Bright Thursdays

by Olive Senior

THURSDAY was the worst day. While she had no expectations of any other day of the week, every Thursday turned out to be either very good or very bad, and she had no way of knowing in advance which one it would be. Sometimes there would be so many bad Thursdays in a row that she wanted to write home to her mother, 'Please please take me home for I cannot stand the clouds'. But then she would remember her mother saying, "Laura this is a new life for you. This is opportunity. Now dont let yu mama down. Chile, swallow yu tongue before yu talk lest yu say the wrong thing and dont mek yu eye big for everything yu see. Dont give Miss Christie no cause for complain and most of all, let them know you have broughtuptcy."

Miss Christie was the lady she now lived with, her father's mother. She didn't know her father except for a photograph of him on Miss Christie's bureau where he was almost lost in a forest of photographs of all her children and grandchildren all brown skinned with straight hair and confident smiles on their faces. When she saw these photographs she understood why Miss Christie couldn't put hers there. Every week as she dusted the bureau, Laura looked at herself in the mirror and tried to smile with the confidence of those in the photographs, but all she saw was a being so strange, so far removed from those in the pictures, that she knew that she could never be like them. To smile so at a camera one had to be born to certain things – a big house with heavy mahogany furniture and many rooms, fixed mealtimes, a mother and father who were married to each other and lived together in the same house, who would chastise and praise, who would send you to school with the proper clothes so

you would look like, be like everyone else, fit neatly into the space Life had created for you.

But even though others kept pushing her, and she tried to ease, to work her way into that space too, she sometimes felt that Life had played her tricks, and there was, after all, no space allotted for her. For how else could she explain this discomfort, this pain it caused her in this her father's house to confront even the slightest event. Such as sitting at table and eating a meal.

In her mother's house she simply came in from school or wherever and sat on a stool in a corner of the lean-to kitchen or on the steps while Mama dished up a plate of food which one ate with whatever implement happened to be handy. Mama herself would more often than not stand to eat, sometimes out of the pot, and the boys too would sit wherever their fancy took them. Everything would be black from the soot from the fireside which hung now like grotesque torn ribbons from the roof. After the meal, Laura would wash the plates and pots in an enamel basin outside and sweep out the ashes from the fireside. A meal was something as natural as breathing.

But here in this house of her father's parents a meal was a ritual, something for which you prepared yourself by washing your hands and combing your hair and straightening your dress before approaching the Table. The Table was in the Dining Room and at least twelve could have comfortably sat around it. Now Laura and the grandparents huddled together at one end and in the sombre shadows of the room, Laura sometimes imagined that they so unbalanced the table that it would come toppling over on to them. At other times, when she polished the mahogany she placed each of the children of the household at a place around this table, along with their mother and father and their bewhiskered and beribboned grandparents who looked down from oval picture frames. When they were all seated, they fitted in so neatly in their slots that there was now no place left for her. Sometimes she didn't mind.

But now at the real mealtimes, the ghosts were no longer there and she sat with the old people in this empty echoing space. Each time she sat down with dread in her heart, for meal

time was not a time to eat so much as a time for lessons in Table Manners.

First Mirie the cook would tinkle a little silver bell that would summon them to the dining room, and the house would stir with soft footsteps scurrying like mice and the swish of water in the basin. All the inhabitants of the house were washing and combing and straightening themselves in preparation for the Meal. She tried not to be the last one to the table for that was an occasion for chastisement. Then she had to remember to take the stiffly starched white napkin from its silver ring and place it in her lap.

"Now sit up straight, child. Don't slump so," Miss Christie would say as she lifted the covers off tureens. Miss Christie sat at the table uncovering dishes of food, but by the time Laura was served, her throat was already full and she got so confused that she would forget the knife and start to eat with her fork.

"Now dear, please use your knife. And don't cut your meat into little pieces all at once."

At the sulky look which came over Laura's face, Miss Christie would say, "You'll thank me for this one day you know, Laura. If you are going to get anywhere, you must learn how to do things properly. I just can't imagine what your mother has been doing with you all this time. How a child your age can be so ignorant of the most elementary things is beyond me."

