was a fine summer's day. We sat outside. You must have some English beer, he said; he placed two pints of dark brown bitter between us and sat leaning forward with his elbows on the table. He had been wanting to talk to me ever since I arrived in England, but with his young family around there had never been quite the right moment until now. And now he was so anxious that his whole face became contorted when he spoke.

10 He said that lately he'd been feeling uncomfortable. He couldn't sleep at night. It was because of his father; he felt he knew so little about his father—my brother, Senaka—and he couldn't stop thinking about him. What the hell happened Uncle? He shook his head trying to clear it. What happened to him in the end?

I didn't know where to begin. I could hear sheep bleating in the field behind us. Up and down the long garden the borders brimmed with pink and blue English flowers: Senaka would have known all their names, but the foxgloves and hollyhocks out at the bottom of the garden framing Ullswater in purple are the only ones I know, and those only because I asked. It feels wholesome and safe, blessed, as if the air had been licked clean. I looked at Ranjit across the table. I wanted to tell him everything.

20 Two days before he died I visited your father, I began, back home. It was three o'clock in the afternoon. The sun boiled in the sky; the hot air rattled the pods roasting on the big flame trees by the road. Nothing else moved. Even the crows were stunned.

How can I forget it?

I banged on the gate, one of those wrought-iron affairs. The white paint was peeling; bits—round rusty shards—fell like blossom at my feet. Your temple flowers.

The house was run down. You could see the rain had destroyed the guttering on one side leaving the wall stained with big dark damp patches. The veranda looked a mess: chairs piled up at one end in the wash of some monsoon flood and boxes scattered all about. I even thought the house might be deserted, that Senaka—your father—might have gone away. Then a man appeared.

Where's the *mahathaya*? I asked.

30 Inside, he said.

I asked him to open the gate.

He took out a bunch of keys and unlocked the padlock. It was as big as a fist holding a fat iron chain; it slithered to the ground.

Call him, I said. Tell him Victor *aiya* has come.

The man disappeared inside the house. I waited on the porch steps. In the garden creepers throttled the blue jacaranda. Weeds had overrun what used to be flower beds and there were big bald patches under the breadfruit tree. The anthuriums had burst their pots and thick tongues of buffalo grass grew everywhere.

40 I hadn't seen Senaka for years, ever since I moved down south. There was never an occasion for us to get together. No reason to I suppose; we had our own worlds, our own preoccupations. He had his books, he was married, and in any case did not care for company, and I was busy running around trying to find a job, looking for ideas; I had tried all sorts of things before turning to teaching English: politics, newspapers, the post office, even the palm-oil trade—but for me it has always been a hand to mouth existence. Not like his. But then one day your mother, Sonia, wrote to say she had left him. She said he was not well but it was impossible for her to do anything for him. Apparently he wouldn't even look at her anymore. You were already studying in England and so Senaka was on his own. Things had gone very wrong for him and I felt I had to do something. I wanted to renew our frayed family ties. There was a lot of lost ground to retrieve. He was my brother and I had done nothing for him. It was not right.

50 I suppose I needed something too. The years—even then—already seemed to have just disappeared into nothing; I had frittered them away so foolishly. Now I have to take each day as it comes with liver salts and iodine and I know we have so little time however long we are given; and yet . . . We had each always been too proud of our independence. Even in our father's house, growing up, we quickly escaped in our own separate ways: he into his books, me into town. I never told him much about anything. He had to find out for himself like anyone else; he always seemed to know what he wanted to do anyway.

When we were children he was the one who always seemed to be examining the world bit by bit; searching, as it were, for something that would redeem it. Maybe it was because of our mother: she was so ill—so distant—although I think her problems really started only after his

60 birth.

He was a great reader, your father; he read everything he could lay his hands on. The second-hand bookshop on Junction Road near our house was heaven for him. Those days it ran a pay-as-you-read library service. You could buy a dozen books for a rupee and after reading them sell them back for fifty cents, or something, a week later. In this way most of England's literature passed through his hands. As he grew older the number of books he could afford to keep also grew and he began his own library, which he stacked up in precarious columns in his tiny room. From these books he learned about England in extraordinary detail. It became the country of his dreams: rich, fertile, full of a kind of tubby valour.

70 I was different, I was older than him: I was appalled at his infatuation with England. As an earnest young man I told him England was an occupying power that had to be repulsed. A blight on the spirit of freedom. In those days I was equally dismayed by our political leadership: at the time it seemed to me so uninspired. I wished we were in India where there was so much more of a struggle. Some fight, some idealism. Gandhi. Rose. You know, men who were doing something for their country. But Ceylon seemed full of lackeys. Everyone wanted to be Head Boy in the Governor's house. How could they? Only when the leftists started up in 'thirty-five did we begin to see a real future. They went out into the villages during the malaria to help our people. And the people recognized their concern. When the elections finally came they responded. I joined up.

