

ROMESH GUNESEKERA

Heaven's Edge

An Extract

Romesh Gunesequera's new novel will be published by Bloomsbury, London, in April 2002 (ISBN 0 7475 5813 2). This extract, pages 101-108, is published here by agreement.

Jaz seemed to be watching my mouth, more than listening. 'Like our underground Carnival?' he asked dreamily.

Jaz knew so little of what had happened in his own environment, to care so little for the past. I wished I could give him the bigger picture in some easy dose. 'You see, then they became a subject of organic archaeology, and the best of them were remoulded into evocation centres. That is until war made the air of some tea-hills too ghastly to breathe ...' As I was speaking I realized war may not have been the only scourge here; perhaps a reign of autocrats and blunderers coupled to an oligarchy of bloodsucking dorks, as Uva would put it, might have been the bigger curse.

Before I could go on Jaz nudged me, 'Hey, I do like that teapot.' There was a silhouette of a giant teapot at the far end of the factory. 'With a spout like that, it must be happy tea, sweetie.'

At th

'This hill road will take us over the central mountains to Samandia, won't it, Kris?' I tried hard to stop my voice from betraying my concern.

Kris, fiddling with his butterfly knife on the other bunk, looked up as though thwarted or something, but then quickly regained his composure. Nothing else gave in his eyes. Watching him open and close the knife I wanted again to hold it; draw closer to her through the metal clone. 'She knows the way there, doesn't she?' I asked, seeking some reassurance. 'Uva?'

From the other side of the room Jaz stifled a yawn. 'Uhuh, sure she knows. She's always been one for the great outdoors.' He put away his nail-file. 'But a rainforest is not really for me, you know. I like a place with a little electricity. A shaving point at least. Some indoor life.' He let out a heavy sigh. 'Your Samandia is not exactly famous for its bars, you know.'

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The next morning the sun was a smoky grey. I made my way on to the main factory floor. The place was gutted. All the machines had been removed, but the interior still smelled of tea. It rose out of the floorboards and off the walls and seemed to stain the air with the odour of old ghosts.

In its heyday who would have been here? Sometimes it is so difficult to remember who belongs where, when. Or why? Whose was the labour, and whose the capital? There would have been blasts of hot air and the noise of dryers and rollers; wheels turning, the smell of burning, roasting tea. Narcotic sweat. There was a time when the sound of machines would have filled the air all around the hills. Factories in full swing. A steam train chugging up to the central hill towns. Eldon loved to recall those scenes, complete with sound effects: the clacking of wheels, the hoot of the engine, the constant gabble of conversations between strangers. It was a land full of talk, he would explain. 'Everyone always wanted to *place* everybody else. People would speak to bridge the gulf between them. We had hope, you know, in those days. We all shared the same vision, the same sense of order even if not all our wealth.'

Sanctimonious claptrap, I suppose, but for me that morning there was no

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Jaz appeared. 'Cuppa tea?' He did an extravagan

Eldon snapped back. 'No, no. I can manage. I could fly a jumbo once, you know.'

That afternoon, while I was still at school, he had been rushed to hospital. He had died before the ambulance had crossed the gates. In the coffin his hands were cold and rigid; unshakable. Unfairly steady.

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Jaz sipped the brew and screwed up his face in disgust. 'I can see why they've gone out of business.'

In front of us the hills formed a troop of bowed green heads. The once tightly curled tea bushes, slackened with neglect,