

The Silk Cravat

When I was 13 I got bitten by a lizard. It fell out of a guava tree and hung onto my lip. It was also the year that Fiji gained independence. But what I recall most about 1970 is meeting Rodney.

It was a sultry morning and I could see the heatwaves welling up from the tarmac in front of our verandah. A group of mynah birds were brawling in a tree with such noisy ferocity that the branches shook. Vika was whisking around with a sasa broom, made from the dried-out spines of palm fronds.

“Have you seen Rodney this morning?” I asked, knowing that just the name would get her going.

Vika threw down the sasa and heaved back and forth with loud laughter.

“I see him at the top of the road. He had a long umbrella and he - poke the hibiscus bush.” She made a thrusting movement, then picked up the sasa and leant against it in another bout of mirth.

Rodney was staying with his parents and siblings during the English summer holidays. I knew he was a student from London but I hadn’t met him – I’d only caught glimpses of him on his back verandah. He was tall and tailored, and his raised voice sounded like my parents’ Flanders and Swann records. But I’d heard a lot about him.

To the local girls he was an endless source of amusement. They laughed until they cried over his oversized shorts, white legs and red nose with a daub of sun cream on the tip. But the biggest joke of all was his silk cravat, which he never took off, even in a 40 degree heat. Vika said there was a heat rash underneath it.

“I see him take it off and scratch.”

I was amused and intrigued by Rodney. But I was a bit in awe of him as well. To me he represented a world which I could dimly remember but of which I had never really been part. He was seven years my senior but felt much, much older.

I hadn't expected to bump into Rodney that afternoon. I was on my way home from grammar school, as usual in a world of my own. The last lesson, sports, had been gruelling; the volley ball had come straight at me and I had ducked to one side. Mr Hunter, a swarthy Australian with big biceps and a walrus moustache, had dubbed me a gormless idiot and I had longed to be anywhere but in his class.

As I left school I felt as if I'd been released from prison. I kicked off my sandals and walked barefoot along the newly tar-sealed road. The soles of your feet toughen quickly in the tropics.

Without warning it began to pour. The rain belted down in solid sheets and for a moment I felt cut off from everything around me. I retreated under a breadfruit tree, although my dress was already plastered to my body. The drain behind me was swelling with water.

I had a shock when I realised that Rodney was sheltering on the other side of the tree. He was holding a 'Fiji Times' above his head, which was so sodden it was falling apart. His soaked cravat seemed glued to his neck. I started to giggle silently. He turned and saw me standing there.

“Hello, what are you doing here?” His English voice was soft and slightly sad. His pale distant eyes had gold flecks in them.

“Waiting for the rain to stop.”

He took me all in: my bare feet and skimpy dress, the wet ribbon in my bedraggled hair.

“You live near me, don’t you?” It was more a reflection than a question.

“Yes, I live next door. I own the cat that chased your puppy up the mango tree.” As soon as I had said it I blushed, but Rodney smiled thoughtfully.

“Oh, so that’s your cat. It’s called Ratty, isn’t it?”

“Ratu. That’s Fijian for chief.” It was good to be an authority on something.

“You go to the school down the road, don’t you?”

“Yes, I’ve been going there for three years. Before that I went to the primary part.”

“Oh, so you’ve never been to school in England?”

Almost embarrassed, I shook my head. He looked at me as if he’d stumbled upon an interesting and rather novel find.

“Do you enjoy it?”

“Sometimes. Only I don’t like sports.” I was surprised by the ferocity with which it came out.

“I see. And what will you do when you finish?”

“I’d like to go to university in England.”

If Rodney was disbelieving he didn't show it. I hadn't noticed the deluge stop. Drenched birds squawked and globules of water plopped down from the green swollen breadfruit. Toads were everywhere, drawn from their corners and crevices, their warty bodies pulsing joyfully. Occasionally you saw the flicker of a tongue in pursuit of a fly.

"I had to catch a toad for biology once. We all had to dissect one," I said.

He looked genuinely intrigued. "How on earth did you manage to capture it?"

"By running after it with a bucket."