The first time Miss Christie had mentioned her mother in this way, Laura had burst into tears and fled from the room. But now, remembering her mother's words, she refused to cry.

Laura's father had never married her mother. The question never came up for, said Myrtle without even a hint of malice in her voice, "Mr Bertram was a young man of high estate. Very high estate". She was fond of telling this to everyone who came to her house and did not know the story of Laura's father. How Mr Bertram had come visiting the Wheelers where Myrtle was a young servant. They had had what she liked to call 'a romance' but which was hardly even imprinted on Mr Bertram's mind, and Laura was the result. The fact that Mr Bertram was a man

of 'high estate' had in itself elevated Miss Myrtle so far in her own eyes that no one else could understand how she could have managed to bear her sons afterwards for two undoubtedly humble fathers.

Laura had come out with dark skin but almost straight hair which Miss Myrtle did her best to improve by rubbing it with coconut oil and brushing it every day, at the same time rubbing cocoa butter into her skin to keep it soft and make it 'clear'. Miss Myrtle made the child wear a broad straw hat to keep off the sun, assuring her that her skin was 'too delicate'.

Miss Myrtle had no regrets about her encounter with Mr Bertram even though his only acknowledgement of the birth was a ten dollar note sent to her at the time. But then he had been shipped off to the United States by his angry parents and nothing further had been heard from him.

Miss Myrtle was unfortunate in her choice of fathers for her children for none of them gave her any support. She single-handedly raised them in a little house on family land and took in sewing to augment what she got from her cultivation of food for the pot and ginger for the market. She did not worry about the fate of her sons for they were after all, boys, and well able to fend for themselves when the time came. But her daughter was a constant source of concern to her, for a child with such long curly hair, with such a straight nose, with such soft skin (too bad it was so dark) was surely destined for a life of ease and comfort. For years, Miss Myrtle sustained herself with the fantasy that one day Laura's father would miraculously appear and take her off to live up to the station in life to which she was born. In the meantime she groomed her daughter for the role she felt she would play in life, squeezing things here and there in order to have enough to make her pretty clothes so that she was the best-dressed little girl for miles around. For the time being, it was the only gift of her heritage that she could make her.

Then after so many years passed that it was apparent even to Myrtle that Mr Bertram had no intention of helping the child, she screwed up her courage, aided and abetted by the entire

village it seemed, and wrote to Mr Bertram's parents. She knew them well, for Mr Bertram's mother was Mrs Wheeler's sister and in fact came from a family that had roots in the area.

Dear Miss Kristie
Greetings to you in Jesus Holy Name I trust that this letter will find that you an Mister Dolfy ar enjoin the best of helth. Wel Miss Kristie I write you this letter in fear and trimblin for I am the Little One and you are the Big One but I hope you will not take me too forrard but mr. Bertram little girl now nine year old and bright as a button wel my dear Mam wish you could see her a good little girl and lern her lesson wel she would go far in Life if she could have some Help but I am a Poor Woman! With Nothing! To Help I am in the fidls morning til night. I can tel you that in looks she take after her Father but I am not Asking Mr Bertram for anything I know. He have his Life to live for but if you can fine it in YourPower to do Anything for the little girl God Richest Blessing wil come down on You May the Good Lord Bles and Keep you Miss Kristie also Mas Dolfy. And give you a long Life until you find Eternal Rest Safe in the arms of the Savor
Your Humble Servant
Myrtle Johnstone.

The letter caused consternation when it was received by the old people for they had almost forgotten about what the family referred to as 'Bertram's Mistake' and they thought that the woman had forgotten about it too. Although Myrtle was only 17 at the time and their son was 28, they had never forgiven what Miss Christie called the uppity black gal for seducing their son. "Dying to raise their colour all of them," Miss Christie had cried, "dying to raise their colour. That's why you can't be too careful with them". Now like a ghost suddenly materialising they could see this old scandal coming back to haunt them.

At first the two old people were angry, then as they talked about the subject for days on end, they soon dismissed their first decision which was to ignore the letter, for the little girl, no matter how common and scheming her mother was, was never-

theless family and something would have to be done about her. Eventually they decided on limited help — enough to salve their consciences but not too much so that Myrtle would get the idea that they were a limitless source of wealth. Miss Christie composed the first of her brief and cool letters to the child's mother.

