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Marks and Spencer Made Me

A steady drizzle was falling when they got down at the bus station. A yellow dog skittered past them with its tail down. It was not the weather she'd been expecting in the South, so near the Equator. Perhaps she hadn't done her homework properly. The dirt road ran with water and looked as though it had done so for days. The two Indians they'd hired to transport their luggage – prematurely ageing father and diminutive boy child – slip-slopped on regardless. Her husband plashed behind them with apparent nonchalance. She came on in fits and starts, careful about splashes on her shoes. They passed a row of wooden shacks shored up above the water, displaying uninspiring packets of biscuits and cans of Coca-Cola. It was not the kind of scenery she'd expected either.

The Government Tourist Bungalow was the same sparse building they'd stayed in in other towns. The familial duo deposited their recently acquired, high-end cases on the chipped-stone floor of the reception area. Father wiped his blackened hands on the sodden cloth which he carried on his shoulder as though he could effectively relieve them of some moisture, and then stuck out one for payment. He took the proffered note and tucked it inside his soaking shirt. The pair of them touched their foreheads and departed without a backward glance.

Nerys brought out her paperwork and her credit card and planked them on the counter. 'Bercow,' she said. 'Three nights. We… I made a reservation.' The receptionist, a thin young man in a dark suit, a university graduate with no prospects of a career, checked the register and addressed himself to her husband: 'Thank you sir. Payment taken on departure. Room twenty-three. Enjoy your stay.'

'Why can't they look you in the eye?' Nerys fumed as they lumbered up the wooden staircase behind the juvenile who was carrying their cases. 'That was my card, my money, my research that brought us here. At least acknowledge me.'

'You take things too seriously,' her husband said.

'I do, do I?'

'Custom and practice in these places. Don't engage with another man's woman.'

'I think you'll find the world is moving on.'

'Obviously not here. Be patient.'

The room was like many they had stayed in before: two hard beds, two lattice-bottomed chairs, a bare floor, a washbasin; shut away in one cubicle an Indian-style WC and, in another, a shower. The only

concessions to decoration were two Western, Sixties-style lampshades jutting out over the bedheads and a nylon net curtain over the corridor window.

She started to unpack their clothes. The main window opened on to a small verandah. Even though it was only at ground level, her husband regarded it with obvious enthusiasm. He stood looking out over the sodden grass at the turgid grey sea shrouded in a pall of drizzle, smiling to himself. She put his pyjamas on the bed nearest the washbasin.

'We did three hundred kilometres on that bus today, y'know,' he called. 'Albeit slowly. That's about a hundred and eighty-five miles.'

'Mm.' She had no interest in distances except in terms of discomfort and fatigue.

'If we'd done a journey of that length at home, even in the car, say, it would have cost us...well, let's say petrol's...uh…a gallon...that's...yes...it would have cost us not far short of… umpteen quid.'

'Oh?' she said.

'Now, here, we paid, what? Er… say… mmm…rupees each for the bus journey, didn't we?' She entered a blank area of silence while he rumbled on: 'And the rupee is about…mmm…let's say…to the pound. That makes a total cost of…good grief!... that's incredible.'

'Do you want to take a shower now?' she asked abruptly.

He looked at her in surprise. 'No. You go ahead. I'll sit here and read the paper.'

She wanted sex, lots of caressing, passion, a falling over the edge. It didn't have to be long. 'Larry,' she said, 'let's…'

'What?' he was already deep in some article on an inside page.

But she knew exactly how it would be, that he would finger her flesh in the way she'd told him so many times that she hated; that he would achieve a modest, matter-of-fact orgasm which somehow warranted him putting his pants on briskly afterwards; that she would have an even lesser, difficult-to-come-by experience and then would lie on her back pointedly examining the lampshade on her side of the bed. He didn't notice that she hadn't answered his question, so she slid into the shower herself.

