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Like this country, I am a child *in extremis*. This is the reason why my parents have named me Maya – illusion, the one whom we believe is but who isn't. I came when they no longer believed I would, after ten years of waiting. It is this wait which had eventually brought them here, to Blue Bay. As a couple, they were supposed to be sterile. So they had fled their northern village, Fond du Sac,<sup>1</sup> weary of being subjected to dark looks and daily gossip.

Fond du Sac can hardly be found by those who visit it for the first time. It changes place on each new edition of roadmap as no one knows where it begins and where it ends. There is no bus link to it, roads die as they reach it and you have to follow precarious paths through fields in order to get to it. The first Indian immigrants settled there, far from the Whites and from the emancipated slaves.

Today, when town people want to mock somebody who is ignorant, they say – “where is he from? Fond du Sac?”, as if Fond du Sac was a hole where one buries oneself on purpose. The armpit of the world, as they say.

My mother, Savitri, married my father, Kavi, nearly thirty years ago. My father told me that, when he met my mother for the first time, he blinked As if he did not believe she was real. Too beautiful to be true. Today, my mother is a dry woman with a thin skin which peels in the sun. She does not keep still, she never stops, she doesn't reflect, she doesn't dream, she doesn't think. Even when she is seating down, she shakes her leg frenetically, twiddles with her hair, mumbles who knows what. It is as if she needs to fill herself with noises and gestures in order to forget that she has only been a mother once. When she sees families around

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a table on TV, she gets up to potter in the kitchen. When she passes women with two or three kids in the street, she walks over to the other side of the pavement. When a song on the radio tells of brothers and sisters, she changes station. Yet, she has me...But it is as if these ten years spent longing for a child have sapped her, have created voids, absences and cracks which my birth has not been able to fill. So she called me Maya, Illusion.

When I see her pinched lips, her creased sari which is draped slightly too short and worn day in day out, her bony ankles, her oiled hair plastered down in straw-like plaits, I struggle to imagine that my father once blinked when he first saw her.

My father tells whoever wants to believe him that he settled here, in Blue Bay, because he wanted to work at *Le Paradis* and that Fond du Sac was really too far away from everything. But I know that they ran off from this village like thieves and that my grandmother, fed up with waiting for grandchildren, wanted my dad to choose another wife... “a woman who can give you heirs”...

I saw that grandmother twice. The first time when I was nine. She was very ill. I remember this village shadowed by trees with trunks so big that I could not put my little arms around them. I remember those lowered gazes when my father, my mother and I entered her bedroom. I remember this pungent smell, the stench of burning incense and the impression that the sun had never reached in there. She was there, lying in the dark and I was scared. She turned her head and did not stop staring at me. Her face was but a heap of wrinkles. Only her eyes were shining. All of a sudden, a tortured hand sprang out from nowhere to grab my face. Her fingers were freezing and she made this sucking noise which terrified me. I understood later on that she was crying. When we came out, she gave me a medallion which my mother chucked in the gutter at the first opportunity. This made me sad at the time but I now understand my mother's reaction.

The second time I saw her was a year later, on her deathbed. Turmeric had been applied to her face and she looked much less

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wrinkled than the previous time... She had a betel leaf in between her parted lips. It made me think of an alien's tongue, green and thick. I was expecting it to suddenly shoot out above her head. My mother and I stood there for a long time, still, amongst this whinging crowd of people who had rushed in from God knows where to pay their last respects to my father's mother. I was tired and as the alien's tongue was staying wisely between the dead lips, I was bored. My hands were sweating in my mother's but as soon as they slipped, my mother tightened her firm grip. I was only ten but felt that I had to be there, that my mother needed me at this precise moment, and that she only had me among all these strangers.

We never set foot in Fond du Sac after this. I sometimes wonder what my life would have been there, amongst these unsettling stares and brought up by this grandmother with the green tongue. But I was born here and all the better for it.

