

(5030 words)

The Interests of Science

From the bus stand, Jessica chose to walk the sandy path to the left of the Polhena Beach Hotel, rather than enter the lobby and walk through it, to the Devil Dance ceremony taking place out back. She was to meet up with Stefan, her anthropologist boyfriend of three months. Behind her, the ocean broke upon the large reef, and a few gulls called out above the waves.

The path led her into a small patch of jungle, and then, curved away from the hotel. Muted ceremonial drumming thumped down the path towards her. The trail darkened in the twilight, and she hurried her pace. A few children ran towards her.

One of them reached out her hand and said, “Toffees?”

“No toffees.”

They ran on ahead of her. Even though everyone knew the white lady school teacher from America, some of the villagers still thought of her as a rich foreigner—one who must be unhappy because she did not have a husband yet.

The path opened out into the clearing. To her right, the small, but modern face of the hotel’s verandah gazed placidly upon the ceremony. The crowd was gathered straight ahead of her where the field ended at the front of a few village houses. The ceremony took place between the crowd and the houses. Jessica looked over the small crowd and noticed the exorcist walking about in front of the patient, a small girl of 11. He was joined by a small group of drummers. A Buddhist monk sat nearby with the girl’s family. To Jessica’s left stood a bamboo hut where the patient would eventually go to be healed. The top of its ceremonial archway displayed a fresco of the devil’s face.

The drummers started into a frenetic rhythm on their oblong instruments, and the dancers, men dressed in white sarongs and headbands, cavorted around the ceremonial grounds with lit torches. Jessica could see Stefan's tall figure hunched over a notebook near the front. She also noticed several familiar faces around the crowd from her village, her school, and Matara town.

In fact, nearly all of Jessica's host family including "amma" Gunasekera and her three sons, sat in the back of the ceremony. The eldest brother, waved for her to come join them. Jessica braced herself.

"Aybowan. How is everyone?"

"Why you did not send telegram?"

"Always worrying amma," said the eldest brother to his mother. "Miss Jessica is smart. She is a woman, not a girl."

"Thanks, aiya." Jessica said. Calling him "big brother" left a good impression on Mrs. Gunasekera. Jessica wanted to redirect her inquisitiveness about her getaways to Unawatuna bay—the small tourist village where she and Stefan met up. But this was Sri Lanka, after all. Life in the fish bowl.

"I still have to do some work with a friend," she informed them. "After tonight, I may not be home until Sunday."

To Mrs. Gunasekara she added, "Don't worry, amma. If I need anything, I promise to telegram."

Jessica placed her hands in prayer-like fashion and slowly bowed. "I will go and come."

The brothers all laughed.

Even Mrs. Gunasekara offered a puritan smile.

Jessica walked towards the ceremony, but still felt their protective eyes watching her every step. The nearer she got to the ceremonial circle, with the singing, drumming and torches, the more she felt out of place. A heaviness sunk into her belly. She looked at the dancers and the faces of some bystanders. Although she'd been to several ceremonies since she'd started her teaching assignment last year, this time, the "patient" was the younger sister of her favorite student Vimala. Plus, Stefan was employing her to help study the ritual. Gather data. Take photos. Write descriptions. Good practice for grad school.

She approached Stefan, where he stood near the dancing area, his khakis a light contrast to the festive saris. She wanted to kiss him openly, but she resisted, still feeling the eyes of her host family and the entire village upon her.

"Good evening, professor?" she said.

"Bout time. Thought you'd decided to stay at Unawatuna."

"Sri Lankan time," she said. "Besides," she continued in a quiet tone, "I'm not sure how to take it when a man hurries away from me to go to work. It's so married."

His face tensed. "Anyway, Dr. Hall sends his regrets. Board meetings with the Asia Foundation and the British Council in Colombo."

"Is it serious?"

"It's about funding. You know how that goes. But he said he'd meet us here tomorrow night."

She felt relieved that Stefan did not appear to be too concerned. If funding for Stefan's project was cut, that would mean he'd probably return to Indonesia where he'd done research before. And she was just sounding out how serious they would become.

He pointed over to Shahera's family. "Why did they consider her in need of an exorcism?"

