

The Intrusion

We looked blatantly out of place there. Tiny houses, almost miniature ones, but spick and span. A little path, so narrow, that if we stretched our arms we could touch the houses on both sides. Why had we come here? I walked stiffly, self-consciously, trying hard to seem unaware of the stares, the curious eyes that followed us. I wished I could turn around and stare back with the same frank curiosity, but all I could do was to peep covertly through the corners of my eyes. Men in checked lungis sitting at fishing nets, drying fish laid out in rows on poles, women with bold faces and gold ornaments ... all the signs of a fishing village. But, I thought, if this is a fishing village, where is the sea? And then we reached the end of the lane, turned right, and there, suddenly, enchantingly, was the sea in front of us, immense and fascinating. And again rows and rows of fish hung up to dry, looking at us and at the blue of the sky with sightless, accusing eyes.

I stopped and stared. He stopped too, and looked at me with a slight, a very slight impatience which aroused the faintest wisp of annoyance in me. Then he beckoned to me with a friendly smile and I hurried on. Now we were walking on the sand, squelchy, oozing, almost black. The sea must have been here not long back, during the high tide. I found it difficult walking in my high heels, with my heavy sari squashing damply round my ankles. I was conscious of an unreasonable pang of irritation against him. As though sensing my discomfort, he held my arm to help me, but awkwardly, too tight, and I wanted to protest, to release my arm from his constricting grip. The sea had left innumerable shells on the shore which crunched under our feet and I bent down to pick

up one—any excuse to loosen his hold on my arm. But—horrors!—there was something alive, something crawling in the shell and I threw it away in disgust and hurried on after him.

Now, thankfully, we were out of the sand and back in the village, but a village that looked so different it was difficult to believe it was the same. The paths were broader and went steeply uphill. There were scarcely any signs of the sea—no fishing nets, no dried fish. Instead, there was the familiar lacy foliage of the drumstick tree outlined sharply against the sky, the drumsticks hanging limply and peacefully from the branches. I had no time to look around. The man, loaded with our new, expensive suitcases, was already at the top of the hill and I had to hurry, to stumble on uphill, panting, wishing now for the support I had earlier spurned.

'We're almost there,' he said encouragingly and yes, we had left all the huts behind us. We went up a steep rocky path, lined by big boulders, and suddenly we were at the top. A square, squat building stared at us blankly. My hair blew anyhow and my sari began billowing into odd, ugly shapes. Someone came forward to receive us and opened one of the rooms for us. I sank gratefully into a chair, easing my tired feet out of my slippers, too exhausted even to look around.

'Isn't this nice?' he asked me beaming, pleased with himself, all signs of nervousness and irritation gone now that we had arrived. 'Yes,' I said.

It had the usual dullness and impersonality of any room where people stay for a short time and go away, leaving no impress of themselves behind. Just a jumble of stale smells. Even, I sniffed surreptitiously, a smell of bedbugs. The man flung open the windows and the breeze rushed in at us, destroying, at one stroke, all the smells.

'Do you want anything?' he asked.

'Yes, some tea. Is that all right?'

I nodded and the man went out. Though when he was in the room I had looked away from him, painfully aware of a secret smile, a smirk on his face that showed an awareness of what we had come here for, suddenly I wished he had not gone. He left behind him a painful silence, an embarrassment

that occurs between two people who scarcely know each other and I wondered wildly, desperately, what we could talk about. As if the silence made him uneasy too, he began to move about the room whistling tunelessly. Then he suddenly burst into speech, telling me how fortunate he was to get this place for our honeymoon. What luck, he said, that one of the top executives, who was to have come here, had cancelled his visit at the last minute, so that we were here all by ourselves. 'Complete privacy,' he smiled, emphasizing the words and I felt suddenly, completely sickened. He went on, unaware of my feelings, telling me it was only the lucky few who could get this place to stay.

And then I began to wonder about these few, and did they come here with their families? Somehow it didn't seem like a place where children had ever played and shouted, with mothers hovering round, anxious and nagging. There was something furtive about the place, something deadpan about the servant's face, which made me feel that the men who came here did so with 'other women'—girls, perhaps, bold-faced and experienced, who would laugh and chat with the men, not go through what I was enduring now. Fears. Tremors. The way I averted my face from the beds. The sheets looked grubby and the pillow covers disgustingly greasy. 'Tell the man to change the covers and sheets,' I wanted to say, but couldn't. I imagined the man giving me meaningful looks when I said it, and later, perhaps, he would discuss us with the other servants. And all of them would make bawdy jokes and laugh aloud.

