



Bone China
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Bone China

For Barrie,
Oliver, Alistair and Mollie.

And in memory of my parents.

‘He who never leaves his country is full of prejudices.’

CARLO GOLDONI

Secrets

1

FROM THE ROAD ALL THAT COULD be seen of the house was its long red roof. Everything else was screened by the trees. Occasionally, depending on the direction of the breeze, children's voices or a piano being played could be heard, but usually, the only sound was the faint rush of water falling away further down the valley. Until this point where the road ended, the house and all its grandeur remained hidden. Then suddenly it burst into view. The car, approaching from the south side, wound slowly up the tea-covered hills. Passing one breathtaking view after another it climbed higher and higher until at last it rolled to a halt. For a moment Aloysius de Silva sat staring out. The house had been in his wife's family for more than two hundred years. Local people, those who knew of it and knew the family, called it the House of Many Balconies. All around its façade were ornate carvings punctuated by small stone balconies and deep verandas. The gardens were planted with rhododendrons and foxgloves, arum lilies and soft, rain-washed flowers. 'Serendipity,' the Governor had called it, 'somewhere deep in the Garden of Eden.' It was here, in this

undisturbed paradise, viridian green and temperate, that the dark-eyed Grace had grown up. And it was here that she waited for him now.

Sighing heavily, for he was returning home after an absence of several days, Aloysius opened the door of the car, nodding to the driver. He would walk the rest of the way. It was early morning, on the first day of September 1939. Thin patches of mist drifted in the rarefied air. In his haste to return home he had caught only a glimpse of the newspaper headlines. They could no longer be ignored. The war in Europe was official, and because the island of Ceylon was still under British Crown Rule he knew it would affect them all. But this morning Aloysius de Silva had other things on his mind. He was the bearer of some rather pressing news of his own. His wife, he remembered with some reluctance, was waiting. The next few hours would not be easy. Aloysius had been playing poker. He had promised her he would not, but he had broken his promise. He had been drinking, so that, as sometimes happened on such occasions, one thing had led seamlessly to another. One minute he had had the chance to win back, at a single blow, the unravelled fortunes of his family, the horses, the estates. But the next it had vanished with an inevitability that had proved hard to anticipate. A queen, a king, an ace; he could see them clearly still. He had staked his life on a hand of cards. And he had lost. Why had he done this? He had no idea how to tell her the last of her tea estates had gone. It had been the thing he dreaded most of all.

‘They’re crooks,’ he declared loudly, a bit later on.

No good beating about the bush, he thought. They were sitting in the turquoise drawing room, surrounded by the Dutch colonial furniture, the Italian glass and the exquisite collection of rare bone china that had belonged to Grace’s mother. Family

portraits lined the walls, bookcases and vitrines filled the rooms, and a huge chandelier hung its droplets above them.

‘Rasanayagaim set me up,’ said Aloysius. ‘I could tell there was some funny business going on. You know, all the time there was some sort of message being passed between him and that puppy, Chesterton.’

His wife said nothing and Aloysius searched around for a match to light his cigar. When he found none he rang the bell and the servant boy appeared.

‘Bring some tea,’ he said irritably after he relit his cigar. ‘I was set up,’ he continued, when the servant had left the room. ‘As soon as I saw that bastard Rasanayagaim, I knew there’d be trouble. You remember what happened to Harold Fonsaka? And then later on, to that fellow, Sam? I’m telling you, on every single occasion Rasanayagaim was in the room!’

Aloysius blew a ring of cigar smoke and coughed. Still Grace de Silva said nothing. Aloysius could see she had her inscrutable look. This could go on for days, he thought, eyeing her warily. It was a pity really, given how good-looking she still was. Quite my best asset most of the time. He suppressed the desire to laugh. The conversation was liable to get tricky.

‘It was just bad luck, darl,’ he said, trying another tack. ‘Just wait, men, I’ll win it all back at the next game!’

He could see it clearly. The moment he fanned out the cards there had been a constellation of possibilities. A queen, a king, an ace! But then, it hadn’t been enough. Too little, too late, he thought, regretfully. All over Europe the lights were going out. As from this moment, Britain was at war with Germany. Bad luck, thought Aloysius, again. She’ll be silent for days now, weeks even, he predicted gloomily. She knows how to punish me. Always has.