> Dear Myrtle,
> In response to your call for help we are sending a little money for the child, also a parcel which should soon arrive. But please don't think that we can do this all the time as we ourselves are finding it hard to make ends meet. Besides, people who have children should worry about how they are going to support them before they have them.
> Yours Truly,
> Mrs. C. Watson

They made, of course, no reference to the child's father who was now married and living in New Jersey.

Myrtle was overjoyed to get the letter and the parcel for they were the tangible indications that the child's family would indeed rescue her from a life of poverty in the mountains. Now she devoted even more care and attention to the little girl, taking pains to remind her of the fineness of her hair, the straightness of her nose, and the high estate of her father. While she allowed the child to continue to help with the chores around the house, she was no longer sent on errands. When all the other children were busy minding goats, fetching water or firewood, all of these chores in her household now fell on Laura's brothers. Myrtle was busy grooming Laura for a golden future.

Because of her mother's strictures, the child soon felt alienated from others. If she played with other children, her mother warned her not to get her clothes too dirty. Not to get too burnt in the sun. Not to talk so broad. Instead of making her filled with pride as her mother intended, these attentions made the child supremely conscious of being different from the children around her, and she soon became withdrawn and lacking in spontaneity.

Myrtle approved of the child's new quietness as a sign of

'quality' in her. She sent a flood of letters to Miss Christie, although the answers she got were meagre and few. She kept her constantly informed of the child's progress in school, of her ability to read so well, and occasionally made the child write a few sentences in the letter to her grandmother to show off her fine handwriting. Finally, one Christmas, to flesh out the image of the child she had been building up over the years, she took most of the rat-cut coffee money and took the child to the nearest big town to have her photograph taken in a professional studio.

It was a posed, stilted photograph in a style that went out of fashion thirty years before. The child was dressed in a frilly white dress trimmed with ribbons, much too long for her age. She wore long white nylon socks and white T-strap shoes. Her hair was done in perfect drop curls, with a part to the side and two front curls caught up with a large white bow. In the photograph she stood quite straight with her feet together and her right hand stiffly bent to touch an artificial rose in a vase on a rattan table beside her. She did not smile.

Her grandparents who were the recipients of a large framed print on matte paper saw a dark-skinned child with long dark hair, a straight nose, and enormous, very serious eyes. Despite the fancy clothes, everything about her had a countrified air except for the penetrating eyes which had none of the softness and shyness of country children. Miss Christie was a little embarrassed by this gift, and hid the picture in her bureau drawer for it had none of the gloss of the photos of her children and grandchildren which stood on her bureau. But she could not put the picture away entirely; something about the child haunted her and she constantly looked at it to see what in this child was of her flesh and blood. The child had her father's weak mouth, it seemed, though the defiant chin and the bold eyes undoubtedly came from her mother. Maybe it was the serious, steady, unchildlike gaze that caused Miss Christie sometimes to look at the pictue for minutes at a time as if it mesmerised her. Then she would get hold of herself again and angrily put the picture back into the drawer.

Despite her better judgement, Miss Christie found herself intensely curious about this child whose mother made her into such a little paragon and whose eyes gazed out at the world so directly.

Soon, she broached the subject obliquely to her husband. One evening at dusk as the two of them sat on the verandah, she said, "Well, just look at the two of us. Look how many children and grandchildren we have, and not a one to keep our company".

"Hm. So life stay. Once your children go to town, country too lonely for them after that."

"I suppose so. But it really would be nice to have a young person about the house again." They dropped the subject then, but she kept bringing it up from time to time.

Finally she said, as if thinking about it for the first time, "But Dolphie, why don't we get Myrtle's little girl here?"

"What! And rake up that old thing again? You must be mad."

"But nobody has to know who she is."

"Then you dont know how ol'nayga fas'. They bound to find out."

"Well, they can't prove anything. She doesn't have our name. She bears her mother's name."

They argued about it on and off for weeks, then finally they decided to invite the child to stay for a week or two.