"Well, that depends," Jessica said, "on whether you think it makes sense to have your life arranged by one's parents, or to have a life of your own choosing."

"Ah, yes. We're grateful of your knowledge about the locals. But we're here in the interests of science, aren't we?"

Jessica could have argued further and told him about how, in class debates, Vimala had wanted to argue the side of love marriages but she was afraid of getting a reputation.

"Well, her name's Shahera," Jessica said. "Her father's a bank clerk, and her mother's a schoolteacher. She's the sister of one of my students. She's 11. She's resisting an arranged marriage."

The exorcist sang in Sinhalese, and the dancers repeated phrases. This exchange prompted a few of the crowd members to reply, and a wave of laughter spread through the ceremony. But they spoke so fast, Jessica couldn't translate.

She opened her bag. She'd packed an extra set of batteries, her notebook, a copy of Hall's ethnography of Devil Dances, the 35 mm Minolta her mother had given her the day she'd left, and the tape recorder her father had sent after she'd been in country a few months. She'd rebelled against her parents' wishes by coming overseas, just as she'd done after their divorce; English instead of pre-med, student loans instead of their money. She took out the tape recorder, the camera, and Hall's book.

Two dancers placed a curtain of bamboo between the patient and the exorcist. Jessica wondered what Stefan thought about the ceremony, about her. She said, "He's telling them the story of how the earth goddess protected the Buddha."

He didn't reply and that made her feel anxious. She rushed to fill in the silence. "Well, you probably know more about this stuff, anyway."

Stefan said and kicked the sand with his hiking boots. "I mean there are always some things that are similar from one culture to another."

"Like?"

"Well, the patterns of local religions, medicine, mixing with whatever the dominant religion happens to be. In Bali, it's Hinduism. Here it's Buddhism."

She did like listening to him talk the talk. He was fun in bed, cute, and intelligent. Nothing like the occasional one night stand she'd had before meeting him.

"Well, it's all there in Hall's book," Stefan said. "What does he say?"

She tilted the book towards the light from the ceremony and read a few lines aloud.

The exorcist will attempt to deflect the destructive powers coming from the magical source that prompted the symptoms that affect the patient. However, in order to effect a competent counter-magic, an exorcist must be schooled in the variety of symptoms, illnesses and how they relate back to the twelve recurring demons.

She grew impatient with the tedious roundabout language. She also felt as if the others were watching them. For the first time, she vividly imagined the gossip that might follow. "Miss Jessica and Mr. Stefan. They will marry." She closed the text. "Well, what I was always told is that he's trying to trick the demons into thinking he's the patient so he can engage them in a kind of spiritual wrestling match."

"I love wrestling. What happens after that?"

Wrestling? Jessica thought. But then they were both still getting to know one another. She pointed to the small hut beneath the bamboo decorations. "Depends. I've seen them destroy the bamboo archway at some rituals. Then, supposedly the patient emerges from that hut,

reborn.” She handed the book to Stefan. “So in this case, Shahera will be ready to do what her parents want her to do. Of course, she won’t actually marry until she comes of age. Still, it’s foolproof. And it doesn’t cost nearly what a therapist would.” She appreciated his smile at her joke.

She set to work with her camera. She held a little pad to write notes about each shot. She saw Vimala, her student, wearing a dark gold and brown patterned sari, handing guests a strand of the “pirith” string, with a deliberate bowing of her head. When Vimala noticed her, Vimala’s face failed to offer her usual animated smile, but she did earnestly hold out her right hand to beckon Jessica to sit beside her. Jessica thought again about how she’d given Vimala, the love marriage captain, extra coaching that helped her team win.

Jessica walked over and greeted Vimala’s family in Sinhalese. She politely refused their invitation for tea.

“Shahera, can I take your picture?”

The young girl smiled and handed Jessica a strand of the white string. She whispered in Jessica’s ear, “I’m not scared. Just masks. It’s not real yakas.”

“You are very brave.” Jessica said, holding the string in her right hand. Then she looked through the viewfinder of her camera. Shahera’s light-brown face filled the lens and for a moment the girl’s determined expression, soft smile, and large brown eyes impressed Jessica. Jessica snapped the photo and then hugged Shahera. She thanked Vimala and her parents, and walked away, placing the string in her shirt pocket.