He went inside—I could hear sounds of him vigorously washing his face. I lay back in the chair, full of lassitude, too tired even to examine all my emotions, only one thought penetrating through the haze—I wish I was back home. The tea arrived. It smelt of kerosene, so did the bread and butter. I was suddenly very hungry and had a sharp pang of longing for the sweets my mother had packed for me. 'I've put some sweets in your bag,' she had said, turning her tired face to mine. 'Ridiculous!' I would have snapped, even a day earlier. 'You can't go on a honeymoon with sweets in your suitcase.' But something forlorn in her face and eyes had restrained me

and I had silently acquiesced. Now I knew that my hunger for her sweets had something to do with the look on her face as well. Yet I felt shy, unwilling to open my suitcase and devour the sweets before him like a greedy schoolgirl.

'We are looking for a girl, simple but sophisticated,' his mother had said. 'My son is working in a foreign company. His wife must be able to entertain and mix with foreigners.' She had made the word foreigners sound like 'martians'. Simple and sophisticated—was I that, I wondered? It had seemed I was, for my mother had joyfully told me that they had agreed to our proposal. No one had asked me if I had agreed; it had been taken for granted. I had taken it for granted myself, when suddenly, a few days before the wedding, I had gone to my father, stricken by doubts. 'Why?' he had asked me, again and again. And, 'What will you do then?' In a panic I had asked myself 'What will I do?' And I had thought of a thousand answers, but none to the question 'What's wrong with him?' I had nothing to say, either, when my father said quietly, 'I have two more daughters to be married.'

'Why are you so silent?' he asked, breaking into my thoughts.

'I'm tired. Just a little.' I smiled as I said it, a painful, awkward smile, the smile one gives a distant acquaintance. What if I had said, 'Now that I've had my tea, can I go home?'

He came closer, looking concerned, and put his arm round me, but awkwardly, stiffly, so that we looked like two marionettes sitting side by side. I tried to move but his hold was firm. He smelt of sweat. Through his glasses, his eyes had a sardonic gleam that frightened me.

'It's a bit stuffy here, isn't it?' I got up, trying to sound casual. 'Let's go out to the veranda. I want to see the sea.'

Unwillingly he let me go and followed me out. The sea was far away. There was only the breeze and a strong smell of dried fish. The cliff on which the building stood jugged out into the sea, giving the beach below us a private, secluded and inviting look. The sand gleamed orange in the light of the setting sun and even as we stood there in silence, the sun went down, swiftly and suddenly, taking us by surprise. I was conscious of a slight headache, a faint nausea. I had a great

longing to go down, to scuff my bare toes in the sand, to pick up shells and sit on the rocks, letting the friendly waves climb up my bare legs. He would swim, I thought, and call out to me in a lazy and friendly way and I would respond with a wave and a smile. But all this was in the future, possibly, if at all. And at present we were not friends, not acquaintances even, but only a husband and wife. And the slightly glazed look in his eyes as he hummed a popular tune told me how unaware he was of everything but of what was to happen between us, making us truly husband and wife. When we were, I thought again, not even acquainted with each other. A month back we had not even heard of each other.

'Let's go down to the sea,' I said suddenly.

'Now?' He seemed surprised. 'Let's go in the morning.'

Yes, but before the morning there's the night—I quailed at the thought. He saw the look on my face and smiled at me.

'It's going to be dark soon. Look at the way.'

A little path went zig-zagging crazily down the cliff.

He put his arm round my waist. 'You don't really want to go down, do you?' It was said in my ear, almost a whisper, and it sickened me, like those furtive touches and glances from faceless, nameless men in crowds. My mind shied like a frightened horse from the words, from the thought.

'Come on in.' He pulled at my arms. 'It's getting chilly.'

So it was. And dark as well; we had to switch on the lights in the room. Someone had removed the tea things and made the beds. I thought with a wistful pang of my own narrow bed at home and of how I would lie on it, curled into a comfortable ball, reading into the late hours of the night. I felt a constriction in my throat, a longing for all the things I had left behind me forever: a melancholy that always assails one when away from home at this time, neither day nor night.

He seemed unaffected by the atmosphere or any melancholy and noisily opening his suitcase, took out some clothes and went in to change. I sat quietly for a minute, then flew to the veranda, unwilling to admit, even to myself, that I didn't want to hear the intimate sounds that were seeping through the thin walls and flimsy door. I stood there, leaning against the wooden railings, tugging savagely at my hair, wishing I

were anywhere but here, with a strange man in a strange room. Wishing that I could project myself into the future, gulf this intervening time and become all at once an experienced, mature woman; one who would not turn a hair at anything. Just then he called out my name, using it so familiarly, with such a proprietorial air that I was startled. A little angry, too. Reluctantly I went in.

'Why don't you change?' he asked and it seemed to me that there was something insinuating in his tone, something eager and excited about him that put me off.

I changed, thankful that my night-dress was modest. His eyes slid over me briefly and he was once again a nameless stranger. Then they slipped away from me. I opened the door to the veranda.

'Where are you going?'

'Nowhere. Just out here.'

'Come here.'

'Let's stand out for a few minutes.' I was pleading now.

'No. Come here.'