80 But your father wouldn't dream of it. He was bright and could have done anything he wanted. He would have gone far in the system if he had wanted to. He could have joined the Civil Service, or done law, become a barrister, anything if he didn't want to fight for our natural rights. But instead in his mid-twenties he married your mother, Sonia. It was a love match. One of the first in town. While he was meant to be preparing for his examinations Senaka, unnoticed, had gone courting. It surprised everyone. We knew her as the daughter of a very wealthy fellow who lived on the other side of town and the marriage was seen as quite a coup. Everybody talked about it.

People even said he had used a magic spell—a *mantram*—and so on, but I don't think Senaka himself knew how he did it; or why.

90 I remember your mother as a slim elegantly dressed girl with a big open face. It was flat as a plate and extraordinarily pale. In the evenings, in the afterglow of sunset, when parrots darted across the sky, her face would absorb light and slowly become luminous like the moon. She was a lovely girl in those days.

Quite frankly I don't really know what she saw in him, but then I can't say I understand how these things happen. I could never let go of myself like that; I always thought you should find yourself first before you embraced someone else, a stranger.

But it was all very sweet. He used to take strings of marigolds for her wrist: velvety, bittersweet flesh flowers. One time I saw them—the flowers—trailing down his leg and asked him where he was going. He said he was going to the bookshop. With marigolds? I asked. He quickly-stuffed them into his pocket. I want to look something up, he said. Botany. His face flushed.

The wedding took place within the year. I suppose it gave our parents some joy in those last years of their lives, although it was hard to tell with mother being the way she was.

100 Your grandfather, Sonia's father, said at the wedding, in front of us all: My daughter must have the best. I'll give you a house, a good start, but if you ever make her unhappy—he cocked a fat yellow finger at Senaka—I'll put a bullet in you myself, understand? And he might easily have done if he had lived long enough. He was an ox of a man. In the beginning the house seemed such a blessing to Senaka. I always thought it was one of the loveliest in town: large and rambling with that stone floor polished like marble and the ornate carved wood frieze—the *mal lella*—under the roof, the Dutch tiles. It was so much more gracious than our cramped bungalow. Your father was so proud of it. He showed me how he had turned one of the bedrooms into a study and lined the walls with his books. You remember how his window opened to your garden full of such grand old trees: mango, king-coconut, bread-fruit.

110 Marriage protected your father from my needling and allowed him to indulge completely in his quaint English manners. Love, he knew from his reading, was not only blind but blinding. Desire blinded. It gave him the privilege of wallowing in his fantasies. While I measured each day's news against our goal of self-government he compared new verse, fresh as apples from England, to the Lake Poets he'd committed to memory. And he managed to feel the more virtuous of us. He seemed to grow older much faster than I did.

Then came the war: in those days the talk in town was all about the Japanese air-raid and the Soulbury Commission, the jailing of the *Sama Samajists* and the struggle for our national independence. Fighting talk. For me it was heady stuff, but when he and I met it was as if nothing were happening in the world. Even when they dropped the atom bomb he said nothing. Somehow by then

120 his incredible dismissal of the daily news—the exigencies of our lives—had a strange authority over anything I could say. He was able to engender such inhibitions in me that it became impossible for me to talk to him about anything serious without feeling I was babbling like a little boy. He, rather than our poor unfortunate parents, had come to represent family stability and authority.

By tacit agreement we also never talked about his marriage, even though the wedding had divided our world, his from mine. And so, slowly, we drifted apart and that common memory of childhood which was once practically the whole of our lives—picking *jambu*, escaping to the tree-house, tense cricket matches played by ourselves—shrank and became a tiny core wearing itself out. Our words to ourselves outnumbered everything else in our heads. Whenever we met, in
130 those early years, your mother would leave us alone to talk but we would just sit on those wicker chairs on the veranda and speak about the baker's bloody bread, or some technical problem with your father's gramophone . . . Then one of us would get up abruptly and say, Must go now, and that was that.

He became such a conservative—that was the thing. It was as if, having found your mother, nothing else mattered to him. While people like me ran around vainly trying to shape a new society, he preferred to sit in his garden and watch his flowers grow, or read his books of faraway places in the light of a yellow desk lamp and dream of another world. I really couldn't understand it at the time.

