

Romesh Gunsekera

Goat

Byron told me to meet him at the New Beacon bookshop on Stroud Green Road, Finsbury Park, at two o'clock. 'Don't be late. Please.'

10 It took me a while because I had to skirt the crowd outside our newly world-famous mosque to get to the bookshop. When I reached it, I saw him near the window leafing through a massive tome on ideology and land rights. He noticed me. Putting the book down, he quickly slipped out. He looked nervous, but that was not unusual; he was often jumpy.

It was June. The sun was trying hard to give us glitter. Dirty rain, or perhaps cat spray, had laced our London air and made it peculiarly pungent.

'Hey.' Byron hopped forward and grabbed at my arm. 'Let's go.'

'So, what's happening?'

'Let's go, let's go.' He pushed me towards the road.

20 We waited for the W3 bus to manoeuvre past an abandoned rust bucket and an illegally parked BMW, and then crossed the road to the butcher's shop. Byron stared at the halal counter heaped with meat, bones and flayed goat heads. Next to it was a cooler full of chicken feet, wings, necks and thawing drumsticks. 'I need help, man, I need some real help.' His face seemed to lose colour.

I had first met Byron at a Bhundu Boys concert at the Town and County Club back in the mid-eighties. He claimed to have been a freedom fighter in Rhodesia, pre-Zimbabwe, before getting a British Council scholarship to come to England. I never quite believed him; he didn't seem to have the physique of a fighter. But then, maybe that's why he got a scholarship. What did I know about ZAPU and ZANU? Even Mugabe always looked pretty narrow-chested to me. I had lost touch with Byron for years until a few months ago when I bumped into him at the New Beacon. He had turned into a librarian and said he worked for the London borough of Haringey. He wore gold-rimmed, tinted spectacles and a tweed jacket. 'No longer the good terrorist,' he'd grin. From time to time 30 after that we'd meet for a beer, but we never talked again about his past, or politics, only the minor problems of the day: library hours, reserve stock, the virtues of Black History Month, the dubious effect of overdue fines.

'You know how to make goat curry?' he asked this time, squinting through his lenses.

I indicated, with a little nod, the pile of chopped neck and scrag ends. 'You need goat.'

'I know. But what then? You know what to do?'

40 'Why curry, Byron?' I had always thought of him as more of a sausage and chips kind of guy, if not actually bangers and mash.

A smile curled out of the corner of his mouth. 'I met this amazing girl.' His head seemed to shrink down as an elderly bearded gentleman in a white kurta squeezed by for a hunk of meat.

'So, you want goat curry now?' I hadn't thought of it as an aphrodisiac - halal or not.

'She's from your hometown.'

'Mine?'

A small storm clouded his face. 'Colombo, Sri Lanka, right?'

50 I waited. I could see he needed time. His lips had turned dark again. He tugged at the neck of his shirt as though his heart was in trouble. Then he blurted out. 'I told her I can make curry and rice.'

Passion, or perhaps just anxiety at the sight of so many carcasses, had made the sweat break out on his face. He pulled out a crumpled, brown handkerchief and mopped his cheeks, his upper lip. I could see haloes of heat rising off him.

'She's coming to your place to eat already? A Colombo girl?'

He recoiled as though I had slapped him. He shook his head vigorously. 'Not yet. Not yet. I haven't asked her yet.' He steered me towards the Caribbean greengrocer next door. I stepped past a crate of yellow pumpkins and a punnet of bitter gourd. 'You think

they have curry powder here? What else do I need?' He frowned at the stacks of plantains, cassava and yams.

60 I told him he was going too fast for me. I didn't understand what he was trying to do. I suggested we go for a beer and talk things over.

'A beer?' It was as though the thought had never crossed his mind before. He brightened up again. 'Good idea. Let's go have a beer.'

We took one of the tables on the pavement, outside the pub. I bought two bottles of Red Stripe and passed one over. Byron poured his out into a glass and took a long sip. He smacked his lips afterwards like a kid. 'Good. That's really good.'

'OK,' I said. 'So, tell me.'

