

Voyage in the Dark

Jean Rhys

It was as if a curtain had fallen, hiding everything I had ever known. It was almost like being born again. The colours were different, the smells different, the feeling things gave you right down inside yourself was different. Not just the difference between heat, cold; light, darkness; purple, grey. But a difference in the way I was frightened and the way I was happy. I didn't like England at first. I couldn't get used to the cold. Sometimes I would shut my eyes and pretend that the heat of the fire, or the bed-clothes drawn up around me, was sun-heat; or would I pretend I was standing outside the house at home, looking down Market Street to the Bay. When there was a breeze the sea was millions of spangles; and on still days it was purple as Tyre and Sidon. Market Street smelt of the wind, but the narrow street smelt of niggers and wood-smoke and salt fishcakes fried in lard. (When the black women sell fishcakes on the savannah they carry them in trays on their heads. They call out, 'Salt fishcakes, all sweet an charmin', all sweet an' charmin'.') It was funny but that was what I thought about more than anything else – smell of the streets and the smells of frangipani and lime juice and cinnamon and cloves, and sweets made of ginger and syrup, and incense after funerals or Corpus Christi procession, and the patients standing outside the surgery next door, and the smell of the sea-breeze and the different smell of the landbreeze.

Sometimes it was as if I was back there and as if England were a dream. At other times England was the real thing and out there was the dream, but I could never fit them together.

After a while I got used to England and I liked it all right; I got used to everything except the cold and that the towns we went to always looked so exactly alike. You were perpetually moving to another place which was perpetually the same. There was always a little grey street leading to the stage-door of the theatre and another little grey street where your lodgings were, and rows of little houses with chimneys like funnels of dummy steamers and smoke the same colour as sky; and a grey stone promenade running hard, naked and straight by the side of the grey-brown or grey-green sea; or a Corporation Street or High Street or Duke Street or Lord Street where you walked about and looked at the shops

We had good rooms. The landlady had said, 'No I don't let to professionals.' But she didn't bang the door to our faces, and after Maudie had talked for a while, making her voice sound as ladylike as possible, she had said, 'Well, I might make an exception for

this time.' Then the second day we were there she made a row because we both got up late and Maudie came downstairs in her nightgown and a torn kimono.

'Showing yourself at my sitting-room-window 'alf naked like that,' the landlady said. 'And at three o'clock in the afternoon too. Getting my house a bad name.'

'It's all right, ma,' Maudie said. 'I'm going up to get dressed in a minute. I had a shocking headache this morning.'

'Well, I won't 'ave it,' the landlady said. 'When you come downstairs for your dinner you've got to be decent. Not in your nightclothes.' She slammed the door.

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