

One Moment in the Well of Time

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How strange it is that I, who love life so much, have my first memories rooted in death. I was four then and the big house, usually bursting with movement, was hushed. I remember evading my nanny, my bigger brothers and sisters and finding my way to where my grandmother was laid, in the awful stillness of death. The room was full of flowers, so many flowers that she seemed to disappear under them. The atmosphere in the closed room, the shutters drawn and the flickering light of so many candles, was overpowering. I was awed. There, my father and mother found me and returned me to the nursery. How to explain death to a four year old? We missed my little French grandmother, her gentle ways, her kindness, the stories she used to tell us, the security and warmth she gave us with her love.

I was the seventh of nine children – three boys and six girls. The family was so spread out from my elder sister who was 21 and married to the last girl aged two. We never really knew our elder brothers and sisters. They were already grown up when my two little sisters and I came onto the scene.

We were living in Mauritius then – ancienne Ile de France – a tiny island in the Indian Ocean east of Madagascar. The year was 1914. We were so far away from the theatre of war that we suffered little of the privations that tore Europe at that time. We were British subjects, but my father was too old and my brothers too young to enlist. We helped the war effort in sending food and clothing to Europe.

My mother had inherited from her French mother and her Scot father good looks, brains and health. She really was a lovely woman with her soft curly dark hair, patrician features, clear skin and large brown eyes, so very expressive. She was graceful, played the piano well, had a lovely voice, and was intensely interested in literature.

My father, whose forbears were English and French, was a well-built man, with pale blue eyes and reddish hair that turned white whilst he was fairly young. He was good and kind and there was a strong bond between the two of us. He loved the sea, reading, travelling, and he introduced me to the wonderful world of geography, of different customs in strange lands. He introduced me very early to a world where one can never feel alone: he gave me the enchanted world of books. His mind was a mixture of logic (by profession he was a civil engineer) and also of dreams. He was over 40 when I was born and I think that of all his children. I was the closest to him until he died in 1930.

We lived in a big house of colonial style, looking very much like the southern homes in Georgia or Louisiana. The house was build of wood, bungalow style and had been added on so much that when I was born, it comprised about thirty rooms. The house stood well back from the road, in five and a half acres of well tended lawns and lovely trees, some of them hundreds of years old. My Scottish grandfather was most meticulous about the garden and three gardeners under his supervision were forever planting flowers, trimming hedges, white washing stone pillars supporting lovely urns with

trailing plants. He even had his private park where two stags with enormous antlers and three or four does with small fawns browsed in a big enclosed area.

My grandmother kept birds, peacocks, guinea fowl and her domain was the kitchen garden which supplied us with fresh vegetables the year round. We always seemed to have a plentiful supply of fresh strawberries, raspberries and tropical fruit.

There were lots of servants, some of them Indians but most of them Natives or Creoles as they are called in Mauritius, a mixture of the early slaves of Hottentot and Negro blood. There was the head gardener, Maraz, who was, or rather had been a high caste Brahmin, a gem of a servant, so trustworthy. Then an Indian cook, several bedroom girls, amongst them Marie, a Christian Indian who had a genius for tidying a room quickly and making it appear spotless. Woe betide anyone who would look too closely behind cupboards and under tables. There was in Marie a rare artistry in flower arrangement. With a few deft movements, an innate sense of colour, she created truly beautiful bouquets. Her husband, Michel, was the waiter, and we would know them not as separate entities but as a sort of intriguing whole called Marie-Michel.

Then there was my old nanny, Nonone, who was a wizened half caste, with incongruous blue eyes in a brown face. She taught me my prayers, scolded and loved me, tended my hurts, of which there were many as I seemed to be an accident prone child. Nonone is part and parcel of my childhood memories. Bless you Nonone, wherever you are now. Surely in Heaven. You taught me so many things, gave me so much of your life.

We had many young friends who came and played in our garden. We played tag, hide and seek, climbed trees, paddled in a pond where we launched all sorts of rafts, gathered flowers, made daisy chains, had picnics all over the big garden. We used to get some sticks to build a fire and cook the gooiest messes that we ate with relish. The modern child's digestive system would be sorely tried, I am sure.