My mother always tells me that the first time I saw the sea, I ran towards it. I love this story. When I was little, I could never get enough of it. Unlike my parents, I am a child of the sea. When I am not feeling well; when I am a bit blue, annoyed, tired, bored; when I have a tummy or a headache; when my mother exasperates me; when I don't want to hear the eternal chat about the Blue Bay drought; when there is nothing else to do, which often happens in Blue Bay, I go swimming. I do not enter the ocean walking, I run in, creating water rings. I dive into it as if I were jumping into the open arms of somebody I hadn't seen for years and whom I would have missed to death. I like this lightness, this feeling that I do not weigh anything. I like letting myself be submerged, opening my eyes under the water to stare at the sea's belly until I feel dizzy. I like my salty body afterwards.

My parents are not people of the sea. When they go with me, they put their toe in shyly. My mother spends the majority of her time filling, with her big toe, the little hideouts dug in the sand by white crabs. My father walks to the end of the rotten jetty, leans over to glimpse the sand at the bottom and a few minutes later,

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my mother joins him. Then, both of them stay there for a long time scrutinising the horizon, one hand holding a pair of flip-flops and the other serving as an eyeshade, as if they were waiting for something precise to appear. They never swim but they never seem to get bored. I even think that if we left them on the jetty, they would stay there. My parents firmly believe that it is Blue Bay's sea air which helped my mother conceive. So when they stand there like this on the jetty, I think to myself that they must be waiting for another favour...

Since his arrival here, my father has worked at *Le Paradis*. He is a waiter in one of the hotel's four restaurants and I think he is happy like this. He serves giant lobsters, calamari in a red sauce, lemon-flavoured fish which still bears the marks of the grill, fresh fruit juices that the tourists never finish. As for me, I have been working at the hotel reception for a year and a half. I wear a hotel manager's uniform: red skirt, white blouse musketeer-style and a little scarf. I never bump into my father. I prefer not to; I would not know what to say to him – me, in my manager's uniform and him, in his grey thing which is too hot for Blue Bay.

Yet, if somebody had told me a few years ago that I would be working here, I would not have wanted to believe it. I remember that, as a little girl, when I used to see these clusters of men and women heading towards the hotel as if they were heading towards certain death, I used to promise myself a better future. What I wanted was to head for the capital city, to become a civil servant, to work nine to four in one of those air-conditioned offices where tea is brought to you twice a day. For me, joining the civil service represented the certitude of getting out of Blue Bay and the guarantee of a job for life which did not involve waiting on tourists. Or better still – I saw myself embarking a plane and leaving for England, for example. My mother's sister has lived there for decades and I recall a photograph of her, sitting on a green, thick and uniform lawn with, at the back, a red-bricked building with "Birmingham Nursing School" written on it. That was England for me.

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I also remember a picture in one of these innumerable photo albums that one flicks through politely round people's houses: there was a guy in an orange parka eating snow on a Swiss mountain. This was what I wished for: eating snow in wintertime and being photographed on a green lawn in summertime.

Leaving my country, my family, my friends and my points of reference; all this seemed perfectly feasible. Here, departure is engraved in our genes. In every family, there is always somebody who has left or who only dreams about leaving. I was in no way dreading being in a foreign country. I was going to adapt, integrate, and assimilate to it: I had no doubts.

Once, my father told me that if, on a very sunny day, you stood on tiptoes you could see the icebergs in the South Pole. My father had whispered that to me, as if he was passing down a great secret, but I remember that, on that particular day, I had such a strong desire to leave that it made me cry. Is this it then – I thought to myself – is this what awaits me? Looking for enormous ice cubes on sunny days – because at the end of the day, isn't that what icebergs are? Bloody ice cubes? I was, then, greatly vexed by this destiny and more than ever determined to leave this village where the only horizon was made up of a hotel and of icebergs.

But the day after I turned sixteen, I met Dave. Dave was all in one the air-conditioned office, the capital city, snow in winter and lawns in summer. Despite my former reservations, I accepted a job at the hotel because Dave was also working there... I would have done anything to be near him. As they say in those Mills and Boon novels, he changed my life. I am searching for a better way of putting it but nothing comes into mind.