The servant brought in the tea on a silver tray. The china

was exquisite. Blue and white and faded. It had been in the family for years, commissioned by the Queen for the Hyde Park Exhibition. Does it still belong to us? Grace thought furiously, looking at them. Or has he signed them away too? And what about me? she wanted to shout. I'm surprised he hasn't gambled me away. Aloysius watched her. He was well aware that his wife was corseted in good manners, bound up by good breeding, wrapped in the glow of a more elegant world than the one he had been brought up in. But he also knew, underneath, she had a temper. The servant poured the tea. The porcelain teacups were paper-thin. They let in a faint glow of light when she held them up.

'It isn't as bad as you think,' he said conversationally. No use encouraging her silence, he decided, briskly. What's done is done. Move forward, he thought. 'We'd have had to give up the house anyway. The Governor wants it for the war. It's been on the cards for ages, you know, darl,' he told her, not realising what he was saying.

Grace de Silva pursed her lips. The flower in her hair trembled. Her eyes were blue-black like a kingfisher's beak and she wanted to kill Aloysius.

'So you see, sooner or later we'd have to move.'

He waved aside his smoke, coughing. The servant, having handed a cup of tea to Mrs de Silva, left. Dammit, thought Aloysius, again. Why does she have to be so hard on me? It was a mistake, wasn't it? Her silence unnerved him.

'The fact is, I'm no longer necessary to the British. We were useful as sandbags, once,' he continued, sounding more confident than he felt. 'Those were the days, hah! It was people like me, you know, who kept civil unrest at bay. But now, now they have their damn war looming, they don't need *me*.'

Is she ever going to say anything? he wondered. Women were

such strange creatures. He moved restlessly. Not having slept he was exhausted. The effort of wanting to give Grace a surprise windfall had tired him out.

‘So, it’s only the estate we’ve lost,’ he repeated uneasily, trying to gauge her mood. ‘I don’t want to be a manager on a plantation that’s no longer ours. What’s the point in that? I’ve no intention of being one of their bloody slaves!’

Grace stirred her tea. Aloysius was a Tamil man who had, by some mysterious means, acquired a Sinhalese surname. He had done this long before Grace knew him, having taken a liking to the name de Silva. When he first began working as the estate manager at her father’s factory he had been young and very clever in the sharp ways of an educated Tamil. And he had been eager to learn. But most of all he had been musical and full of high spirits, full of effervescent charm. Grace, the only daughter of the planter boss, had fallen in love. In all her life she had never met anyone as intelligent as Aloysius. He was *still* clever, she thought now, but his weaknesses appalled her. Soon after their marriage he had started gambling with the British officers, staying out late, drinking and losing money. Only then did Grace understand her father’s warning.

‘He will drink your fortune away, Grace,’ her father had said. ‘The British will give him special privileges because of his charm, and it will go to his head. He will not be the husband you think.’

Her father had not wanted her to marry Aloysius. He had tried to stop her, but Grace had a stubborn streak. In the end, her father, who could deny her nothing, had given in. Now, finally, she saw what she had done.

‘The children have been asked to leave Greenwood,’ she told him, coldly. ‘Their school fees haven’t been paid for a year. A *year!*’

Hearing her own voice rise she stopped talking. She blamed herself. Five children, she thought. I've borne him *five* children. And now this. Her anger was more than she could bear.

'Stanley Simpson wanted me to play,' Aloysius was saying. Stanley Simpson was his boss. 'It would have been incorrect of me to refuse.' He avoided Grace's eye. 'I have always been his equal, darl. How could I suddenly refuse to join in? These English fellows have always relied on me to make up the numbers.'

'But they know when to stop,' Grace said bitterly. 'They don't ruin themselves.'

Aloysius looked at his feet. 'When it's your hands on the wheel it's so much easier to apply the brake,' he mumbled.

They were both silent, listening to the ticking of the grandfather clock. Outside, a bird screeched and was answered by another bird.

'Don't worry about the children, darl,' Aloysius said soothingly. 'We can get Myrtle to tutor them.'

Grace started. *Myrtle?* Had Aloysius completely taken leave of his senses? Myrtle was her cousin. She hated Grace.

'We'll start again, move to Colombo. I'll get the estates back somehow, you'll see. And after the war, we'll get the house back too. I promise you. It's just a small inconvenience.'

Grace looked at him. I've been a fool, she thought, bitterly. I've no one to blame but myself. And now he wants to bring Myrtle back into our lives. She suppressed a shiver.

Outside, another day on the tea plantation continued, regardless. The early-morning mist had cleared and the coolies had brought in their baskets of leaves to be weighed. Christopher de Silva, youngest son of Grace and Aloysius, was sneaking in through the back of the house. Christopher had brought his mother a present. Well, it wasn't exactly for her, it was his really.