Jessica joined Stefan, who held the tape player. “What’s the string for?”

“A favorable blessing from Buddha for the exorcism,” she said and snapped a photo of him. She took more photos of the dancers, musicians and exorcist, but each time she angled the

lens, she thought about Shahera's innocent voice saying, "...not real devils." Jessica knew that the ceremony would be a long ordeal, and she wondered if Shahera's spirit would be broken. She knelt as she felt herself starting to cry. This was harder than she'd thought. Why couldn't they just let the poor girl alone?

The exorcist carried a torch to the entrance of the bamboo hut, and he tossed in burning resin. One of the dancers went into the home of Vimala's family and burned resin in each room. The odor of sulfur penetrated.

Stefan asked, "What's this about?"

"They're purifying the patient's home, and the hut, where they will lead her later on." She smiled watching as Shahera made faces back at the three dancers.

Stefan lit a cigarette. "When do they cut off the rooster's head?" He offered her a cigarette, but she declined.

"That's the last day."

"Poor bird." He pointed towards the young girl, her small body in its white sari. "Can you tell me more about her case?"

Case? Jessica thought. But she caught herself. Science, right? She pointed to a robust man with a large mustache, dressed in a black suit coat and white sarong, holding a black umbrella. "He's the village matchmaker who helped Shahera's parents with her arrangement. Vimala said her sister wouldn't even meet the suitor for tea. Pretty strong for a young female. Her parents believe she was sick with demons because she refused."

"So, by driving out these 'demons', they'll settle her down. I suppose it means they're scaring the hell out of her."

Jessica felt irritated by Stefan's tone, in which she detected something more than just irony. But she checked herself. She wanted to have fun, and she wasn't sure but that maybe she was just being affected by the ceremony.

They stood closer to one another, without touching. She sensed him straining too.

"In any case, Jessica. We have enough photos."

They said goodnight at the foot of the hotel veranda and agreed to meet at Unawatuna.

Jessica stood on the small balcony of their usual room at the Full Moon Beach Inn. Tiny columns of blue smoke rose up with whispers from the breakfast fires along the thin stretch of jungle that edged against the sand. A fishing canoe bobbed on the green-blue water just inside the foaming reef of the small bay. The occupant, an old man, worked a large rope net steadily, and then waved towards the shore where a girl, who looked like Shahera, reached to pet the fanlike tail of a peafowl. The bird flew several feet ahead. The girl persisted in spite of a reproach from the man in the boat. Again the bird flew out of reach. Jessica wanted to help her but what would she do with a peacock?

For a moment she just listened; the gentle splash of ocean waves, tinny sounds of a radio far off playing Bob Marley's "One Love," people shouting on the beach below, the water dripping in the shower. She felt alone. The silence between the occasional shouts and the crash of a wave began to engulf her.

Jessica smiled and went back into the room to take a shower. She found Stefan's shaving bag which he'd left behind. She felt the smooth black leather and opened the bag. A disposable razor, toothbrush, dental floss, and mini soap were all tucked neatly into their respective slots. She pulled back on an inside zipper; a few Trojans and several irregularly shaped slips of paper

with names and phone numbers on them. She decided she'd violated his privacy enough, zipped everything back into order. She stepped into the shower as someone knocked.

"Stefan?"

"Yeah."

"I've ordered brunch. I'll be out in a minute."

As she showered, she imagined she was preparing herself for a fertility ritual. She came out from the shower, wrapped in a large white towel and lay down in the sun on the striped chaise lounge. She let her towel drop around her.

"Sexy," Stefan said.

"Listen to the waves!"

She lifted up a copy of *Buddhist Verses* and said, "Seeing how you know Hinduism," she said, "I thought I'd indoctrinate you properly into Buddhism."

Stefan nodded, closed his eyes against the sunshine, and leaned back, and she read out loud:

*When I rain down the rain of Dharma
Then all this world is well refreshed
Each one according to their own power
Take to heart this well-preached Dharma, one in taste.*

"Ponder that, grasshopper." Before she drew him to her, she wanted to savor the moment. What did he feel about here and now and her? Did he listen to how the wind rustled the palm leaves, how naggingly the village dogs barked? Could he hear just then a woman's far off voice and the children playing?