Rodney's bow-shaped lips twitched. The sun's rays started to filter through the tree, making patterns on my wet dress. He smiled at me.

"I didn't like sports either."

Every day after that I strained to see Rodney through the screen of ginger spears separating our compound from his. But all I could usually see was a wicker chair on the verandah or a tennis ball stuck in the bottom of a drainpipe. Once I heard his voice and caught a glimpse of a naked torso, but it disappeared so quickly that it could have been a mirage. I dreaded the time that he would have to return to England.

"Do you think he might stay?" I asked my mother hopefully.

"Don't be silly – there's nothing for him here," was her reply.

About a week before he was due to leave, she arranged for me to go on a Saturday school trip to the top of Mount Corumbumba, a small mountain outside Suva, where we lived. It was a local landmark well-known to hikers. But I wasn't

much of a hiker – and it would mean a whole day with Mr Hunter, who had organised the trip.

My mother insisted it would be good for me. “You’ve been mooning around a lot lately.”

There were nine of us in the transit van, eight students and Mr Hunter, who has driving. I was squashed between two football players, who talked over me as if I wasn’t there. The tar-sealed roads soon turned into dirt tracks which belched up clouds of dry red dust.

“Stick your head out of the window if you want to be sick,” said Mr Hunter, jerking his balding head in my direction.

When we reached the bottom of the mountain, all you could see was a green-shrouded mass. The sun was bouncing off the foliage, giving it an almost purple glow. You could hear a stream gushing down the mountain slopes.

A track had been hacked through the foliage and we picked our way over sprawling roots. Snapped-off branches and wrenched-up tree trunks told of recent violent squalls.

We stopped to rest at a point where a tree dipped down into the yellowy-green water. Mr Hunter was red and robust, beads of sweat standing out on his forehead. He passed around a flask of cordial, wiping his mouth with the back of a beefy hand.

“Think you can make it to the top?” he said, looking directly at me.

I nodded and glared at him.

I don't know whether it was by accident or design, but soon after we'd resumed our trek I became separated from the others. One minute I was behind a fifth former's bobbing head and the next I was on my own. For a moment the bush seemed menacing and I was gripped by fear. But I made myself keep moving, knowing that if I kept going upwards I would eventually reach the top.

It wasn't long before I could hear the rush of water and see a stream glimmer on the other side of the track. I squeezed gingerly through the saplings blocking it from view, almost taking with me a big black millipede that was clinging to the back of a twig.

I emerged beside clear fast water, the moss beneath it streaming like green ribbons. Just below me was a mountain pool. Secluded and fern-fringed, it was gouged out of the rock and a tall tree had flung a creeper down into it. The water within it spewed a gentle froth as it tipped over the edge and cascaded into a second pool below. It was one of the most enchanted places I'd ever seen.

It took me a good minute to realise that someone else was in the second pool, and another minute to realise who it was. Oddly, seeing Rodney naked didn't come as a shock. The torso I'd so fleetingly glimpsed from our back garden was strangely appealing in the clear water. His buttocks were sinuous and taut, and he'd even removed the silk cravat, which was draped on an overhanging bough with his clothes. I stood transfixed as he swam slowly around the pool. It was only when he stopped that I realised he wasn't alone. There was another naked man – and he seemed curiously familiar. Rodney and the man with the balding head appeared to melt into one as they shared a lingering embrace.

I'd never seen two naked men embrace before, and I wasn't entirely sure what to make of it. But I instinctively felt that it was best for me to remain invisible. I withdrew quickly to the track on the other side of the pool.

It wasn't long before I reached the top of the mountain and was reunited with the others, who were relieved to see me. But there was no sign of Mr Hunter. They said he'd gone looking for me but was a good while before he returned, his shirt buttoned up in the wrong places and wet hair plastered across his bald patch. To my surprise he merely nodded at me and didn't comment on my absence at all.

As for Rodney, he returned to England a few days later and I never saw him again. But I do sometimes think of him and wonder what became of him. Is he still in England? Did he stay in touch with Mr Hunter? And does he still wear the silk cravat?

(c)