My father didn't believe in sending us girls to school, so we had a teacher who came to teach us every morning, from nine to twelve, and left us plenty of homework to be done for the next day or else. That's how I was taught or taught myself. Geography, history, literature, arithmetic (ugh – to this day my pet aversion and worst subject). Voracious reading, plus my father and mother, intelligent and cultured as they were, carried on the good work and gave me the little knowledge I possess.

It was a marvellous childhood and one that I would not have exchanged for anybody else in the world. I would make myself a little tree house in one of our numerous fruit trees, changing my abode according to whatever fruits were in season, and with a stack of books securely fastened to a large branch, seated on a cushion, I would study propped up against another large branch. From time to time, I would pick up the fruit in my immediate vicinity, be they mangoes or guavas or custard apples or any other variety of tropical fruit we has in our garden. Sometimes, just to add more diversity to that Elysian state of affairs, there would be some chameleon to watch, tongue darting to get a fly, or some weird looking insect gliding by.

Often, we would go down to the river and fish for camarons, huge prawns, green in colour. Imagine a sunny day, the river, crystal clear shallow water on clean pebbles. Flat on one's stomach, lying full length on a stone warmed by the sun. Overhead, hanging branches of trees called jamrosas, fruit trees which I suppose would be entirely peculiar to Mauritius, with strongly scented fruits. The play of light on water. In one's hand, a kind of noose secured in a cane stick. Watching, watching, hardly daring to breathe, watching the least movement of the great big green prawn on the stones in the shallow water and then when the noose was dead in the centre of its middle, one would lift it and get the camaron, again and again until one's basket would be full. What heaven! I can still feel the warmth of the sun, the scent of the jamrosas, the glorious sense of being lost in a world where time mattered not but the present so rich, so actual, so sufficient.

The glory of it all though was July and the holidays. The island of Mauritius is only 40 miles long and 27 miles wide and we would be going by car from the town where we lived on the plains to our bungalow by the seaside, a relatively short distance, but to our child's minds, it was the great Odyssey itself. The trunks would be taken down from the attic, dusted, and in would go our clothes, our toys, our numerous odds and ends, usually far too many things and there were many tears and grumblings where we had to streamline the packing. There would be the avant garde of servants sent to air, clean and prepare the big bungalow with thatched roof and cool rooms, give a hand to Ismael, our permanent servant there. The trunks would be unpacked and then, only then would be arrive, usually for lunch and we couldn't wait to get into the sea, so beguiling would be the brilliant sun shining on the green waves of the lagoon.

My father had three boats, a schooner called "Why Not?" and two 30 foot sailing boats, one called "The Flag" and painted red, white and blue, and the other "The Wave," all white with a tall mast, a long white sail and a mizzen. We children were allowed to take a dinghy call "George the Fifth" (what names a child will give to things). My sister Alix, aged 13, and I, aged 9, were great buddies. Alix had the adventurous mind of early explorers. She was a hardy sailor and we would go on trips, first using a long pole to push or dinghy, then, where we thought we were sufficiently out of sight from our elders, we would hoist a sail and try deeper waters. It makes me shudder now to think of us two, 13 and 9 respectively, exposed to so many dangers. Admittedly, we were manoeuvring a boat in a bay, in lagoons where the waters was not very deep and we were both good swimmers. But there were currents and deep channels nearby where sharks lurked. There we were, blissfully ignorant of such dangers, in our little nutshell of a dinghy, enjoying the sun, the fresh breeze, the salty tang on our lips, enjoying to the full our carefree childhood. Sometimes, we would drop anchor and dive into the clear water. Sometimes, we would get out our lines and fish, leaning over the boat and looking at the myriads of coloured corals, great magnificent flowers of the sea under which emerged little and big fish with bright tropical colours – yellow striped black, red and green, orange, blue or scarlet, intent on the thrill of watching one of these beauties approach cautiously, take our bait, and up would come our line with one more wiggly fish on the bottom of the boat.