She heard a knock on the door and covered herself with the towel. A waiter brought in a tray with sliced papaya, lime wedges, cucumber sandwiches and tea. He handed a telegram to Stefan, who stood, and tipped him.

“It’s from Hall. Says he wants me there for dinner.”

Jessica sat up, covering herself and crossing her legs. “What time is it now?”

Stefan looked at his watch and back at the telegram. “Damn near 2.” He tossed the telegram on the tray and winked at her. “Guess we’ll have to pick up where we left off later.”

“Figures!”

“What? I have to help Hall. You do too, but you don’t need to be there till later.”

Jessica stood and tightly wrapped the towel around her body. “If you ask me, the whole ritual is stupid.”

“What?” Stefan stepped back, leaning against the balcony. “I thought you were interested in anthropology?”

“Does everything have to be about culture? What about the patient?”

“These people have customs. Think about them.”

“I am doing that.” She held on to the knot of the towel.

“No, you aren’t. Listen, they have traditions and they don’t need an American school teacher to change them. Besides, your position here is to teach English not women’s rights. And your job today is to take pictures.”

“Do you have any values?”

“Science. The truth.”

“Well maybe you should try fucking science for a change.”

“That’s intelligent.”

“Look Stefan you are afraid of the truth so bad you bury your head in all that ethno-bullshit.” She left him on the veranda while she went in and dressed.

She returned to the last evening of the Devil Dance and joined Stefan and Dr. Hall, who were overlooking the ritual from the verandah of the Polhena Beach Hotel. Dr. Hall perused several manila folders. A small crowd sat on the ground near the ceremonial area effused with a waning violet light. The seaward breeze jostled the coconut palms and the surf thudded down the shoreline. She snapped a photo thinking she'd entitle it, “Wasted Beauty.”

She looked at the ceremony and her heart sank. She knew Shahera had probably gone through a barrage of incantations, chants, spells, and god knows what else. The feeling that had dampened her spirits with Stefan grew heavier.

“How were your meetings, Dr. Hall?” Jessica asked. She took a seat around the small table.

Dr. Hall rubbed his hands together as if washing them. He was never one for small talk.

“Well, as I told Stefan, I have bad news. And good news.”

Jessica leaned closer to Stefan.

“The foundation is shutting down my project here in Sri Lanka.” He tapped a finger on the files and continued. “They said Sri Lanka was only worth a one-book study. Princeton's going to go with the foundation and focus on Southeast Asia. Seems that's the academic fad. Anyway, I'm to pull up stakes and move everything to Jakarta.”

Jessica looked at Stefan. “What about you?” She thought of their plans. But they hadn't any real plans to speak of. She felt as if she was missing something, like their future was an

afterthought, something that would come or it wouldn't. After their argument, she wondered if they should even stay together. But maybe she was being too hard on him.

Stefan lit a cigarette and said, "Dr. Hall says my British Council grant is ok for a year."

"That's right, though at reduced pay. After that, I don't know if they will continue."

"That's the bad news," Stefan said.

Hall smiled and pulled a folder from the bottom of his stack. "Right. There's funding for a couple of research assistants, next year. Think about it."

Jessica smiled but avoided Hall's eyes. If she wanted, Stefan and she could stay together this year, and then, she could go to Indonesia and learn anthropology. That was a bit too much, too fast for one accustomed to living on Lanka-time, where 9:00 a.m. meant noon and saying goodbye meant I shall go and come back whenever.

"The duties," Hall continued, "won't be anything glamorous, though. Paper work, typing field notes, preparing manuscripts. And it will require you to do some coursework. After all, Peace Corps work, while valuable in its own way, is teaching English, not doing anthropology." She slung her backpack off her shoulder and onto the ground.

Dr. Hall glanced at the documents in the folder he held, nodded towards Stefan and asked, "So you're interested in the pantheon then?"

"Yes," he said, eyeing the folder that Hall placed on the table.

Dr. Hall shuffled through some papers, and then nodded. "Go on." And then it began. They seemed engulfed in a world of cigarette smoke and cultural theories that swirled around them and faded into the twilight air, only to be replaced by other ideas.