When Laura came, she was overawed by the big house, the patrician old couple who were always so clean and sweet-smelling as if perpetually laundered each day anew by Mirie the cook. She fell even more silent, speaking only when spoken to, and then in a low voice which could hardly be heard.

Miss Christie was gratified that she was so much lighter than the photograph (indeed, Myrtle had quarrelled with the photographer for just this reason) and although she was exactly like a country mouse, she did fill the house with her presence. Already Miss Christie was busy planning the child's future, getting her into decent clothes, correcting her speech, erasing her country accent, teaching her table manners, getting her to take a complete bath every day – a fact which was so novel to the child

who came from a place where everyone bathed in a bath pan once a week since the water had to be carried on their heads one mile uphill from the spring.

In the child Miss Christie saw a lump of clay which held every promise of being moulded into something satisfactory. The same energy with which Miss Christie entered into a 'good' marriage, successfully raised six children and saw that they made good marriages themselves, that impelled her to organise the Mothers Union and the School Board – that energy was now to be expended on this latest product which relatives in the know referred to as 'Bertram's stray shot'.

Although her husband fussed and fumed, he too liked the idea of having a child in the house once more though he thought her a funny little thing who hardly made a sound all day, unlike the boisterous family they had reared. And so, as if in a dream, the child found herself permanently transported from her mother's two-room house to this mansion of her father's.

Of course her father was never mentioned and she only knew it was him from the photograph because he had signed it. She gazed often at this photograph, trying to transmute it into a being of flesh and blood from which she had been created, but failed utterly. In fact, she was quite unable to deduce even the smallest facet of his character from the picture. All that she saw was a smiling face that in some indefinable way looked like all the faces in the other photographs. All were bland and sweet. In none of these faces were there lines, or frowns, or blemishes, or marks of ugliness such as a squint eye, or a broken nose, or kinky hair, or big ears, or broken teeth which afflicted all the other people she had known. Faced with such perfection, she ceased to look at herself in the mirror.

She had gone to live there during the summer holidays and Miss Christie took every opportunity to add polish to her protegé whom she introduced everywhere as 'my little adopted'. As part of the child's education, Miss Christie taught her to polish mahogany furniture and to bake cakes, to polish silver and clean panes of glass, all of which objects had been foreign to the child's former upbringing.

The child liked to remain inside the house which was cool and dark and shaded for outside, with its huge treeless lawn and beyond, the endless pastures, frightened her.

She had grown up in a part of the mountain cockpits where a gravel road was the only thing that broke the monotony of the humpbacked hills and endless hills everywhere. There were so many hills that for half of the day their house and yard were damp and dark and moss grew on the sides of the clay path. It was only at midday when the sun was directly overhead that they received light. The houses were perched precariously up the hillsides with slippery paths leading to them from the road, and if anyone bothered to climb to the tops of the hills, all they would see was more mountains. Because it was so hilly the area seemed constantly to be in a dark blue haze, broken only by the occasional hibiscus or croton and the streams of brightly coloured birds dashing through the foliage. They were hemmed in by the mountains on all sides and Laura liked it, because all her life was spent in space that was enclosed and finite, protecting her from what dangers she did not even know.

And then, from the moment she had journeyed to the railway station some ten miles away and got on to the train and it had begun to travel through the endless canefields, she had begun to feel afraid. For suddenly the skies had opened up so wide all around her; the sun beat down and there was the endless noisy clacking of the train wheels. She felt naked and anxious, as if suddenly exposed, and there was nowhere to hide.

When she got off the train at the other end, there were no canefields there, but the land was still flat and open, for this was all rolling pastureland. Her curiosity about the herds of cattle she saw grazing in the shade of an occasional tree could not diminish the fear she felt at being so exposed.

Her father's parents' house was set on the top of a hill from where they could see for miles in all directions. Whenever she went outside she felt dizzy for the sky was so wide it was like being enclosed within a huge blue bowl. The summer was cloudless. And the hills were so far away they were lost in blue. But then summer came to an end and it was time for her to go

to school. The nearest school was three miles away. Her grandmother, deciding that this was too far for her to walk – though walking greater distances had meant nothing in her former life – had arranged for her to travel to and from school on the bus which went by at the right time each day. This single fact impressed her most as showing the power and might of her grandmother.