The Bay of Mahebourg, the scene of these exploits, is surrounded by a ridge of mountains, the highest being 2,000 feet and shaped like a huge Sphinx, another shaped like Fujiyama – the whole chain silhouetted against the blue and green waters of the bay. On the horizon, the foam and roar of the

barrier reefs (Mauritius is a coral island), the intense green of the lush grass, the flour like whiteness of the sand beaches, the filmy loveliness of the casuarina trees, the thatched roofed and whitewashed bungalows nestling amongst the green – all that is struck indelibly in my mind as one of the most beautiful spots on earth, and I have seen many. The famous line, “see Naples and die,” brought vividly to mind the Bay of Mahebourg. When I saw Naples I couldn’t but compare it unfavourably to my childhood playground in Mauritius.

Sometimes, my father would take us children to a real deep sea trawling expedition. My mother was a very bad sailor, nervous and frightened of the sea. She would pack a wonderful lunch for us and would live until we were back in her sight again. Off we would go, fresh winds swelling the sails, the boat threshing the waves, fresh air filling our lungs, my father at the tiller, one bulky black fisherman as a lookout, directing us to the most promising fishing grounds. Ye gods, but what better memories can a child have? We would drop anchor, board the Island of Egrets, then resume our fishing. The sun would set, a sudden melancholy would descend with the approaching twilight, the mountains would grow darker, we would feel the cold and my father would decide to turn sail toward home. Home, where a very joyful mother would clasp us in her arms and heave a sigh of relief until the next fishing expedition.

Sometimes when we were older we would go fishing in the evenings on the reefs, each one of us with a torch made of rags dipped in paraffin. Grownups would be with us always as there was danger there, deep crevices where one could slip between the jagged reefs. The sight was eerie, so many flaming lights, the roaring foaming white surf, all of us looking like dark devils with flaming spears in hand, trying to get, and get fast, lobsters or octopi or phosphorescent fish, things of the deep, sliding, writhing, seen now and disappearing in a flash in their dark, murky, unfathomable depths.

Oh, these days and nights at the seaside. Endless joys, golden memories of a wonderful childhood. Everything there seemed to have a special brand of magic. There was a Chinese bakery owned by convert Christian Chinese who asked my mother and elder sisters and brothers to stand as godparents to their three children. Therefore, we were all *persona grata* and fussed over tremendously whenever we visited the bakery, which we seemed to do pretty often. The smell of good bread baking, the floury dust rising like a cloud in the sunshine which poured through the wide windows, the cleanliness, the biscuits, shaped as funny animals, the gingerbread men with raisin eyes, all especially and lovingly baked for us. The little Chinese woman and her husband, dressed in their Chinese costumes, softly padding in their slippered feet, the funny little lacquered boxes and trinkets they gave us, together with good things to eat, all these things stand out as memories never to be forgotten.

Then there would be the moonlight. Our bungalow was built on a kind of promontory and from the dining room with all windows open, we’d have the illusion of being in a ship at sea. The ancient phonograph would wheeze happily and Alexander’s Ragtime Band or the Merry Widow tunes would float out in the silvery night. No radio, no TV. We had to use our imagination and build so many castles in the air. Sitting at the long table, we watched the moonlight over the sea, so many of us, and the talk would be animated, the dinner would be fish or seafood caught only a few hours earlier. The small fry would feel sleepy but not sleepy enough not to try and squeeze more playtime before being whisked off to sleep. On these moonlit nights, we would always try to snatch a last game of hide and seek in the

boats which would be lying on their sides at low tide. We would clamber on board, feel thoroughly frightened at the shadows lurking everywhere. We would rush on deck and pretend we were pirates. At last, an irate nanny or mother would come and forcibly march us off to bed. What did it matter? There was still another golden day to be lived tomorrow. And tomorrow, maybe we would be out first thing in the morning before breakfast fishing for clams or tec-tecs as they are called in Mauritius, picking starfish or crabs. We listened to the endless folklore of native servants, or as the day went on, we would go and watch sugar cane being loaded onto the train. We would bite on a big juicy bit of sugar cane and relish the sweet treacly taste. Or we would go to the native market and buy some gay straw hat or bag or bright coloured candies that couldn't have been cooked under too hygienic conditions! Then, it would be goodbye to the seaside and September would see us back in our town house, enduring schooling and . . . exams. How we hated those Septembers that marked the end (for a year at least) of our complete freedom, our close association with the sun and the sea, our fun-packed days.