But if he gave it to Grace he knew he'd be allowed to keep it. The older children were still at school and no one had seen his father for some time. It was as good a moment as any. He hurried across the kitchen garden and entered the house through the servants' quarters carrying a large cardboard box punctured with holes. The kitchen was full of activity. Lunch was being prepared. A pale cream tureen was being filled with a mound of hot rice. Napkins were pushed into silver rings.

'Aiyo!' said the cook, seeing him. 'You can't put your things there. Mr de Silva's back and we're late with the lunch.'

'Christopher, master,' said the servant boy who had just served tea for the lady of the house, 'your brothers are coming home this afternoon.'

'What?' asked Christopher, startled.

The box he was holding wobbled and he put it down hastily. He stared at the servant boy in dismay. Why were his brothers coming home? Just when he had thought he was rid of them too. Disappointment leapt on his back; he felt bowed down by it. He was only ten years old, too young as yet to attend Greenwood College with Jacob and Thornton. And although he longed for the day when, at the age of eleven, he could join them there, life at home without Thornton was very good. Thornton monopolised his mother and Christopher preferred his absence.

'Is Thornton coming too?' he asked in dismay.

'Yes,' said the servant boy. 'They're *all* coming home. Alicia and Frieda too.'

His eyes were shining with excitement. He was the same age as Christopher. They were good friends.

'You're all going to live in Colombo now,' he announced. 'I'm going to come too!' He waggled his head from side to side.

'Namil, will you never learn to keep your mouth shut?' cried

his mother the cook, pulling the boy by the ear. 'Here, you nuisance, take these coconuts outside to be scraped. And Christopher, master, please go and wash your hands, lunch is almost ready.'

'What's going on?' muttered Christopher. 'I'm going to find out.'

Then he remembered the cardboard box in the middle of the floor. A muffled miaowing came from within.

'Namil,' he said, 'can you put this in my room, carefully? Don't let anyone see. It's a present for my mother.'

'What is it?' asked the servant boy, but Christopher had gone, unaware of the horrified expression on the cook's face as she watched the cardboard box rocking on her kitchen floor.

Further down the valley Christopher's older brothers waited on the steps of Greenwood College for the buggy to collect them. Jacob de Silva was worried. They had been told to leave their books before returning home. Although the real significance of the message had not fully dawned on him, the vague sense of unease and suspicion that was his constant companion grew stronger with each passing minute.

'Why d'you think we have to go home?' he asked Thornton.

'I thought you said they hadn't paid our school fees,' Thornton replied. He was not really interested.

'But why d'you think that is?' insisted Jacob. 'Why didn't they pay them?' Thornton did not care. He was only thirteen, the apple of his mother's eyes, a dreamer, a chaser of the cream butterflies that invaded the valley at this time of year. Today merely signalled freedom for him.

'Oh, who knows with grown-ups,' he said. 'Just think, tomorrow we'll wake up in our own bedroom. We can go out onto the balcony and look at the garden and no one will mind.'

And we can have egg hoppers and mangoes for breakfast instead of toast and marmalade. So who cares!’ He laughed. ‘I’m glad we’re leaving. It’s so boring here. We can do what we want at home.’ A thought struck him. ‘I wonder if the girls have been sent back too?’

On their last holiday they had climbed down from the bedroom balcony very early one morning and crept through the mist, to the square where the nuns and the monkeys gathered beside the white Portuguese church. They had had breakfast with Father Jeremy who wheezed and coughed and offered them whisky, which they had drunk in one swift gulp. And afterwards they had staggered back home to bed. Thornton giggled at the memory.

Jacob watched him solemnly. He watched him run down the steps of Greenwood College, this privileged seat of learning for the sons of British government officials and the island’s elite, his laughter floating on the sunlight.

‘I want to stay here,’ he said softly, stubbornly, under his breath. ‘We can go home any time. But we can only learn things here.’

He frowned. He could see all the plans for his future beginning to fade. The headmaster had told him he could have gone to university had he stayed on at school and finished his studies. His Latin teacher had told him he might have done classics. Then his science teacher had told him that in *his* opinion Jacob could have gone to medical school. Jacob had kept these conversations to himself.

‘Oh, I can learn things anywhere,’ Thornton was saying airily. ‘I’m a poet, remember.’ He laughed again. ‘I’m so lucky,’ he said. And then, in the fleeting manner of sudden childhood insights, he thought, I’m glad I’m not the eldest.

‘Come on,’ he added kindly, sensing some invisible struggle,