She was glad of the bus for she did not want to walk alone to school. Now the clear summer days were ending, the clouds had begun to gather in the sky, fat cumulus clouds that travelled in packs and in this strange and empty country became ugly and menacing. They reminded her of the pictures she used to get in Sunday School showing Jesus coming to earth again, floating down on one of these fat white clouds. And because the Jesus of their church was a man who had come to judge and punish sinners, these pictures only served to remind her that she was a sinner and that God would one day soon appear out of the sky flashing fire and brimstone to judge and condemn her. And until he came, the clouds were there to watch her. For why else did they move, change themselves, assume shapes of creatures awesome and frightful, if not to torment her with her unworthiness? Sometimes when she stood on the barbecue and looked back at the house outlined against the sky, the house itself seemed to move and she would feel a wave of dizziness as if the whole earth was moving away off course and leaving her standing there alone in the emptiness.

She would run quickly inside and find Miss Christie or Mirie or somebody. As long as it was another human being to share the world with.

While all day long she would feel a vague longing for her mother and brothers and all the people she had known since childhood, she never felt lonely, for if her mother had given her nothing else, in taking her out of one life without guaranteeing her placement in the next, she had unwittingly raised her for a life of solitude. Here in this big house she wandered from room to room and said nothing all day, for now her lips were sealed from shyness. To her newly sensitised ears, her words came out

flat and unmusical and she would look with guilt at the photographs and silently beg pardon for being there.

There were no other children around the house and she was now so physically removed from others that she had no chance to meet anyone. Sometimes she would walk down the driveway to the tall black gate hoping that some child would pass along and talk so that they could be friends, but whenever anyone happened by, her shyness would cause her to hide behind the stone pillar so they would not see her. And although her grandmother said nothing on the subject, she instinctively knew after a while that she would never in this place find anyone good enough to bring into Miss Christie's house.

Although she liked the feeling of importance it gave her to get on and off the bus at the school gate – the only child to do so – most times she watched with envy the other children walking home from school, playing, yelling, and rolling in the road. They wore no shoes and she envied them this freedom, for her feet, once free like theirs except for Sundays, were now encased in socks and patent leather shoes handed down from one or the other of the rightful grandchildren who lived in Kingston or New York.

Most days the bus was on time. Every morning she would wait by the tall black gate for the bus to arrive. The bus would arrive on time every day. Except Thursday. Sometimes on Thursdays the bus wouldn't arrive until late evening. She would nevertheless every Thursday go to the gates and wait, knowing in her heart that the bus would not come. Miss Christie would sometimes walk out and stand by the gate and look the road up and down.

Sometimes Mass Dolphie passing on his way from one pasture to the next would rein in his horse and would also stand by the gate and look up the road. All three would stand silently. The road swayed white in an empty world. The silence hummed like telegraph wires. Her life hung in the air waiting on a word from Miss Christie. Her chest began to swell like a balloon getting bigger and bigger. "The bus isn't coming. You'll have to walk," Miss Christie pronounced with finality.

"Oh Miss Christie, just a few minutes more," she begged. It was the only thing she begged for. But she knew that the bus wouldn't come, and now, at this terribly late hour, she would have to walk alone the three miles to school in a world that was empty of people. She would walk very fast, the dust of the marl road swirling round her ankles, along this lonely road that curved past the graveyard. Above, following every step of the way, the fat clouds sat smirking and smug in the pale blue sky. She hated them for all they knew about her. Her clumsiness, her awkwardness, the fact that she did not belong in this light and splendid place. They sat there in judgement on her every Thursday. Thursday, the day before market day. The day of her Armageddon.