September is the time of spring in Mauritius. The garden was full of flowers and our huge camphor trees showed the pink glory of their young leaves. The big house would have been freshly painted, standing all white under its black shingled roof and gay with its green shutters. The large cool rooms were wide open to light and sunshine and the smell of waxed floors and great bowls of fragrant flowers everywhere would permeate a child's mind that all was well in a well regulated, comfortable world.

We would have to study really hard and Miss Glover, our teacher, spurred us to renew our efforts to get first place, silver or gold medals in the forthcoming examinations. My school books at that time in 1919 (I was ten then) show a strange mixture of many bracing mottoes scribbled on the fly leaf. Things like "A merry heart goes all the way" and "Smile and the world smiles with you." Later on, when I made the acquaintance of the prince of men, William Shakespeare: "To thine own self be true, and then it must follow as the night the day, thou canst then be false to any man." Or "...full of God's thoughts, a place of peace and safety amid the most exalted grandeur and enthusiastic action, a new song, a place of beginnings abounding in first lessons of life, mountain building, eternal, invincible, unbreakable order; with sermons in stone, storms, trees, flowers, and animals brimful with humanity."

Later, it was Ruskin: "The white fire of a great enthusiasm is the mightiest force in the world." Or Pascal: "Le silence eternel de ces espaces infinis m'effraye, car enfin, qu'est ce que l'homme dans la Nature? Un néant a l'égard du tout, un tout a l'égard du néant, un milieu entre rien et tout." (The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me, because finally, what is man in nature? A nothingness has the respect of all, everything has the respect of nothingness, a mean between nothing and everything. ") And old Omar Kayam: "The moving finger writes and having writ moves on; and, having writ, moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit shall lure it back to cancel half a Line, nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it." Or, "There was a door to which I found no key. There was a wall past which I could not see. A little while of thee and me, and then, no more of thee and me."

Remembering these scribbling over my school books over the years, they appear to me now as stepping stones of my mind. I seemed to brace myself at the beginning of each year with some sort of programme that I obscurely felt I had to live up to. To a psychoanalyst, they would give the answers to the development of a happy extrovert child to a strangely mature deep thinking child of 10 to 12, living an intense interior life of her own, deeply religious, extremely curious, building around her an armour of

moral and physical strength a hard shell to protect the core of agonizing self consciousness, the sensitive, easily hurt feelings that seem to be the unavoidable hallmarks of every adolescent.

Christmas would come upon us, always a time of rejoicing. Bulky parcels would have been stored away and we would try and guess the shape of delights to come: toys, always well chosen, exactly what we wanted just then. We had a custom in our family that I have kept to this day. We went to Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve, the whole family, and then, on coming back from church, we would first kneel in front of the crib, greeting the Christ Child in our own home, saying a short prayer. There would be a row of little shoes, one shoe to each child and each shoe containing a small gift. The big moment would come when, curtains drawn apart, would reveal the big Christmas tree standing in its glory of twinkling lights and bright shiny ornaments, fragile gossamer things belonging to a fairy world. At the feet of the tree, gaily wrapped packages. So much expectation! My father and mother would distribute each parcel until each child was surrounded by his and her mound of treasures. Then a cold supper would be served with turkey and champagne (we were allowed to sip some), and we would go back to bed, happy, sleepy, having once more had a glimpse of what we imagined paradise to be. On Christmas morning, it would be the turn of the servants to receive their presents, always a special gift for each and an envelope of money. After serving lunch, they would have time off until the day after for their own celebrating.

