

*Rahda K. Ramsumair*

## SURROUNDED BY FIREFLIES

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Manuel sat on the steps of his house and looked out into the cocoa fields that stretched far down into the valley. Christmas was not far away, and in the past the scent and feeling of Christmas would have pervaded the old house in which he lived before moving up into the hills.

It was five years since Rachel had left, and since the scents of Christmas were linked to her preparations, when she left, she took her Christmas activities with her and so the aura of Christmas had faded away.

He felt Rachel's presence before he saw her.

"I hear thinking about Christmas, and thought that it was because of that my mind was playing tricks on me." He said to her, explaining his initial belief that his reminiscence of Christmas had somehow included her in the scenario.

She sat down on the first step, so that her back was to him. Looking down at her he realized that her attractiveness was still there and it brought back to him his hurt.

"What you want?" he asked gruffly.

"Good morning. You see I haven't lost my manners yet."

"You lose more than what that when you leave."

"I didn't come here to quarrel."

"Who quarreling? You hear me raise my voice?"

"How the children?"

Skillfully she deflected the tone and direction of their conversation.

“They adjust well to my parents, they doing all right. Why you stop visiting them?”

“They cry too much when I leaving and I don’t like to give them that hurt. You know I can’t take them with me, he don’t want no other man children round he.”

“He don’t know is yours too?”

She stayed silent for a while.

“He only tell me that after.”

She got up and walked over to an empty overturned water barrel that lay just beyond the steps. Using one hand to lever herself onto the barrel so that she was sitting, facing him. Her face was different. Sad almost, although her forced gaiety attempted to hide it.

“I thought you had another woman by now.” She said to him.

“I done with that for a while. Too much stress.”

“I know what you mean.”

“So,” he muttered to himself, “trouble in paradise.”

He did not ask any questions, not wishing to give her the idea that he was in any way interested in what was taking place in her life.

They were both silent.

The silence was taut, like a spider’s web with a struggling insect, and then she broke it.

“You not cleaning for Christmas?”

“No,” he stretched out the ‘o’ so that it became a long drawn out syllable.

“Is just me, what I cleaning up for, not even my friends does come up so high in the woods. I does have to go down by them when I need company. Besides, you know, business.”

“Yeah.” She laughed.

He had a thriving bush rum trade here on the estate, and business boomed during the Christmas season. He had a reputation for producing high quality bush rum, and wishing to maintain his good reputation, he always remained close to his stills, tending his product continuously.

“This year going to be a bumper year, I have several thousand in orders already.

“Whew.” She whistled.

Silence.

“About the cleaning for Christmas.”

“What about it?”

“I miss the children.”

“And?”

“I sneak out everyday when he gone out on business till the day before Christmas Eve. I fix up the house for you.”

“The catch?”

“You bring up the children for Christmas. Your parents too. If they wish to come.”

“You coming?”

“You know I can’t do that. I have to stay home to entertain he friends.”

She let out a shrill laugh after her statement. It was a laugh of understanding, of being relegated from lover, to lady of the house, to servant.

“Yeah, I have to entertain he friends.” She said it ruefully.

He wanted to say no to her request, to hurt her, to hate, but he couldn’t. The most he could mutter was neutrality.

“O.K.”

“I starting now.”

She leaped off the barrel and passed her hand over her bottom to dust it.

He pretended not to notice.

Over the days the layers of Christmas that he had once recalled from memory returned. The smell of cleanliness and paint, the heady scent of cask wine and the earthy smell of the dirt oven being built, the sweet smell of flowers and the crisp newness of curtains.

On the day before Christmas Eve, the grand finale, the scent of freshly baked cake and sweetbread.

After she had removed them from the oven she went outside to sit on the front steps.

He leaned over the bottom half of the door to look down upon her, opening the conversation.

“You still not coming? The children and my parents decide you know. They coming. My parents old, they say they would like the quiet. The children, they always like it here. They looking forward to it.”

Silence.

“Why then?” he asked.

“What?”

“The cleaning, you know, everything.”

“You don’t get it yet?” she replied.

She paused, and then continued.

“So they will know.”

“Know what?”

His confusion was genuine.

“That I here, I spending the Christmas with them.”

They both remained silent for a while.

“Look,” she said, pointing down into the cocoa fields, “the fireflies are coming out. I have to go.”

“So long,” he said, “thanks and Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas.” Came her reply as she walked off down the dirt track, flanked by the cocoa trees, and surrounded by fireflies.