Thursdays the old bus would sit on the road miles above, packed with higglers and their crocus bags, bankras and chickens. The bus would start right enough: somewhere on the road above the bus would start in the dawn hours, full and happy. And then, a few miles after, the bus would gently shudder and like a torn metal bird would ease to a halt with a cough and a sigh and settle down on the road, too tired and worn out to move. It would remain there until evening, the market women sitting in the shade and fanning the flies away with the men importantly gathered around the machine, arguing and cursing until evening when the earth was cool again and the driver would go slowly, everything patched up till next Thursday when the higglers descended with their crocus bags and their bankras, their laughter and their girth and their quarrelling and their ferocious energy which would prove too much for the old bus. Then with a sigh it would again lie still on the road above her. Every Thursday.

Sometimes though if she managed to dawdle long enough Miss Christie would say, "Heavens, It's 10 o'clock. You can't go to school again".

'O Miss Christie' she would cry silently 'thank you, thank you'.

Sometimes when she didn't go to school Mass Dolphie would

let her dig around in his irish potato patch collecting the tiny potatoes for herself.

Digging potatoes was safe. She could not see the sky. And she never knew when a really big potato would turn up among all the tiny ones.

"Like catching fish, eh?" Mass Dolphie said and she agreed though she didn't know how that was having never seen the sea. But she would laugh too.

II

One day they got a letter from the child's father. He was coming home with his wife on a visit. It wasn't long after their initial joy at hearing the news that the grandparents realised that difficulties were bound to arise with the child. For one thing, they hadn't told their son about her, being a little ashamed that they had not consulted him at all before coming to the decision to take her. Besides, it was a little awkward to write to him about such matters at his home, since from all they had heard of American women they believed that there was a strong possibility that his wife would open his letters.

Their immediate decision was to send the child home, but that too presented certain problems since it was still during the school term and they couldn't quite make up their minds what they would tell her mother to explain a change of heart. They certainly couldn't tell her the truth for even to them the truth seemed absurd: that they wanted to return the little girl because her father was coming. For once, Miss Christie was at a loss. It was Mr Dolphie who took a firm line. "Write and ask him what to do," he instructed his wife, "after all, its his child. If he doesn't want her here when he comes then he can tell us what we should do with her".

They were suprised but not overly so when their son wrote

that they should do nothing about the child as he would be greatly amused to see her.

Mr Dolphie didn't see any cause for amusement in the situation and thought that it was just like his youngest son to take a serious thing and make a joke of it and all in all act in a reckless and irresponsible manner. He had certainly hoped that Bertram had finally settled down to the seriousness of life.

Long before they told the child the news of her father's coming, she knew, for without deliberately listening to their conversations, she seemed to absorb and intuitively understand everything that happened in the house.

Since hearing the news there had been a joy in her heart, for her mother had told her so often that one day this mysterious father of hers would come and claim her as his own that she had grown to believe it. She knew that he would come and rescue her from fears as tenuous as clouds and provide her with nothing but bright Thursdays.

But when she searched out the photograph from the ones on the bureau, his face held that unreadable, bland smile and his eyes gave off nothing that would show her just how he intended to present his love for her.

One day Miss Christie said to her, "Laura, our son is coming on a visit. Mr Bertram". She said it as if the child and the man bore no relationship to each other. "He is coming with his wife. We haven't seen him for so many years".

Yes. Since I was born, Laura thought.

"Now Laura, I except you to be on your best behaviour when they are here."

"Yes mam."

Laura showed no emotion at all as Miss Christie continued to chat on the subject. How does one behave with a father? Laura thought. She had no experience of this. There were so few fathers among all the people she knew.

Miss Christie turned the house upside down in a frenzy of preparation for her son's visit. Without being told so, Laura understood that such preparation was not so much for the son as for his white wife. She was quite right, for as Miss Christie

told Mirie, "these foreign women are really too fresh, you know. Half of them don't really come from anywhere but they believe that everybody from Jamaica is a monkey and live in trees. I am really glad my son is bringing her here so that she can see how we live". Laura silently assented to that, for who in the wide world could keep up a life that was as spotless and well ordered as Miss Christie's?