Christmas was always a family occasion with us – no noisy parties with strangers. But in true Scottish fashion, December 31st was our real BIG night and we celebrated “Hogmanay” in a truly splendid manner. All friends and relatives would be invited for a formal supper at 9 p.m. Long trestle tables would come out of storage from the garage and set in a horseshoe shape in the long dining room, the largest room in our house. Snow-white linen would set off the very best cut glass, the finest dinner service and silver cutlery. Every year, Marie supervised long flat narrow flower arrangements and each year she improved her artistry. We dressed in our finery – my mother in evening gown and jewels and my father in a dinner jacket. Family and friends would arrive with kisses and handshakes all around, exuberant exchanges of the latest news and a round of drinks before sitting down with 50, 60 or 75 people to a beautifully prepared, beautifully served dinner. The children had their own table in a corner of the dining room. Soup came first, then fish or lobster or prawns, followed by poultry or venison or even a suckling pig, great mounds of asparagus and green salads. Throughout the “specialité de la maison” was served, Punch a la Romaine, a concoction of water, ice, champagne and aniseed, and heaven knows what, a truly ambrosiac drink whose purpose was to refresh the palate and prepare the taste buds for appreciation of the next course.

The finale to the gargantuan meal would be something called “bombes glacées” – homemade super-duper ice cream. These ices would be of all colours of the rainbow, enriched with nuts and cherries. The preparation of these masterpieces never failed to fascinate us. There was an official ice cream maker, an Indian called Albert, who made a roaring trade going from house to house for special parties. He was a real wizard at his job. Albert would bring three or four or more weird looking pails into which went a long aluminium mold. This would be surrounded by chunks of ice and salt. Albert himself would turn the handle of these contraptions and from time to time peep into the molds and determine the degree of creaminess and excellence that would result in the perfect ice cream, something that this age of refrigerators and quick frozen commercial products somehow entirely fails to achieve.

Now, to come back to our dinner party. Having sat down to dinner and by 10 p.m. consumed large quantities of exquisite food, we were ready to greet midnight and the New Year in a champagne

toast. Happy New Year! And then in a large circle we would join hands and sing Auld Lang Syne. Even at that early age, I remember thinking whilst being happy, "What will it be next year at that very moment?" And to this day, the strains of Auld Lang Syne bring back this bittersweet moment of greeting a New Year with all the frightening unknowns it does bring.

Birthdays were always tremendous occasions in our family. When we were quite small, we would find our high chair on birthday mornings decorated like a bower of flowers and waiting for us at breakfast time, ready to greet the special king or queen of the day. We had our presents all lined up in front of our plate and invariably, some very original present in the form of a live animal – perhaps a beautiful white bunny with pink eyes or a bird or goldfish or even once I remember being presented with a magnificent white goose adorned with a blue ribbon around its neck. This menagerie would be a special thought from my mother, aided and abetted by the faithful old servants who had known us from babyhood and were very fond of us.

Of course, in between the good times, we were prey to the cortege of childhood ailments, chicken pox and measles, mumps, colds and sniffles. But we seemed to be a pretty healthy lot and these disagreeable things did not plague us too long. We were of the generation called the "castor oil kids." Every two months or so, our mothers or nannies were suddenly conscious of the fact that we needed a good interior spring cleaning. How I hated these fateful dawns when the dose of castor oil was forthcoming! We were told to pinch our noses and swallow the vile stuff quickly. This was followed by a cup of strong black coffee. To this day, I cannot bear the smell and taste of black coffee.

We had two lawn tennis courts in our garden and my elder brothers were fond of the game and very good players. This is where I met my first love and the tender age of seven or eight. The boy who would have been then seventeen or eighteen was particularly ugly and moreover, he was afflicted with a cleft palate. Not any sort of Casanova, but by Jove, what fascination he held for me. I supposed I was introduced to romance through the pictures. It was the era of silent films of course and we saw films such as "The Mysteries of New York," "Judex" or "The Adventures of Monte Cristo," running in countless episodes. From week to week, breathless adventures would transport us to a world of cloak and dagger, high living and mincing romance, bleak despair or downright clowning. How artificial these silent films appear to us now and yet, how they mesmerized us.