Then you were born, and he discovered how little he had that was his own. He complained to your mother that not only was the house not really his own but everything in it seemed to belong, in its
140 origin, to somebody else. The tables, the cupboards, the china, the crockery, even the bed they slept in had somebody else's imprint on it. Everything was a gift, and every giver had purchased a small claim on his life, a claim on his well-being. And everything came from your mother's side; from her father, or mother, or an uncle, or an aunt. Even you—his baby son—had your mother's features, her family bounce. As a child you had nothing of Senaka as far as he could tell; not even that slight tilt of the head that had kept our people listing but afloat generation after generation. And the mandarin comfort of his home which he had taken such care to protect from the harsh realities outside suddenly appeared to him to be a complete illusion. Nothing had been protected. The whole island had a finger in his life, while he himself had nothing. It soured him.

Your mother had been his only link to the rest of the world; she dealt with all the practicalities and fed him the bits he needed to nourish his life. She must also have given him some real warmth. But
150 after you were born I think he felt she was slowly leaving him stranded inside his tight, tight head.

In those days up in our hill country the stars at night were so close you could almost touch them. They swarmed across the sky like a million tiny mirrors of our earth. I used to feel proud just seeing them—as if they too were somehow ours—but Senaka found no solace. He felt that the stars had all turned against him. I think to him it was as if the whole place, the times, the land, the sky, the country, family, history, destiny all conspired against him. After our parents passed away he just withdrew. Your mother told me he had become closed completely, hunched up. She said that when their eyes met it was no different from meeting the gaze of a stray cat. That was when, as you remember, he retreated to his study and stayed with the door shut. In his bit of territory at least I guess he felt safe
160 from the twists of the world outside; comfortable with the sound of a heavy ceiling fan swishing the air, the muffled thud of books closing, pages decaying, himself growing old. Outside there were the crickets, the cawing of crows, and occasionally the crash of an overripe bread-fruit falling through the thick leaves of that huge tree.

Anyway, when he finally appeared on the veranda that hot afternoon in 1967 when I went to his house, his eyes were screwed up against the light. His mouth was lopsided. He wore a banyan over a crumpled sarong and scratched at his head as he walked.

Were you sleeping? I asked. His face was rubbery. He nodded and sat down on one of his wicker chairs. He took a deep breath but said nothing. I could smell arrack coming off his skin: an almost visible vapour fermenting the hot afternoon air. The place reeked of liquor.

170 He expressed no surprise at my suddenly turning up after so many years.

How are things? I asked. Are you OK?

He shrugged. I don't know, he said. Are you? His eyes were briefly defiant. He spoke with his chin to his chest, his eyes fastened on his knees, but every now and again they'd flick up to check who might still be around. He rubbed his forehead as he spoke and his face glistened with sweat. He was unshaven. Tiny beads formed like warm dew on his peppery upper lip.

I asked about your mother.

She's gone away, he replied quickly. He didn't say any more as if he wanted to forget some misunderstanding.

So we just sat there breathing in each other's air. A couple of flies settled on the table.

180 It wasn't the first time we had sat like that in silence. Only this time Senaka looked about to burst like the dusty pot plants in the garden. His bare feet were swollen. He had always looked serious as a boy. His brows, nose and mouth used to rush together to the centre of his face, pulling it into a permanent frown. Now they were puffed up in different shapes, distending and distorting his face into something soft and vacant.

What's happened, Senaka? I asked. I wanted to capture some of the time we'd lost. Life was passing by too fast I wanted to say. Too fast for us to sit there saying nothing.

He lifted his head and looked at me suspiciously. I'm all right, he said. What do you think?

190 The veranda with the dark grand lounge behind it had such a mysterious air. You must have felt it too. It was a front: a place for small talk, entertainment. It was the foyer of a theatre which then became the theatre itself; a stage for lies, artifice, pretence. Neither of us had the stomach for it any more.

Your father stood up and said he had a headache; then, bowing his head as if in a plea for clemency, he suggested we go to his room. The arrack on his breath was sour. He headed towards the back of the house, walking close to the wall, steadying himself every now and then by testing it with the heel of his palm. His head was cocked at an angle. He swayed a little and left a trail of cheap coconut liquor in the warm air. I followed him.

200 When he opened the door to his study I felt we had walked into a lair. Nicotine clung to everything, the wolfy stink of gut-rot: diarrhoea and stale smoke. He had a lavatory adjoining his room; it had no door. Old screws on the frame had rusted and released a brown stain down the sides. The small square sink was cracked; a dead cockroach lay on the edge by the bits of dry green soap. His roll of toilet paper had unwound from a wooden peg and there were rags plugging a leaky cistern. I could see him sitting on the commode every night with his head in his hands, retching, spluttering, drinking his ropey arrack from a bottle on the wet floor, bleaching out his stomach; too drunk to unhitch his sarong when he finished.

There was a tall glass with a finger of yellow liquor already on the table. A cigarette lay burnt-out on the arm of a chair with two inches of ash curling like a grey horn.

He opened a cupboard and picked up another glass and a half empty bottle. Arrack? He showed me the bottle.