Laura longed to talk to somebody about her father. To find out what he was really like. But she did not want to ask Miss Christie. She thought of writing secretly to her mother and telling her that Mr Bertram was coming, asking what he was really like, but she was too timid to do anything behind Miss Christie's back for Miss Christie was so all-knowing she was bound to find out. Sometimes she wanted to ask Mirie the cook who had been working with the family for nearly forty years. But although she got into the habit of dropping into the roomy kitchen and sitting at the table there for hours, she never got up the nerve to address Mirie, and Mirie, a silent and morose woman, never addressed her at all. She believed, though, that Mirie liked her, for frequently, without saying a word, she would give her some tidbit from the pot, or a sample of the cookies, or bread and guava jelly, though she knew that Miss Christie did not approve of eating between meals. But apart from grunting every now and then as she went about her tasks, Mirie said nothing at all on the subject of Mr Bertram or any other being. Laura wished that Mirie would talk to her, for she found the kitchen the most comforting part of the house.

Her father and his wife arrived one day when she was at school. When she got home, she was too shy to go in, and was hanging around trying to hide behind a post when Miss Christie spotted her.

"Oh Laura, come and meet my son," said Miss Christie and swept her into the living room. "Mina," she said to a yellow-haired woman sitting there, "this is Laura, the little adopted I was telling you about". Laura first vaguely made out the woman, then Mass Dolphie, then a strange man in the shadows, but she was too shy to give him more than a covert glance. He

did not address her but gave a smile which barely moved his lips. In days to come she would get accustomed to that smile, which was not as bland as in the photograph. To his daughter, he paid no more attention. It was his wife who fussed over the little girl, asking questions and exclaiming over her curls. Laura could hardly understand anything the woman said, but was impressed at how trim and neat she was, at the endless fascination of her clothes, her jewellery, her laughter, her accent, her perfume, her assurance. Looking at her long polished nails, Laura had a picture of her mother's hands, the nails cracked and broken like a man's from her work in the fields; of her mother's dark face, her coarse shrill voice. And she was bitterly ashamed. Knowing the mother she had come from, it was no wonder, she thought, that her father could not acknowledge her.

She was extremely uneasy with the guests in the house. Their presence strained to the fullest the new social graces that Miss Christie had inculcated in her. Now she had a two-fold anxiety: not to let her mother down to Miss Christie, and not to let Miss Christie down in front of this white woman from the United States of America.

For all the woman's attentions, it was the man that she wanted to attend her, acknowledge her, love her. But he never did. She contrived at all times to be near him, to sit in his line of vision, to 'accidentally' appear on the path when he went walking through the pastures. The man did not see her. He loved to talk, his voice going on and on in a low rumble like the waves of the sea she had never seen, the ash on his cigarette getting longer till it fell on his clothes or Miss Christie's highly polished floor. But he never talked to her. This caused her even greater anxiety than Miss Christie's efforts at 'polishing' her, for while she felt that Miss Christie was trying, however painful it was, to build her up, she could not help feeling that her father's indifference did nothing so much as to reduce her, nullify her. Laura would have wondered if he knew who she was if she hadn't known that Miss Christie had written to him on the subject. She decided then that all his indifference was merely part of a play, that he wanted to surprise her when he did claim

her, and was working up to one magical moment of recognition that would thereafter illuminate both their lives forever and ever. In the daytime that is how she consoled herself but at nights she cried in the little room where she slept alone in the fearful shadow of the breadfruit tree against the window pane.

Then Thursday came round again and in this anxiety she even forgot about her father. As usual the bus was late and Laura hung around the gate hoping that Miss Christie would forget she was there until it was too late to walk to school. The road curved white and lonely in the empty morning, silent save for the humming of bees and the beating of her own heart. Then Miss Christie and Mina appeared on the verandah and obviously saw her. Talking together, they started to walk slowly towards the gate where she stood, trapped by several impulses. Laura's heart beat faster then almost stopped as her father appeared from the orange grove and approached the two women. Now the three of them were walking towards her. They were now near enough for Laura to hear what they were saying but her eyes were only on her father.

"Oh dear, that old bus. Laura is going to be late again," Miss Christie said.

"Oh for chrissake. Why don't you stop fussing so much about the bloody little bastard," her son shouted.

Laura heard no more for after one long moment when her heart somersaulted once there was no time for hearing anything else for her feet of their own volition had set off at a run down the road and by the time she got to the school gates she had made herself an orphan and there were no more clouds.