She felt better afterwards. The water had been warm and the soap had lathered. She wrapped herself in a long gown and came and sat near him on the verandah. After a while, they rang for coffee. When it came, they drank it slowly. They talked little. When some item of political interest caught his attention in the newspaper, he would offer up a comment, and she would answer 'Yes,' or 'No,' as she felt the case might be.

Then it was his turn for the shower. She could hear him snargling away inside the cubicle like some form of marine life. At last he emerged, shook himself extravagantly, towelled himself dry and joined her in bathrobe and slippers. They ordered dinner.

After a meal that an English teenager might have cobbled up while her parents were out – sweet vegetables punctuated by greying prawns on a bed of flat, wet grains of rice – she washed some underwear through at the basin. Her husband sat with a guide book to hand and a map on his knees, his fingers wandering variously over the sheet as he traced possible routes for the next stage of their journey. He occasionally threw questions at her: 'What about here, they have relics from the Chola dynasty?' or 'What about there, there's a spectacular Shaivite temple?' She merely answered with 'If you think so,' or 'I don't mind,' and got on wringing out the washing. She'd wanted to be on holiday with him, not Mr. Baedeker and his bloody book. At last, 'That's settled then,' he said, and folded up the map. She let the water out of the bowl and finished hanging up some socks.

The next day was better. The sun actually put in an appearance. He gargled his way through his teeth-cleaning procedure, cheerfully put on his still-damp socks and went out for a walk.

Left to herself, she took her time deciding what to wear. Eventually she chose a pleated Tricel skirt which she'd carried carefully in a nylon stocking all the way from the UK. She laid it out on the bed and eyed it critically, organising the folds. Then she added a delicate voile blouse in a complementary shade of green, and laid that out too. After a moment's contemplation, she sighed with satisfaction.

She got up and began to wander languidly about the room in a sudden mood of optimism. She paused to wash herself at the handbasin. The sun reached across the floor and tickled her heels as she bent over the water, and her spirits rose still further. She made a resolution. Today, in this land without full-length mirrors, where she'd conversed with no-one since they'd arrived several weeks ago, where she existed only as a spectator of other people's actions, she would assert herself. In a place where men readjusted loincloths conspicuously in public places, and women fed children from uncovered, slopping breasts, she would state that her own life was a different order of existence.

She held her tights up to the light, checking them for ladders. Flawless! She brushed her dishwater-dull hair until it had a sheen. She applied lipstick. By kneeling on the bed, she managed to examine her figure in the shaving mirror. And although it would be considered unremarkable by current standards, the cream slip she wore set off her pale breasts rather well, she thought, and gave her a certain charm. Finally, she put on the skirt and blouse, twirled about to encourage the seductive swish of the pleats, then picked up her bag and crossed the room to go to breakfast.

It was only as an afterthought, as her stomach took a slight turn towards the unsteady, that she turned back and went into the lavatory cubicle. She didn't close the door. Who would be coming in? But she was just in the midst of awkward and febrile efforts, with her skirt gathered up round her waist and her feet in their heeled shoes planted unsteadily on either side of the hole, when she heard the door of the room open. The boy whose job it was to straighten the beds padded across the room and stopped dead, opposite her in the closet doorway. Panic-stricken, she clawed about for cover. Finding none, she backed away into the corner of the cubicle and sat down unceremoniously, knocking over the water can. Her feet were shackled by her tights, and one foot slid down the stinking drain. The boy stood looking at her.

'Go away, you bugger!' she cried. Her voice was abrasive. Even at that moment, she was alarmed to hear the hatred in it.

The boy remained. He was transfixed by the horror of interrupting the white woman as one interrupts an animal, and the sheer fascination of watching a memsahib in the middle of a private, physical act. She flung the water can at him.

'I said bugger off!'

He fled.

It took her a little while to recover. She changed most of her underclothes, scrubbed herself where it mattered most, doused herself in perfume and paced about the room trying to salvage her dignity. At the same time, although she couldn't forgive the Indian for his unannounced entry, she was aware that she'd treated him badly. She had been mean and coarse.

