

Excerpt from...

Hope & Despair

by Roman Payne

BOOK I

Tales from the Terrace

CHAPTER I

We had then those nights upon the terrace with the colonnades that overlooked the walled gardens below. Our lips were for each other and our eyes were full of dreams. We knew nothing of travel and we knew nothing of loss. Then, on those mornings when we awoke entwined, we would leave the bed and house together and walk down to the waterfront. There, we drank sweet coffee on the banks of the canals, while the early boats took passengers on through the city. And while the sun rose up over the building tops, the world passed by and around us. We believed in places far away but they didn't concern us. Ours was a world of eternal spring, until the summer came.



She was still practically a girl then, on those first days of early May when the two began to meet. In the garden, they were together and wore nothing. They wove words for each other like clothing, only to cast aside. At one moment in the day, while lying in the grass, she left him to go pick fruit for the two of them to eat. By the far garden walls where the apricot

trees and figs grew, she knelt down and filled her hands with tender fruit. Then, while standing up to return to where he was waiting, she heard our voices walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and she was afraid because she was naked; and so she hid herself amongst the trees. The fruit she had picked, she dropped, and it scattered across the grass.

Once we were gone and she was certain she was alone, she ran back to her lover and told him to take her inside. "I am cold," she said. He covered her with the blanket and then he covered himself and the two hurried in the house.

They spent their mornings together in the sun-washed markets of the Lower Quarter of the city. At midday, they would eat lunch on one of the quiet bridges spanning the canals; and afterwards they'd make their way up the hill to the house where she lived. The house belonged to her father. He lived and worked abroad in the West Islands and it was almost always empty, so she lived there alone. And whenever she was alone that spring, she asked him to come. And when she asked, he came.

Like us, they were new lovers, and like all vernal lovers, they never once realized or cared or even gave it any thought that there might exist others like them, that others loved as they loved. For them, there were but they and the warmth of the sun.

Walking past the lattice in the warm tincture of spring, through days that were long and becoming, the two strolled together through the arboretum hand-in-hand, among the new flowers abloom with peach petals like folds of skin. Overhead, the green lacquered leaves in the tree bows rattled in the soft breeze. Here the two would stop a moment, to linger on each other's eyes, upon each other's parting lips. They would walk then on, leaving prints with their feet in the soft grass wherever they stepped. Once, she picked a leaf from a rhododendron bush and pushed it deep into the palm of her lover's hand...

"Palm, palm! . . . What a funny word!" Her voice was full of happiness. She turned to him and asked him, "Nishka?"

"Yes?"

"Why do they call you that?"

"Palm?"

"No, not palm! . . . Not, why do they call you palm! Why do they call you Nishka?!"

"But only you call me Nishka," he answered, softly caressing the leaf with the tip of his finger.

“Well, why do they call you Nikolai, then?”

“But you know,” he smiled coyly, “I didn’t have a name at all until I was twenty. Then one day, someone called me Nikolai and hung it around my neck with a string and there it stayed.”

She looked at him without speaking. Her eyes grew wide and bright. She wondered if what he was saying were true. He slipped his hand back into hers and asked, “Why do they call you Nadja?”

“But I told you a million times, Nishka! What are we going to eat tonight?” She was always hungry it seemed.

From the arboretum, there was a little tree-lined road that wound up the hill and ended at the walls of the gardens that surrounded her house, and that surrounded the other houses in the city’s Upper Quarter. Often the two lovers sat in those gardens late into the day until that hour came – that sad hour of spring when, in the early evening, the sun hid itself; and there wasn’t yet that hotness of summer that made up for it so the air became cool and covered in shadows; and it would have been altogether a sad moment, if it wasn’t that these lovers had each other and didn’t care either way. Usually, at this time, they would go inside and Nikolai would begin making dinner in the kitchen. Nadja would sit on the sofa and watch him cook, or else she’d flip through one of his many books he had lying around her house. The evenings were an idle and happy time for them.

In the still privacy of night, they would eat together and talk endlessly and lie with candles on the terrace. Nikolai would’ve cooked spiced cheeses, breads with peppers, hot vinegars with vegetables. There was always plenty of cool wine to drink.

Once they had eaten, she would ask him to read to her a tale from one of his books. She loved the sound of his voice when he read and she would lie near him listening with gentle attention. All through the night, she would lie for him. She would lie for him like a bow, softly drawn; and when he would finish reading, he would set his book aside and his hands would go to her. They would pass slowly over her waiting body – softly spread – her hands would come to meet his and she would touch them for just a moment. Then she would cast them aside and merely lie for him. She would stretch beneath those hands, those strangely shaped and heavy gentle hands that coursed her warm skin, the soft slope of her waist. His hands passed now and then beneath the bands of elastic stretched taut over the bones of her hips – stretched taut like the lathe of the bow where she received him well. Kneeling above her, he would rub sweet oils on her skin. And she would stir softly.

Tired, the two lovers lay together outstretched with thick blankets soaked in sweat and wrapped around their skin, cooling quickly – it was still only May, and the air was mild at night.

“Do you feel that?” she asked him in a whisper.

“The drops on the skin?”

“Yes, the drops.”

“Yes. What is it?”

“Nothing,” she breathed, turning over.

“Nadja?”

“Mm hmm?”

“Why were you so alarmed this afternoon in the garden?”

Nadja leaned up towards Nikolai. She took her hand from the blanket and touched his face; she stroked his sandy chin with her smooth finger and looked long into his eyes, saying nothing.