Unwillingly I turned and went to him, my legs as heavy as lead. And suddenly his arms were round me, his face close to mine, his rough chin scraping, hurting my cheek. His embrace was too sudden, too rough, and I wanted to scream, to cry out. But somehow I knew that this was just between the two of us. I turned my face away from him, trying to escape, so that the kiss he intended for my lips landed in the air. He let me go abruptly. There was a foolish, angry look on his face. His glasses had fallen down in the struggle. Mutely I picked them up and gave them to him. He was silent while he wiped them and put them on. When he finally spoke, his voice was shrill, almost with a note of hysteria in it. 'What's this? Why are you behaving like this?'

'Like what?' I tried to keep my own tone level, innocent.

'Avoiding me. Don't think I haven't noticed it. Ever since we came here you've been ... been ... avoiding me,' he ended lamely.

'No, I have not, I'm not....' It was the reflex denial of a child.

'Do you think I enjoy feeling that I'm forcing myself on you? What's the problem? Why are you acting so strange?'

I felt contrite at the sight of his bewildered face. But I had nothing to say.

'You're not an innocent little girl, are you? You know ...'

Yes, I did. No, I was not innocent. In fact, just before the wedding, I'd read a book. Not furtively, hiding in dark corners, but openly. And it was my mother who had blushed like a girl on seeing it. As I'd read it, strange shivers had gone over me; finally I had thrown the book away in disgust. What things, I had thought, one has to do just to propagate the human race!

I stood silent. Angry, hurt, crestfallen, he waited for my answer. 'We ... we scarcely know each other,' I stammered at last.

He seemed flabbergasted. 'Know each other? What has that to do with it? Aren't we married now? And how will we start getting to know each other if you put on such a touch-me-nottish air?'

I want to know all about you, I wanted to say. What you think, what you feel and why you agreed to marry me? And what did you think of as we went through all those ceremonies together, and do you like the things I do and will we laugh together at the same jokes, enjoy the same books? And there were all those fears crouching in me—would his breath smell, and were his feet huge and dirty with uncut toenails, and did he chew his food noisily and belch after meals? I wanted to tell him how shy and frightened I was about exposing the mysteries of my body to him and how homesick I was for my mother's face, my father's laughter and my sisters' chatter.

But I could say none of these things to him. Even if I did, I thought, looking at his face, he would not hear me. He was all keyed up for a different experience and for him other things would come later. While I wished to talk now, sitting up the whole night, so that in the morning we could smile at each other like old friends. I stammered as I tried to explain, I flushed, I almost burst into tears looking at his angry face. The eager look in his eyes died as I spoke, and finally he turned away from me, violently flung himself on a bed and lay there still. I felt as if I had committed a crime, yet there was a light-hearted sense of escape, too. Quietly I went to my bed

and lay down, trying to sleep, while countless erotic images came out of the pages of the book I had read and tortured my distracted mind. I lay wondering if I was that thing I had read about, a frigid woman, incapable of love. And what we would do if it were so. I imagined myself returning to my parents' home, shamed and rejected, and the consternation and grief it would cause there, my sisters' marriages held up forever, my parents disgraced—all because of me.

Simple and sophisticated, I told myself, choking myself with my blanket to prevent my gurgle of laughter from being heard. But how can I, with a man I scarcely know? It's not fair, I thought angrily. It's indecent. He should have given me some time. What a way to spend our honeymoon, I thought, imagining him sulking the whole time, and I, moving around with a load of guilt, shame and fear. What will we tell the others when we go back?

I must have drifted off into sleep at some time because I woke to the dull, booming sound of the sea coming in. There was scarcely any pause, I noted drowsily, in the thundering noise. I did not wake up all at once, but drifted for some time between sleeping and waking, struggling out of a confused dream that I was lying there on the beach, where I had so longed to go and that the waves were pounding me.

And then I woke up to realize that the sound of the sea was real, but I was on a bed, not on the beach. And it was not the sea that was pounding my body but he, my husband, who was forcing his body on mine. I was too frightened to speak, my voice was strangled in my throat. I put my hands on his chest to push him away, but it was like trying to move a rock; I could do nothing. He put his hands, his lips on mine and this time I could not move away. There was no talk, no word between us—just this relentless pounding. His movements had the same rhythm, the same violence as the movements of the sea; yet, I could have borne the battering of the sea better, for that would hurt but not humiliate like this.

At last, mercifully, it was over, my body having helped him by some strange instinct beyond and outside me. And the cry I gave was not for the physical pain, but for the intrusion into my privacy, the violation of my right to myself. I drew the

sheets over myself and lay quietly, afraid to move, thinking of nothing, my mind an absolute blank. When sensation and feeling came back with a surge, my first thought was that I could not hear even the sea now. I wondered why, till I realized that there was another sound drowning it. I looked at him. He was lying on his back, legs flung apart, snoring loudly and steadily.