

A JAMAICAN BOY

By Cyril Dabydeen

“You have an accent,” he says, with aplomb and ease, and it’s his declaration no less. Does he really know? French-Canadian Mauril is absolutely devoted to his wife, I must also know, which is why he’s here—waiting for Sylvie to finish her art class. “Yes, my wife,” he affirms, like a boast, looking at me intently.

I imagine Sylvie to be a striking woman with artistic finesse in her special art class in this community centre. Diligently Mauril drives her home, back and forth twice a week. Now he waits for her—here, being with us at the fitness club. Yes, here with my accent and all. “My wife wants to do well before it gets worse,” Mauril adds.

“Worse?”

“She’s blind.”

“How blind?” I am curious; never mind my accent.

Sylvie wants to see everything before she loses her sight entirely. “She only sees a chink now,” Mauril explains, making a small space with his fingers—indicating a chink, and an arc forming. Sylvie has a real sense of colours, you bet. Abstract, surreal. The sauna’s temperature rises; and, he’s indeed here after the swim, usually in his plodding style. Now it’s about my accent with my swarthy complexion and all. He quotes some words to me. An Indian language?

I shake my head. No comprendo!

He tells me he’d been to India as a Canadian consultant on electronics, and he loves the food there, the fiery stuff! How fiery? The food in Kerala is the best, he says and laughs. I also laugh, being agreeable. Masala in the air, I sniff and make a face. Nothing more exotic? Now he and Sylvie regularly eat Indian food in Ottawa’s restaurants.

How am I taking him? He taking me? Am I not really from India? North...or south?

“How many children d’you have?” I try.

Family, yes. “None,” Mauril says, “but my wife has.” I wait to hear more. “Seven children...from her first marriage,” he tells me.

And she’s blind?

“My wife wants to do things before she fully loses her sight,” he adds. But he and Sylvie still want to travel, everywhere—to see the world before her sight goes completely. Really to see the world?

India: as the entire world, traversing a

vast plain to Kerala, then up to the desert state of Rajasthan, indeed. How much more authentic can you get being in Jaipur? Maundering along...to far north past the Punjab and going as far as Shimla in the Himalayas. Not go East to Bengal? Calcutta, here I come!

East India Company, Lord Clive. Whoa!

Winding rivers beyond the Ganges and the Brahmaputra, then north again, in Meerut worshipping in sacred waters and paying homage to Brahma-Vishnu-Shiva. The sacred Ganges winds along, as worshippers are everywhere. Sanctity, with holiness. How far, or near? Then to Agra to see the



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Taj Mahal. Am I also a devotee, than in another incarnation?

Mauril looks at me with awe, if also anxiously.

Lakes, lagoons in my ken with coconut trees leaning at the water’s edge, our being in south India again. Water-lily in green clusters, pothos. A river-boat moving along; the cook mixing pungent masala, his fish-curry culinary fare is the best. Crunchy chick-peas thrown in for good measure.

Mauril takes in my dark-complexion, see. From India? Where do you really come from? Dialectal words, a vague idiom: with an Indian inflection—what’s now contrived.

No, not Sanskrit! India’s origins long before the Mughals and the British Raj.

Not just the French in Pondicherry? India’s a country to return to, Mauril says, with his own francophone origins. Ah, Canada with vast empty spaces somewhere in the background.

Where else must we go? Where Sylvie indeed wants to go before she loses her sight, I know.

What Mauril really knows.

We meet again, like what’s preplanned: as Mauril and I talk about more travels, then about his wife’s art lesson, which will soon be over. He won’t come here again; he chortles, adding that he adores wife with her seven children. “She’s really a good artist,” he emphasizes.

“With poor eyesight?”

He nods.

She will continue putting more bright colours on canvas, I must know. Oil, acrylic, and water-colour. “She’s an expressionist, like Gauguin,” Mauril tells me with new emphasis. Not going to Tahiti, same as Gauguin did? How really exotic the world is.

And where am I from exactly? From somewhere in the Caribbean archipelago, with islands in-between. Tell him! Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad, islands never being the same, in my ken, and as I’m layered with an indenture and plantation past.

Coastal Guyana next. Music: soca and calypso; chutney music also, in the background with new immediacy. Mauril winks an eye at me, sort of. And yes, he and Sylvie love the fiery Indian stuff; and he’s now more convinced about me. How much more Indian, eh? The sauna becomes hotter, as we gravitate to more foreign and exotic places.

Farewell! I say my goodbye to him, and he takes his leave with a new familiarity. “Now I’ve met my first Jamaican boy,” he says to me, with glee. Really me?

Caribbean, you see.

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