For us small fry who could not possibly be aware of the implicated dangers, cyclones or near cyclones would be something excitingly out of the ordinary. When the wind reached a certain velocity, the electricity would be automatically cut off everywhere; all storm windows and shutters battened down. The darkened house was lit by candles. The flickering light cast enormous shadows on the ceiling and in every corner of the room. We were huddled up in the middle of the house and somebody would attempt to tell us stories, but our minds were intent on the great elemental drama being enacted outside. The pelting rain machine gunned the roof, the wind tossed, raging, whirling, charging, coursing, and spiralling, as if it had ten thousand demons at its heels. Terrifying. The big house shuddered at each new onslaught; the beams of the roof and every board would creak as if they were souls in agony. When bedtime actually did come, we would be bundled up to bed, and if the great storm outside had not abated, we would sense the concern of our elders and feel the air around us uneasy with fear. We would sink into a fitful sleep and wake up the next day to witness devastation all around. Trees down, lawns flooded, flowers smashed to pulp, but with the natural resilience of children, we would go out of doors if to were safe to do so, donning our mackintoshes and running barefoot into the hundreds of little pools left by the torrential rain.

Ours was a close-knit family. My mother's love of music would naturally have influenced us. My elder sister Simone was a brilliant violinist, having won a gold medal at eight years old in a competition where she defeated several adults. One of my brothers was quite proficient with the flute; another brother had a lovely baritone voice, and one of my vivid childhood memories is listening to family concerts with my sister and her violin, my two brothers – one playing the flute and the other singing – and my mother at the piano. Sometimes she would sing too in a lovely warm mezzo soprano voice. There was sense of oneness, togetherness in these evenings that always made me feel that I was privileged to belong to such a family. That being part and parcel of it was indeed something very precious.

Mauritius being a land of many races – Indians, Chinese, Creoles and Europeans – was an exciting and exotic place to live. I remember about once every month down our long avenue would come a small caravan, three or more men carrying enormous bales on their backs, usually preceded by a fat prosperous looking man in eastern costume with fez, richly embroidered vest and baggy trousers. For some reason, these men were called by our native servants "Bombays." I suppose the logical explanation was that they hailed from Bombay.

These "Bombays" would politely ask permission to display their wares, and if my mother agreed, then the three men would open their bales and out would spill the treasures of the Orient: shimmering silks, richly scented sandalwood boxes, magnificent shawls which were richly embroidered, velvet slippers and evening bags encrusted with gold thread and gem stones, fans painted with amazing looking peacocks or birds or paradise, barbaric looking jewels, exquisite filigree work. Such fascinating things to our children's eyes. We just could not be prised away from viewing all these treasures whilst interminable haggling went on over some magnificent pieces of silk.

It sounded like this: My mother: "How much for that?"

Bombay: "One hundred rupees, great Madam."

My mother: "What? Such a big price for THAT piece of silk?" My mother's tone implied she was looking down on a very inferior thing indeed. And on and on the parlaying would go until my mother victoriously got her piece for a quarter less than the original asking price.

Sometimes there would be some visiting Indian magicians and we saw feats of hypnotism that I have never seen equalled to this day. The magician would take an Indian child and put him in a basket. He would ask us to feel and see the boy inside the basket, then he would cover the basket, hum some weird incantation, the cloth covering the basket would be whipped off and lo! There would be nothing inside. The child would appear from the far end of the garden and walk toward us! Quite amazing and not easily explained.

Or the same magician would fill the basket with earth from our garden and before our very eyes he would plant a seed that he had asked us previously to examine. The seed would germinate in the space of seconds; it would grow into a little plant that would produce a flower; the flower would change into a fruit; the fruit would grow right in front of us until it attained a proper size, and then, calmly, the magician would whip out a knife, but the fruit and offer it to us. Needless to say not one of us ever tasted the fruit! We were awed by such fantastic feats of hypnotism and could not explain what we had

witnessed. And if I myself had not seen these things with my own two eyes, I would have laughed at such tall stories.

Snake charmers also accompanied this band. They piped on their flutes a kind of monotonous cacophony and from a low covered basket with a hole in the centre would slither a swarm of slithering, swaying, writhing snakes emerged, their heads cocked to one side, listening and moving to the sounds of the high pitched flutes. Rattlesnakes, mambas, pythons and cobras – deadly poisonous snakes, completely entranced by some weird magic.