When she eventually stepped out of the bedroom to go in search of the dining-room, bad conscience went with her. She imagined a huge communications network behind the scenes, and that every Indian porter and servant now knew of the ignominious incident, and she was afraid to cast her eyes sideways in the corridor in case she met other eyes, filled with derision.

The episode affected her mood at breakfast. Her husband was already seated at a table, half-way through something emulating a traditional English breakfast. Observing the gusto with which he was tackling two fried eggs, she found herself incapable of addressing a civil remark to him, or even of telling him what had happened.

The boy approached to take her order. She fixed her gaze on her husband's coat lapels and directed a request for orange juice via him. By the time her husband had finished his third cup of tea and wiped the grease from his mouth with a napkin, she was seething. She rejected his suggestion of a boat trip to the rock where Vivekananda had achieved enlightenment with a vehemence that obliged him to retaliate, and they spent a good five minutes snarling at each other across the table. In the

end, he got up and stalked off to their room to pick up some belongings before disappearing for the morning. She remained sitting at the table for a while longer to allow him to clear the room. For a moment, she felt the ecstasy of release from his presence and then, just as suddenly, bereft.

She wandered desolately about the grounds of the hotel, eventually passing through a small, wire-mesh gate and out on to a stunning beach that consisted of mountains of creamy sand with voracious white waves tearing away at the foot of them. At the water's edge sat a woman, working away arduously at some shells which some small boys, probably her own, brought to her fresh and dripping from the water. The boys combined work with play, screaming and shouting, leaping and diving through the powerful waves, surfacing with handfuls of the fronded shells and bounding out on to the beach to deposit them.

She stood for a moment, admiring the spectacle: the sea, the sand, the exuberance of the children, the ease of relationship between adult and child. She sat down in the lee of one of the mountains of sand. If there was nothing else she could do, she could sit here and watch. And so she stayed, at the point where three oceans met, tight in the chest, caught in the cross currents between love and hate, passivity and passion, watching the endless cycle of waves crashing, boys diving and shells being brought to the shore.

The sun climbed higher in the sky. The pile of shells in the woman's basket grew big. Still she worked on. Occasionally a child forayed far enough up the beach to come and look at the unusual visitor. She would smile at him uncertainly until, without responding, he turned away and ran to join his comrades in the water.

The sand became very hot. Perspiration drew lines over her complexion and gathered, cold, behind her knees. The light became too bright for her to see comfortably as far as the water's edge, so she withdrew her gaze and sat looking blankly at the toes of her shoes.

At last, the woman picked up her basket. She called something to the boys, and they came swarming out from among the waves. She hoisted the basket to her head, and the little troupe set off along the beach, finally disappearing from sight where the shoreline took a sudden turn. Sadly, she watched them go. Now the place was bleached and empty. How easy it was to sit on the edge of a land mass that was teeming with people and yet to be alone.

Last term she'd become the county council's advisor for students with learning difficulties. No-one was more surprised than she was herself when she got the promoted post, and she would be eternally grateful to the old boy who had recognised her commitment. Now people had to come to her desk and ask questions and seek approval. Not the men who'd been passed over, of course. Not Brian who now didn't speak to her at all. Not

Gavin, who'd taken to running some undermining agenda of his own out of the back door. But the others. It all made a difference.

Suddenly, she realised she had no idea what the time was. She'd been gone from the hotel, from home, for too long. She got to her feet, dizzy and dishevelled from sitting in the sun.

On her way back through the hotel grounds, she met her husband coming in search of her. They greeted each other tentatively, then walked back towards the hotel, him lobbing comments and observations across the cavern that lay between them, and her dealing with them so assiduously that by the time they were sitting over lunch, it appeared that they were having a fully-fledged conversation. But they hadn't touched each other yet. Nor had they reworked the text of the original incident.