70 He pushed his spectacles up on his forehead and leant back. He had calmed down. He waited for another bus to trundle past and take the corner before speaking. The buses were coming thick and fast that day.

'I met her only last week. I can't get her out of my mind.' He half closed his eyes as though he was watching her move inside his head. 'She came into the library and wanted to look at all the issues of the *Observer* for the last three months.'

'Why?'

'Exactly what I asked her. We are not meant to ask why, you know. Our job is to provide, not to question. But I couldn't help it.' He pulled off his spectacles and wiped his steaming forehead. 'I felt something, you know. From the moment I saw her. An ... affinity. I wanted to do anything and everything for her.'

80 'And?' I had to coax him, bit by bit, out of a reverie.

'Land reform. She's doing a PhD on land reform. She wanted to read up about what's happening in Zimbabwe.' Byron grinned, relieved at how perfectly their interest coincided, viewed even in retrospect. 'Imagine that.'

I knew then it had to be Rehana, but I wasn't sure whether I should tell him. Rehana was a woman whose interest in property had wrecked more than one life. Several families in both Asia and Europe had been ruined by her antics; now it seemed it was Africa's turn. I tried not to sound worried. 'What's her name?'

Byron's face swelled with a kind of smug pride. 'Her name, my friend, is Rehana.'

I cleared my throat.

90 'Re-hana,' he repeated, waving an arm at an invisible orchestra.

'I know.'

'Good name?'

'Very good name,' I agreed. 'Rehana Jayasinghe, from Middlesex, formerly of Borella, I believe.'

'You know her?' Byron's eyes widened.

'Of her. I know a little bit about her. An expert, I believe, in this land-ownership business.'

'Reform.'

'Yes.' I took a sip of beer. And then another.

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I had heard about Rehana at the De Silva christening in Wimbledon. I was there, professionally, to do the pictures, but I was drawn by the gossip outside. After tea had been served in the church hall, a group of older ladies - the aunties - had gathered together on the lawn to chat. I was dismantling my tripod nearby when Mrs Amarasekara exploded. 'That girl is a menace. A wretched menace.' The tea from her cup showered several of her huddled companions. More teacups rattled on their saucers as various ladies made exclamations of agreement while others protested, defending the absent girl. A peculiar excitement seemed to spread. I put down the tripod and quietly loaded another film into my Leica. I went for a 400, a touch of speed. I thought something might happen. A skirmish. Some old-fashioned ritualistic cursing. Perhaps even some elderly fisticuffs - Mrs Amarasekara was known to be exceedingly pugnacious. The object of her vilification turned out to be Rehana: the siren who had destroyed the emotional balance and equity holdings of Mrs Amarasekara's favourite nephew - Kaiser. 'She led him on, you know. She just led

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him on until she got her hands on the house in Borella and then everything went phut.'

'Phut?' Mrs De Silva, the presiding grandmother who had just joined the party, echoed looking puzzled.

'Within eighteen months of the marriage she'd sold the front garden, then the back garden, and then the *house* - just because *she* wanted to come and pussyfoot in

120 England. Kaiser went to pieces.'

'Pussyfoot? Kaiser?' Mrs De Silva echoed again, now thoroughly confused.

'She left the poor boy and came here, pretending to study, and got involved with some German professor and stripped him of all his possessions.'

The lady next to Mrs Amarasekara pulled her pashmina tight around her shoulders.

'You mean in front of everyone? Shamelessly?'

'Took him to the cleaners. The professor lost all his money. House, land, a fortune in Bavaria. Now she's gone to Middlesex.'

One of the other ladies then explained to the gathering that the trouble all

130 stemmed from Rehana's father. He had been in Mrs Bandaranaike's first administration, back in 1961, and was fanatical about the government's land-reform policy. 'They called it redistribution, but all that fellow wanted was to get his hands on everyone else's backside. That's where this girl got all her odd ideas from . . .'

'Backyard,' Mrs Amarasekara corrected. I noted this Rehana's predilection for Bs: Borella, Bavaria, backsides . . .