“But why were you so alarmed this afternoon?”

She was silent another moment and then suddenly, in a single gasp of bewilderment, that enthusiastic delight peculiar to her, she cried... “But Nishka! Do you mean when I went to go pick fruit?”

“Yes, then.”

“Oh, Nishko! If only you had been there with me. I tell you Nishka, I could paint what I saw. Someday I will.”

“What did you see?”

“Well... the leaves were shimmering like coins in the sunlight. The leaves that fell, they crunched like wafers under the man’s foot, and under the woman’s too. They crunched under their feet as they walked in the garden near where I was picking fruit. And they spoke too. I heard them coming and since I was naked, I was afraid and I ran back to the blanket to get you. That’s why I wanted to go back inside.”

“Like wafers?” he asked, “How will you paint the wafers?”

“But stop, Nishka!” She pressed her hands on his knee as her eyes grew wide, “It was like that! They were walking in the garden and their feet crunched the leaves like wafers.

And when they spoke...”

“They spoke? What did they say?”

“But, Nishko!” she puffed, turning her mouth down in a pouting face a little deflated. “Maybe they didn’t speak. Maybe after all I imagined the whole thing. Yes, maybe there were no people walking in the garden at all.”

“But of course there were, Nadja. If you heard them.”

“Yes, there were. There were people.”

Then the sound of fanning branches swept over the terrace and the birds dropped one by one into silence.

CHAPTER II

It was an evening the two came back late from town and a warm rain started coming down, at first gently, it then turned into a heavy downpour. The lovers came running across the garden beneath the bows of the plane trees towards Nadja's house. Nikolai stopped in the path to pick Nadja up to carry her inside, and she flung herself over his shoulder and clung tightly to his back; and during all this her sandal fell off her foot and it landed on the gravel in the midst of the path. In the beginning, she was scared but then she laughed and let him carry her off. She thought for a moment that her feet would never again touch the ground. He ran with her upstairs and brought her to her bedroom and laid her down on the bed. Her shoulders soaked the linen. Outside, the rain was landing heavily on the stone surface of the terrace, flinging drops wildly against the railing; the sound came loudly through the open glass doors. Nadja jerked under his grasp. She wanted to change first out of her wet clothes, and tried to reach for a brush on the nightstand to brush the water out of her hair. She tried to get up but Nikolai clasped her on her shoulders and laid her back down and pushed her back firmly into the bed, and began pulling off her wet clothing. The rain in her hair soaked the pillow beneath her head. She moved no more, but just looked at him, and he at her. The two stared steadily at each other. Then Nikolai slowed down. He gently undid the clasp of the damp dress that was fastened loosely around Nadja's tender throat, and slid her soaked cotton sleeve down off her shoulder. From her soft arm, he removed the wet lace. He took her gold bracelets off and set them aside. He set his hands beneath her bare breasts

and slid her dress from her belly down to her knees. She stirred and made a soft sound. He passed his hands over her skin beaded with rainwater and came up to offer her the wetness of his lips. She took them to hers while drawing her hand through his own wet hair to let the water fall down upon them both. So much wetness and so much warmth. She shivered with pleasure each time she felt a drop of water fall from his hair onto her skin. She felt him upon her, lingered long; and when she finally wanted to rest, to turn him over like a worn animal and lie upon his body to rest awhile, she did so. She pressed his hands tightly and then looked bright into his eyes for what he'd done to her.

Nadja lay quietly for many moments, eyes closed, her belly rising and falling in measured breathes, the sound of rain fading to the background. Then, as if caught by a ringing in the ears, she opened her eyes wide and held them fast to Nikolai and clearly called out to him...

"Nishka!" ...as if she were falling upon an idea that had emerged suddenly with great importance and had to be said right then and not a moment later.

Nikolai looked back at her.

"Yes, my Nadiushka?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Nadja . . . tell me!"

"You know, Nishka, for a time when you were carrying me through the garden, I really felt my feet would never again touch the earth."

"Were you scared?"

"Yes, I was. A little, Nishka, I was. But I wanted it." She paused. "You know, Nishka? I wanted to go even higher. I wanted my feet to never again touch the ground."

"Never to touch this mortal earth?"

"Yes, this mortal earth! . . . I wanted you to take me all the way up, and there I would bear beautiful things for you." In saying this, she was recalling a myth he had read to her a few days before.

"And there you would bear beautiful things for me?" He kissed her throat and told her, "Sweet girl, whoever you are . . . you, holiest of perfection..." And while his hands fell down, his words lifted, "...up until I saw you, love, I knew only mortal toil," as if it were just a myth he were reciting, though he'd forgotten all but she, the woman, who lay before him

now, "...though I don't know which goddess you are, I will construct an alter for you. Yes, I will make you an alter on the highest peak in a far-away place, and there I will make sacrifices for you in all the seasons." And sullen his words grew as he said yet, "Only, I implore of you, dear goddess, let me live long and happily. Let me know the light of the sun. Let me be always happy and live to the threshold of old age. Let me be a man prosperous among the people..." and he finished there and pulled Nadja in towards him.

"Oh, Nishka," Nadja cried to him while pushing his shoulders back so she could look at his face, "Nishka, you can have whatever you want!"

Thus went that night as the swarms of unpossessed rains timbered on. Upon the surface of the broad bed, those lovers slept. Their lips were for each other and their eyes were full of dreams.

End of Excerpt

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