After lunch, she agreed to go for a walk with him. From the boat he had seen the facade of a Gothic church, bleached and blasted, standing in the midst of Equatorial landscape. It had made him wonder, he chuckled, if God wasn't after all a Surrey batsman clad in cricket whites. They set off in what he judged to be the right direction according to his observations from the boat. He reckoned that it would be no more than a mile away.

It was impossible for them to follow a straight line at first because they were obliged to go back through the village. They wound their way between the shacks, from under which still slithered the remains of yesterday's deluge, encountering more yellow dogs and Coca-Cola cans and sodden bedding hanging out to dry. There were few people about. They walked arm in arm, comfortably. She looked down at the Tricel skirt folding and unfolding over her knees. She deserved this. She deserved his company.

Suddenly, they emerged from among the huts. The ground in front of them was scrubby and rough. But they had sight of the church, and reaching it seemed to be a simple matter. With a burst of enthusiasm, they set off at an increased pace. It was no longer possible for them to link arms now the going was harder. Instead, they waded on, arms flailing, through the sometimes waist-high grass, his pace always slightly longer, her always impeded by the heels of her shoes.

The church had appeared deceptively close. After fifteen minutes when they looked back, they saw they had come a fair distance, but they had more than as much again to go. They stumbled on, the air thick and moist. The voile blouse became tacky. It rankled in her armpits and clung to her back. Her skirt was covered with a smattering of burrs and dead, bloody insects.

Her husband arrived at the margin of the scrubland and stood waiting for her. In his blue cotton poplin safari suit he was the epitome of Marks

and Spencer Man. His favourite quip about himself was, ‘Marks and Spencer made me’. She had begun to wonder if it were true. She staggered out of the grass beside him and wiped a hand across her brow.

The church had, in the meantime, moved its position and they discovered that they had to walk down yet another muddy track before they could reach it. It was, though, as impressive a sight from the landward side as her husband had said it was from the sea. It was a confection of every kind of mock-Gothic mannerism available. It stood without introduction, fringed by palm trees and backed by the ocean, as startlingly white and two-dimensional as if it were a stage set.

‘God! The British at play, I mean worship!’ her husband declared.

‘The English you mean,’ Nerys retaliated. ‘The Welsh could never build a piece of frippery like that.’

‘Forgive me, I’m Jewish, you know.’

They kept their eyes fixed on the place as they marched down the lane, having got a second wind.

It was not until the track started to broaden out that she noticed something odd. The patch of well-trodden ground they were approaching was obviously the work area and meeting-place of some small community. She could just see one or two huts tucked away at the foot of the palm trees. Nets were spread over the ground and women with heavy ornaments hanging from stupendously stretched ear lobes sat working at them. Children played round them. One or two men leaned or strolled about, inspecting the floats on the nets. But although the children played, although the women did not raise their heads, although the leaning men continued to stare unblinking into the eye of the day, she felt a distinct sense of being unwelcome. She faltered in her tracks and tugged at her husband's sleeve. ‘Wait... I think... I'm not sure...’

He looked back over his shoulder. ‘Nearly there,’ he chirruped.

No path had been left between the nets. Visitors were not expected. Visitors were not hoped for. She followed gingerly as he picked his way around the perimeter, between the women, sometimes venturing right on to their handiwork. Some of the children stopped playing and came and stood by their mothers' shoulders. She was conscious of a deep silence. Tension bristled in the air. She tried again. ‘I don't think..,’ she gasped.’

He glanced back again and grinned. ‘Giddy up there!’ He smiled around him too, at the men, the women and children. He smiled knowingly, benevolently.

They stepped off the nets and walked the remaining yards to the massive west front of the church. It was built from sandstone, well-weathered and creamed by winds off the sea. A man leaned by the door. Her husband approached him and asked him in gesture, with much nodding of the head, whether the door was locked. The man didn't move. Her husband shrugged and dived straight for the handle. He wrenched it

round and gave a shove. The door gave slightly, but apart from that nothing happened.