"Stefan can we talk?" asked Jessica, but they both ignored her. Jessica imagined what it would be like to practice anthropology. She wasn't sure that she had the passion for it, after all.

Her smile disappeared. She listened to Stefan, and considered their differences. Stefan was dedicated to his work, but Jessica knew that could be a bad thing, too. Besides, she wondered about Stefan's true feelings, even as she was becoming surer of her own.

Dr. Hall flagged a waiter.

"Yes sir," said an elderly man dressed in a white sarong and holding a tray.

"Just a moment." Dr. Hall raised his left hand in the direction of the ceremony. "Jessica, could you capture some of the ceremonial archway and such on film for me?"

Jessica nodded out of instinct, as if she just remembered these two needed time to talk about important things while she went over and took pictures. But still, she was glad at first for the shift from purely academic topics.

"And please remember. We are here to observe, not interfere."

She looked at Dr. Hall and felt a warm tingling in her face. Then she looked at Stefan.

A quick anger drummed in her arms, and she hastened to grab her pack and leave the patio, lest her face betray her irritation. Science, yes of course. She could tell them that Shahera just wanted a chance at her own destiny. She thought, they didn't have to go through all of this. What if Shahera is out there scared and sick? And I'm not supposed to help her? Somehow Jessica wanted to make a difference. She knew these rituals, these people.

She looked across the clearing towards the ceremony, and was greeted by the fretful elder Gunasekera.

"Miss Jessica. Please forgive me. I know you want to work, but amma ask if you can come tonight. She is worry. And she will not let me go to visit my friends unless you come home. What to do?"

Jessica realized that amma didn't need her, but that he had been sent to spy on her. "I just have a little more to do." She held up her camera.

"I can wait?"

Jessica looked over her shoulder at the verandah where Hall and Stefan sat in conversation. She felt the same stifling around her as if she were in her room. Then she started walking towards the ceremony. "No. You can't stay. Just leave me alone."

"Miss Jessica is upset?"

"Damn it. Go to your friends, or go home, or stay, or whatever." She didn't wait for a reply, but walked to a nearby table, and plopped down her pack. She tried breathing to calm herself. How she disliked this constant fishbowl, and worse—to show that kind of irritation.

The ceremony continued in a more somber tone. Shahera sat alone in the small hut. The drums started, and the exorcist sang to their beats, the other dancers serving as a chorus. Torches lit the area, and their yellow flames cast a pale light to the dusk. The waves thumped on the shore as if calling to the drummers. Jessica looked at Vimala's family: a weary, gray-haired father; a teary-eyed mother in a colorful sari; the two younger brothers asleep on mats. Jessica watched as Vimala, standing behind her mother, pointed toward the hut at the other end of the grounds. Jessica imagined what it might be like to take a photo of the ceremony seated next to the mother. So close to her perception. Wouldn't Hall appreciate that? As she approached them, Vimala came up to her.

"Miss Jessica, you are well? Your face is sad, I think"

"Oh, no. Just tired." Jessica held the camera at her side. She remembered Shahera's brilliant smile in the small viewfinder. She glanced back at Dr. Hall and Stefan. Decked in their

khaki outfits, a servant bringing drinks on a tray, they looked like “sahibs,” remnants from Sri Lanka’s colonial British days. “Vimala, do you think this will change Shahera’s mind?”

“How can I say? It is up to the gods, isn’t it?” Vimala held a lace handkerchief to her face.

“But you remember our class debates?”

“Sometimes, we may choose badly. Even the love. My opponents perhaps were right, isn’t it?”

“So are you saying that now you believe the traditions are right?”

“What can we do?”

“But ‘each according to their power take to heart?’” Jessica said.

“Miss Jessica, I must return to my family now.”

They said goodbye, and Stefan walked toward her. She quickened her pace, moving away from the crowd towards the table where she’d set her pack down. She felt him behind her, a part of her wanted to smack him. She turned and faced him, the ceremony in the distance.

“Listen, Jess, I know what you’re thinking. I didn’t tell Hall anything about our talk.” he said and shoved his hands in the pockets of his pants. “What did you want to talk about?”