Sitting in the sun with a Red Stripe in my hand, I weighed the whole scene in my mind. How much of it could I reveal to Byron? I looked up from my beer. Byron's face had lost its tension. His eyes had gone a bit bleary.

'So, what d'you know?' He smiled indulgently. 'Come on. Tell me, man.'

'You've talked to this girl some more?' I asked, playing not just for time but for some

140 sense of where he was really heading. 'Or is this still just a book thing?'

'Newspapers. She was after newspapers. Periodicals. Current affairs. But we've talked. I've seen her outside.'

'Where?'

'Outside, man. Just outside.'

'You mean just outside the library. Like at the entrance?'

'No.' Byron was indignant. 'No. We walked to the bus stop together. We talked a lot, man. Like about Colombo. Harare. Finsbury Park. A lot.'

'So, she told you she likes goat curry?'

'No, but she was on her way to the Crouch Hall Curry Club. I figured she must do.

150 You are always on about goat.. . '

'Mutton,' I said. 'Mutton curry.'

'Yeah, but you told me that for you mutton means goat. Right?'

I conceded. 'Anyhow what does it matter? This Rehana is one who prefers bratwurst and sauerkraut.'

'What are you talking about? What are you saying, man?' Byron was getting annoyed. He didn't like it when I played games with him.

I told him what I'd heard about her marriage to Kaiser and the affair with the Bavarian professor. Both, I said, were left bereft and distraught.

Byron laughed. 'But I have nothing, my friend, and I've been bereft and distraught all

160 my life. Can't you see? It's a perfect match. Everything to pull us together, nothing to pull us apart.'

I was not convinced. Although I'd never met her, I felt I knew her better than Byron. I could imagine the charming smile, the political fug that was her natural habitat, the sly moves of her tight buttocks in pursuit of private gain, as she slipped from plot to perch, continent to continent. 'You should be careful.'

Byron leant across the table. 'Listen, my friend. I can feel it in my bones. Our chromosomes are meant to entwine. We fit like a jigsaw: Africa and Asia. It is in our tectonic whatchamacallit. Our children will inherit the whole earth. I didn't end up in that

170 library for nothing, you know. She didn't come there just for the newspapers. Your Kaiser was her stepping stone to reach me, like your goat - or mutton whatever - will be mine to reach her ... Destiny.'

'Don't be ridiculous.'

'Come and meet her then. *Kismet*. You'll see. I'll ask her for a drink. I'll tell her you are from Colombo too. Tomorrow evening.'

'At the Goat's Head?'

He laughed and banged my knuckles with his.

180 I went to the pub early. I wanted to figure out a good line to tease him with when he turned up alone. Maybe offer him something sweet like ... *Liebfraumilch*.

190 While I waited, I took out my favourite camera: the old Leica that had belonged to my uncle Stanley. Made in 1954, the year he got married. He gave it to me when I first set off to come to London. His wife had died and he had no children. When he also finally died, a couple of years ago, he left me a plot of land in the hills for when I got married and wanted to settle down somewhere quiet and beautiful. Up there I'd be able to take perfect pictures, and make a new life. The Leica was my connection to what had gone before, and what lies ahead. The metal body always feels good and heavy as though it preserves the past in itself with every shot. Through it I feel I can see what is to be. In its frame lies all of life. The lens I usually have on it is a fabulous Elmar Leitz: pin sharp and a dream to use. When I turn the focus ring on the lens with the camera to my eye, I discover things I've never dreamed before. I find it is always with me at the most crucial moments. In the semi-darkness of the pub, I cleaned the filter and checked the winder. The camera has no built-in light meter, but my hands are able to set it by instinct. The Leica never fails. I turned the shutter dial and fixed the aperture. Then I pointed the camera at the doorway and looked through the viewfinder.

200 Rehana was taller than I had expected and wore an expression that seemed to obliterate everything else in the frame. I had never seen her before, but I recognized her. I saw her move, nothing else, and felt a burn as though something inside me had been clarified by the most astonishing light. There was nothing I could do but wait for her to come closer and closer.