Quickly, she glanced round at the group of people behind them. The children were unusually quiet, but no-one was actually paying the pair of them any attention. The women sat as before, with their heads bent over their work. The men were still idling. And yet she felt the same feeling of hostility, as though someone had pursued them to that spot. Suddenly, it became very important to get the door open. It was not the first time, it occurred to her, that people had clung to a church door handle for sanctuary.

Her husband wrenched at the door again. This time the top juddered open, but the bottom remained fixed. The salt-damp air had obviously warped the wood.

'Harder!' she urged, almost in a frenzy.

'All right, all right,' he said. 'Keep your hair on!' and flung himself against the door. It burst open and they fell inside together, filled with expectation.

They looked around them. Her husband closed the door. There were no seats, no fancy altar cloths, no rood screens, not even a candlestick. A flaking plaster cross stood at the centre of the bare altar, there were one or two splashes of colour on the walls where someone had once tried to daub some pictures and light fell from the high west window in the soft, diluted manner normally associated with churches, but that was all there was in the way of religious paraphernalia. Where the tiled floor was not encrusted with bird droppings, it was piled high with fishing tackle. There were nets, floats, creels and large lumps of timber, soaked and splintered by the sea, awaiting the shaping that would turn them into useful working items.

'Oh!' said her husband.

'Oh no!' said Nerys.

'Nothing here,' said her husband. 'Wait a minute though...' and he disappeared behind a pile of timber.

Nerys started to shiver. There was pressure between her shoulder blades as though someone was shoving her from behind. A light breeze that was hot then cold frisked about her. Perspiration sprang out on her brow. Dark waves of something obscured her vision, alternating with bright light. She started to feel sick. Maybe it was the smell of fish. Or maybe the waft of malevolence. 'Can't stay in here,' she called. 'Got to get out.'

'No hurry,' came his voice. 'I've just found...'

She didn't care what he'd found. She waited for him to appear at the other end of the stack, then caught hold of his arm. 'Let's go,' she said.

'Don't be daft. We've only just got here. Let's have a bit of a nose arou...'

‘I’m not kidding. There’s something wrong here.’ She summoned her strength. ‘I want out now, and I am not going back that way.’

He looked down at the strained, urgent face, at the thin hand wrapped round his arm. She had surprised him again. He saw that she was getting ready to make a big fuss. ‘All right,’ he said amicably. ‘I don’t have to see fishing nets. We'll find another way.’

She breathed with relief and took her hand from his arm. They searched the church systematically. ‘Here's the vestry door,’ he called at last. ‘It's open.’

They plunged out into the light. They were on the beach, among the huts she had glimpsed between the trees. It was, in fact, a small settlement, a sliver of habitation between vegetation and the sea. Boats, crudely shaped, lying idle at the water's edge, gave the impression that their owners were absorbed in work elsewhere, perhaps indoors or out at sea. A dark, ordurous substance which included decaying fish and the charred ends of rope covered parts of the beach. The huts themselves, made of broken branches and bits of driftwood that looked as though they would succumb at the first hint of a stiff breeze, were so close together that there was hardly space to walk between them. The people who lived here had calculated every inch between the high tide and the trees. Here there was no seawall, no promenade, nothing fencing off an angry tide. This was the last resort of human habitation.

‘Look!’ said her husband, pointing. ‘Amazing!’

They tip-toed to the water's edge and looked in both directions: to both right and left the same endless crescent of untiring waves. There was no way back to the right. The waves were already tearing at the east front of the church. To go further up the beach would take them miles in the wrong direction. He looked at her: ‘We'll have to go back the same way.’

‘No.’

‘No choice. Calm down. It'll be all right.’

‘Don’t tell me to calm down.’ But she knew he was right. She swallowed down her fear until it was a stiff lump in her belly, then nodded. They turned and retraced their steps.