Sometimes we would be taken to an Indian festival held on a big sugar estate. There would be a milling crowd of Indians celebrating their festival of light. Thousands and thousands of lights flickered in the soft summer night illuminated tall and incredibly ornate and intricate decorations made of paper and bamboo, further ornamented with bits of metal that tinkled and jingled in the breeze. These decorations were held together by grotesque masks and strange animal effigies. The highlight was the fire walking. A trench of about 20 feet by 8 feet would have been dug and filled with wood and coal, lit and burned until the whole trench was blazing red hot. Then, the Indians would come, men and women, moving as if in a trance. Slowly, they would walk, slowly, without ever hurrying, to emerge at the other end of the trench, unburned, completely unscathed. Where does the explanation lie there? Apparently, these same men and women had to undergo a period of fasting and abstinence, total continence, intense meditation and prayer, until they were cleansed and worthy to go through the ordeal of fire walking. To make things even more difficult, some of them walked through the blazing trench carrying a pitcher of milk or water on their heads!

Perhaps the most spectacular sight of all was during the Chinese New Year when happy laughing Chinese people went delirious over exploding fireworks and setting off noisy firecrackers while a huge dragon was promenaded through the garlanded streets. Its oversized body was covered with the most unrealistic scales in garish technicolour. Its huge mouth gaped over ferocious teeth and it belched forth real smoke -- a most fearsome spectacle and one that never failed to send us into ecstasies of fright.

The Creoles had no particular rejoicing except getting violently and sickeningly drunk of some sort of crude spirit called arrack. From time to time, they would forget the natural indolence which characterized them and launch themselves into a dance called the sega. The danced started sedately enough, but as the night went on and more and more arrack was consumed their gyrations became grossly obscene and suggestive, their black faces and bodies glistening with sweat and twisting, gasping in a crescendo of lust and the night would end in orgies. They danced to a crude music of hands clapping and the supporting melody of one or two guitars accompanying rich Creole voices signing with a rhythm inherited from their African ancestors. We children, needless to say, were never taken to these dances so I am writing of them through hearsay. Also, I remember when I was older being taken to an expurgated version of the saga and being whisked away before things became too hotted up.

A great sport in Mauritius was hunting. Some friends of my father had some hunting grounds in some very lovely woodlands up some wooded mountains. From time to time, my father would be invited to hunting parties and although, strictly speaking, no children were to be included, my father somehow managed to smuggle me on the Ladies Days. He knew how much I enjoyed anything connected to open air sports. The thrill would be unbelievable: getting up early on a spring morning, getting warmly dressed, shod with thick soled shoes and driving some 15 to 20 miles to the hunting grounds where we met the other hunters. It was the responsibility of the master of the hunt to place the hunters in their different spots, then the native men and a pack of dogs would be let loose and

would shepherd the stags in different directions toward the huntsmen. How the wind blew was of course of paramount importance as the stags would pick up quickly the human scent. Great shooting prowesses would be accomplished and excited hunters would meet at noon at the hunting lodge, and over a beer or whiskey compare the size of their quarries, the dimensions of the antlers and so on and on. Thereupon, a most delicious and plentiful lunch would be served and this would be another golden memory in my childhood's scrapbook.

My first big party was given to me on my fifteenth birthday. I had a dance from 7 to 11 p.m., complete with a jazz band and a real grownup supper. How I thought myself a woman of the world and what wonderful fun I had that evening. Boys and girls, all dressed up, all so eager, so deliciously young, the atmosphere electric with anticipation. We danced the Lancers, the Schottische, and the Boston. We helped ourselves to a buffet table groaning with good things. We held hands and made a long chain, farandoling all along the garden which had been made festive with Chinese lanterns and coloured lights.

My "beau" was a tall, lanky youth of eighteen or nineteen who danced divinely. We had heaps of friends, even if in our heart of hearts we were swooning with love for a particular person. Would we communicate these feelings? Never! Perhaps the brashness of modern youth would jibe at such innocent romancing. Yet, there was in such romances the tender awakening of feeling, like a fragile spring blossom that uncurls its petals on a fresh sunny morning – something beautiful, something unsullied, something that our gum chewing, jean trousered, coldly factual, going steady, boldly necking and petting guys and dolls of today might laugh at, but be so much the poorer for never experiencing it.

So there I am, on the threshold of youth, the . . .