210 I said, Fine. I wanted to make some gesture of good will. I was willing—God knows I was willing then—even though I felt sick inside. I looked around the room. In a corner on a table was the old gramophone with a broken lid, and two cane armchairs—*hansi-putu*—and a sofa-bed by the windows.

Senaka put some ice in the glass from a small fridge he had installed in the room and sloshed the liquor in: the ice cracked like a pistol shot. He then filled his own glass. We sat on the armchairs. He closed his eyes and said, Cheers! His voice was already thickening. He didn't look at me.

For a long time we just sipped our drinks while I tried hard to think of a way of bringing us back to life. It was so hot and wasting. We just sat there like strangers. I said nothing. I couldn't help it.

220 Then slowly he started talking, the words coming faster and louder as he spoke; in a harsh bitter voice he started accusing me. You always thought I was bloody useless, didn't you? he said. A lackey. A sponge. The monkey in your glory parade . . . His eyes were half closed, the skin around them twitched. You hated me; You hated me for intruding, for being born, for being me. For not being one of you. You thought it was all my bloody fault. . .

I felt poison burning my lungs. Each word was wrung out of his mouth with such bitterness. Hate?

I told myself he was not well. I told him, It's all right. Take it easy. But then he shouted at me.

I said OK, all right. I lifted both my hands, open and empty. I surrender. I give in. What do you want? I asked.

230 Don't fucking patronize me. I want nothing, he shouted. I've got what I want. What the hell do you want? Why did you come?

Then he started shouting about mother. *Our* mother. As if he thought I blamed him for her illness. Maybe I did once but that was so far back, I had put it behind me. I wanted to reach him again so much. I came to help— what are we if we can't help each other?—but anger was climbing up inside my throat. He had no right to shout at me like that, to talk like that. I felt all wired up inside.

There is nothing left, he then said quietly. We are on our own, until we are dead we are on our own. You can't get away from that. He dug one hand into the other.

What about your son? I asked. About you. I thought he must recognize some responsibility.

But he looked at me as if he didn't know what I was talking about. He then crossed his arms tight against his chest and closed his eyes. Just get out will you, he said. Go! Leave me alone. His eyes

240 were squeezed tight. I don't need you here. Get the fucking hell out of here, he shouted again.

I wanted to smash the glass in my fist, hammer some sense into him, but I controlled myself and very carefully put the glass down on the table. My hand was shaking. My shoulders felt swollen and the blood throbbed at the back of my head. I felt all hot again; the sweat broke out of my skin and soaked the back of my shirt. It dribbled all down my spine. Almost every single moment of frustration, every disagreement we had ever had, every argument from the most trivial over a cricket ball to the most profound over democracy voiced and unvoiced returned like a flood to fill me with all the fury I had ever felt about him. But I held it in; my whole body began to go numb.

I was so angry with him for making it so. For his drunkenness. For his hopelessness. I could not bear to stay a minute longer. There was nothing I could do that I wouldn't later regret. I got up to go.

250 Then he opened his eyes for a moment and I saw something drop behind them. Just for a moment he looked vulnerable and weak—so frightened—but it quickly faded. It was too late. I walked out. I went as fast as I could with that frightened angry look on his face clinging to me; it stuck inside and has stayed stuck.

Two days later he was dead. He shot himself in the head.

I still feel cold to think about it...

When you came back from England for the funeral no one wanted to say anything; there seemed to be no need. The coroner was kind and you had to get back for your finals.

Then later when you got married here in England and settled down I never expected to see you again. I knew there was nothing for you back home after what had happened: only me. Your mother

260 told me how you had said you never wanted to see her again after she remarried. I felt like writing to you then. It was not her fault. There was nothing else she could have done; she couldn't have coped alone in that house. But I didn't write. I don't know why. I suppose I was waiting for something...

So when you wrote inviting me to come and meet the family, and arranged for the ticket and all, I was really happy. I thought maybe there was some hope then, at least for you. You know, among my papers I had come across a big brown scrapbook full of cuttings collected by your father. The pages were brittle, riddled with holes; the edges crumbled into yellow dust in my fingers. It had all turned into so much rubbish, good for nothing but weevils: everything had felt so pointless.

I had been staring out at the black water while talking. When I looked back at Ranjit I saw he was

270 about to cry; his face was lopsided, the skin tugged down by his mouth.

But what did my father really want? he asked. What the hell did he think he was doing? . . . Ranjit's voice was so harsh.

Surely he understood his father had turned into a drunk, that he had become ill, and that he had deliberately cut himself off? But Ranjit seemed to want me to exonerate him. Us.

In the end I said, Your father knew what he was doing. In his own way he *knew*. There wasn't anything more I could say.

I sipped the beer, Ranjit's English bitter, and waited for my mouth to go numb.