

lakes. Your voice shakes... we are a modest people, down to earth and you, my child... you are a dreamer, a moonwalker. No local boy will ever look your way now you have been soiled with heathen blood. And another thing. A young lady should not walk so freely; swing her arms with such abandon. Your clothes are too extravagant, loud and frivolous; totally unsuited to country living. I put my arms over your shoulder, Mother, but you swing away and cover your face. I tell you that I will go to the city and get a job sewing. Send you money. Get out of your way, so you won't have to worry at all. But, Mother, you only weep; bringing forth sorrow after sorrow for Father shot dead on a rock in a faraway place called Gallipoli. I walk away, lose myself to the heated mist and hot flowers of Bombay Hill.

The day was warming up so that even the petals on the geraniums withered in their beds. The sun beat mercilessly down on Christine as she stood alone on Steven's mother's front lawn. Not far away a group of men stood in an almost conspiratorial half circle. Some had their arms folded, others rested a hand on a hip; a beer in the other. Occasionally one would break the circle to turn and look at Christine. A ginger bearded man had even smiled at her encouragingly. Beside the group some birds of paradise held their orange-beaked and crowned heads toward the sky, the thin necks of their bodies stiffly lurched in the wind. Christine looked for Steven; why had he left her alone for so long? She was beginning to sweat inside her dress and wrapped in folds of crepe-de-chine and silk rosettes, Christine felt like a melting wedding cake. She recalled the words of a teacher at school, offering advice, "Try to be practical! You're really too intense. To survive one must inevitably tone oneself down." And now, when Christine had wanted things to be so right, she had blown it by wearing the crazy old dress with the wrong ethos. A middle-aged woman appeared at the doorway of the square, weatherboard house. She raised a red hand and waved to the group of men. A bird of paradise arrogantly waved back. The woman cupped her hand to her mouth and called, "Have you done the meat, boys?"

"Just about there, Mum!" called a voice from the group, "Just give us a few ticks, aye?"

"Righto," said the woman as she disappeared into the dark regions of the house. Christine sought shelter under a cabbage tree but the thin leaves of the giant lily, provided no shade. She was beginning to feel faint, even slightly nauseous, when she spied Steven walking her way; his hands confidently deep in the pockets of his pleated cream trousers. He looked full to brimming with vigorous health. "Hi, darling... I've been looking everywhere. What are you doing sitting here? Are you okay? I'll get you a drink."

Christine scowled, "Where have you been all this time? You left me alone as soon as we got here. You just walked away. Are you ashamed of me or something?"

"Don't be silly. It's only been five minutes at the most."

A piercing hot light seemed to shine directly onto Christine, almost blinding her. She squinted; Steven's frame became a large shadow and in the same instant a small, round figure appeared and stood beside him. It was the woman who had stood in the doorway. They both looked down at her, their hands raised above their eyes to ward off the glare. Christine wanted to cry. A thought spun about in her head, repeating itself... sitting here like Miss Muffin on her bloody puffin. I must look ridiculous.

It is midday and my feet are two white feathers; my hands are busy and plump as birds as they knead the air and tell the story of the dress. I can feel the gossamer touch of it against my cheek... the hint of gold in the crepe-de-chine, the red and blue satin



rosettes that look as though they have been scattered over the dress in a grandiose gesture from above. The utter extravagance and fullness of it appears before me like life itself as I softly murmur the words of Mabel Hartley at the Bombay Hill dance. You had better go home and change, my dear. People are talking. You never should have worn that dress! But why ever not, Mabel? This dress was made for dancing, I made it especially. I thought it would bring an exotic flavour to the occasion. Is my dress indecent? Can you see through it? My hand moves to my bare throat, guarding the flesh from the little brown guillotine eyes of Mabel Hartley. No dear, but we all know about the exotic and indecent where you are concerned. Besides, this is a depression we are in and when folk see you standing there all feathers and wings as if you hadn't a care in the world... well it's just too much! I search Mabel's clean round face for some measure of understanding but Mabel has only the righteous look of Sweet Angel of all Suffering. Her large hands are folded neatly in front of a tastefully plain dress; her mission to guard the Pearly Gates of Heaven and deny the intemperate access.

"This is my mother, Ray. Mum, meet Christine."

"Hello, Christine." There was a moment's silence as Christine scrambled messily to her feet. The woman squinted through the lines of her tired pinched face. Christine heard herself say, "It's a nice day for a barbecue!"

"Yes, the weather's really turned up trumps." Steven's mum wiped her hands on her apron. Steven quickly chipped in... "Christine's a painter, Mum!" Christine noticed a defiance in Steven's normally measured tones. But she wished he had never said anything about her occupation; it was another thing she had to play down, like her dress, to unpretentious beiges and browns.

"Oh yes." Steven's mother sounded doubtful; faintly uninterested.