But Jessica no longer wanted to talk. She was still thinking about her conversation with Vimala. She looked at Stefan, and then she looked toward the ceremony for a moment, and then looked at Stefan again. “Do you remember that Buddhist passage I read to you on the balcony?”

“Yes?”

“Each according to their own power take heart? Shahera tried to exercise *her* power. And we have power, too. I do.”

“Yeah?”

“I can choose to stand here. Take photos for Hall in the interests of science,” Jessica said and nodded toward the bamboo hut, “or I can go help Shahera realize her power.”

Stefan gave her a puzzled look. “I don’t think that is what Buddha had in mind.”

Jessica felt the beating of the drummers, the soft tropical breeze across her face. She didn’t want to continue talking but she did. “Why not? It said, take to heart.” She looked him squarely in the eyes. “Not to mind.”

“Well that’s not Sinhalese tradition.”

“But look at how local customs bend traditions to fit their own needs. Shahera deserves a choice, even if she doesn’t fit neatly into a thick description.”

“I get it. If you were writing the ethnographies, you’d want to write about feelings. But it’s all about getting at a systematic world view.”

“Some system. Men forcing little girls into behaving their rules. Men write the ethnographies and women fetch the artifacts. ”

“Look, Jess. We are all human. That’s not the point.”

The drumming grew louder and then stopped abruptly. The main dancer howled and a few of the villagers closest to the dancing gasped.

“I told Dr. Hall that I’d go back and help him with some notes.” He lowered his voice and said, “Don’t do anything drastic, Jessica.”

“Or what?”

“Well it’s not going to help your case any if go messing with the ceremony.”

“My case? You don’t even know what is going on here.”

“You’d ruin your reputation here, not to mention what they’d think of the Peace Corps.”

“That’s so odd coming from you. I thought we shared these ideas.”

“I do at least, for Westerners. But I don’t interfere with culture.”

“What if they beat her after this because she will not get engaged? Is that ok too, Stefan? You know, you two will leave here someday, maybe soon, I don’t know. But Shahera has her whole life to live here. Why should she be deprived of a chance to be her own person?”

“You’ll never get a chance to work with us in Indonesia if you piss Hall off.”

She watched him return to the patio and rejoin Hall with his papers and drinks. The hell with them both. He can keep his ego and his ethnographies and his stupid little scraps of paper with some bimbo’s addresses on them. Jessica didn’t think Hall or Stefan knew as much about these people as she did. She realized that it didn’t matter to them and that made her even angrier. Jessica wondered if she’d be able to talk with Shahera before the Morning Watch began. But what could she tell her?

She looked upon the dancers with scorn; for the experience seemed like a ghastly pantomime, as if the dancers, the village, the whole country were mocking her and her values about independence, female strength. The devil dance seemed like a scene from a Bosch painting. What evil had been done to these men that they could think it was ok to inflict this upon a young female? What a twisted culture.

The lead drummer, whose face glinted with sweat, began a rapid succession of beats. The dancers adorned themselves with masks to symbolize the presence of the demons passing from the girl to them. The leader, the tallest, wore red, yellow, and blue strands around his waist, and donned the largest mask, a grotesque yet festive looking monster. He threw powder into the fire and it sparkled. Then a thin column of yellow smoke rose and the smell of sulfur permeated the grounds. Jessica felt dizzy. Through the haze and the drumming, she could make out the frail outline of Shahera in the tiny ceremonial hut.

Jessica rounded near the back of the hut and peeked in. She gasped and her eyes watered. Shahera was half asleep and distraught, her clothes dirty. Hall's ethnographies about patients only referred to whatever aspects mattered to the exorcism. Medical conditions, social rules, customs, power relationships and ancestries, instead of their hopes and dreams, their feelings or ideas.

The drumming increased, and she watched as the exorcist and dancers wound their way towards the hut. Through the trees, she caught a glimpse of Stefan deep in conversation with Hall. She'd had enough. Interfering would stop it. For only this one patient. This night.

Jessica dropped her pack and entered the small, musty hut.

"I'm scared, Miss Jessica," the little girl said. Then she cried softly.

Jessica held Shahera in her arms. "I'm scared too," she said and leaned back to better hold the girl.