As they rounded the corner of the church, they saw exactly the same sight as before: the women bent over their work, the children playing. The man still leaned by the door of the west front, but as they passed Nerys was conscious of some movement. Her palms began to sweat. They walked again towards the nets. The children began to form themselves into a chanting avenue. She looked to see if they were playing, in which case she would smile and try to show how nice she thought they were. But no, their dark, steady eyes were filled with spite, and their mouths were twisted in contempt. Then the women looked up. Their insults were fouler. It wasn't necessary to speak the language to know that. Their voices were coarse with abuse. They pointed and gesticulated. The earrings wagged

furiously at the sides of their heads. It was clear what they meant. They were being told to clear off and mind their own sodding business.

The first stone was thrown. It ruptured Nerys's tights and drew blood from her leg. There was more quick to follow – more stones, and handfuls of dirt – until the whole gathering was pelting them. The dirt caught in her hair and raddled down inside her blouse. The stones bounced off her back. Her husband bent forward, shielding his head with his hand. All at once, the fear she'd been concealing leaped into her throat, and she broke past him into a terrified run.

She lay on her back on the hotel bed, staring fixedly at the ceiling. Her face was no longer streaked with dirt and perspiration, her hair was well ordered, she had a plaster on her leg where the stone had cut her. The green blouse and the skirt, shredded where she'd caught it on the undergrowth, hung over the back of a chair. She had been in the toilet and had been very, very sick.

Her husband was pacing up and down in his bathrobe, smelling of body lotion. His hair was plastered down on his head so that he looked like a retriever emerging from water. 'Boy, you didn't half set off at a lick,' he chortled. 'Looked as though you had the fear of God in you.'

She didn't answer.

'I watched you go hell-for-leather, arse over tit all the way through that grass.' He laughed outright now. 'A right pair we must have looked to the lot at this end.'

She said nothing. She remembered all too clearly her choking, sobbing, ungraceful return through the village.

'I can't think why you were so scared.'

She took her eyes off the ceiling and shuddered. 'There was something evil there. Something primaeval.'

'Twaddle! They were objecting. That place was their storage depot. We were trespassers, that's all.'

'I thought they were Christians in this part of the world.'

'Lots are. Lots aren't.'

'Well, they clearly weren't.'

'There's been tension between Hindus and Christians. Whoever they are, the place obviously hasn't been used as a church for years. They've probably no idea that it's supposed to be open to all comers.'

'There was more to it than that. I just can't describe to you the force I felt.'

'Christ! You're a real liability on a foreign holiday, aren't you,' he said, half-joking, half not.

She didn't move. She felt empty in every sense, as though one effort of will could release her into the void. From one small cell of consciousness, she looked out at this man who was her husband as he

pottered about. He was not unattractive: a face showing the imprint of humour and lined with the unanswered (and unspoken) questions of middle-age, hair greying at the temples with the effort of working to support a family, a figure slightly slack at the waistline through drinking before meals and over-indulgence at week-ends.

She had not understood why, in mid-life, he had wanted to undertake a rough-and-tumble exploit like this, but she had agreed. For the first time in years, they were alone with nothing to distract them. And suddenly, she realised how many secrets they had, and how few of them to share. Without the mediation of dental receptionists, school secretaries, traffic wardens and sports club captains there was very little left to say. Their lives hardly seemed to touch at all. Now she realised how little he told her about who she was. Somewhere on the way to gaining a family and a small-time promotion, she seemed to have lost herself.

Eventually, she staggered out and stood beside him on the verandah. Her stomach was still grinding away uncertainly, but she knocked back a few Imodium tablets with her gin and tonic. 'The English, sorry, Welsh panacea,' he said. 'Never fails.' A burgeoning white cloud was piled high in the sky, riven right across by a ragged red tear.

'Cumulus nimbus, that,' he said. 'Tail end of the monsoon.'

To her it looked more like internal bleeding.