

Independence Day

"Move back! Move back!" the policemen shouted.

Today they were lining the main street in the city to see the Prince who had come from England to give their country back to them. At midnight.

The woman took shelter in the green space in her head, and waited. The children, released early from school, were standing along a stretch of empty road, books held above their heads casting inky shadows on their faces. The sun shone brightly on the tarred road. A policeman stood on the broad yellow centre line, his starched cap exploring the distance. Policemen in heavy brown boots and khaki uniforms, holding guns and batons, told the children to move back. The Prince from England would not like to be crowded upon.

On the other side of the road women were dancing and singing traditional songs, under the towering gum tree. Sweat poured down their faces as they welcomed the future. The policemen with guns and batons told them to move to the back of the crowd or line up with the rest of the people. One gave them tiny flags to wave, a new flag for a new nation. While waiting for the Prince, sent by his mother the Queen, the woman held a branch from a jacaranda bush over her tired

face, and stayed shielded in the green space in her head.

A limousine came down the street that was lined with exploding purple jacarandas. Children broke into screams, thinking it was the very important person who had come all the way from England to give them back their country. The woman watched the car drive up, and then heard the excitement die down. This was not the moment. It was just another car.

"We shall not know which car the Prince is in when he finally drives by," a man said. "For security reasons. But we have to wave at all the cars as they drive by. One of them has the Prince."

"You mean we shall not see the Prince?" the woman asked, perplexed. She had woken up very early, to see the man who had the power to give them back their country. She heard the sound of sirens, and saw policemen rush by on motorbikes, followed by several cars moving slowly behind.

"Stay back! Stay back!" the policemen shouted to the excited students who extended their arms and waved their tiny flags in front of the stream of passing vehicles.

"Which car has the Prince?" asked the woman.

"Certainly not the first or the second one, for security reasons," the man answered. "And certainly not the last, it's too obvious."

It must be the third then. The woman looked hard through the heavily tinted windows, but saw nothing. Still, everyone waved and shouted. They saw only their own excited faces, intercepted among reflections of purple jacaranda blooms. Along that very road the Prince surely had passed. If they had not seen him, maybe he had seen them. "Did you see the Prince?" they asked each other on the way home. Later, some of them would see him at the stadium, at midnight. The woman would not go.

The man kept one arm around the woman, while with the other he held a bottle of cold beer. He had the television on, and insisted that he would watch the Independence celebrations first. He had already given her the money, and she kept it knotted in a yellow handkerchief which she had tied on the strap of her bra. The stadium, usually reserved for soccer matches, was filled to capacity. First there was traditional dancing in the middle of the stadium. The woman withdrew into the safe space in her mind, and watched the pictures go by on the screen.

The new Prime Minister gave a long speech, and people clapped and shouted. They raised their fists in jubilation. The new Prime Minister spoke into a microphone. The women continued dancing while the Prime Minister was speaking. The people waved their flags when they were told everything would be changing soon. Jobs and more money. Land and education. Wealth and food. The woman saw the Prince sitting quietly, dressed in spotless white clothing. They said his mother could not come. But in these matters he was as important as his mother. The new Prime Minister said something about the Prince, and everyone cheered.

The man watching the screen went to the kitchen for another beer. He was going to celebrate Independence properly: with cold beer and a woman. Now it was ten minutes to midnight. She must take her clothes off. The screen flashed the ticking minutes. The Prince and the new Prime Minister walked to the large flagpole in the middle of the stadium. The old flag was flapping in the air, the new one was hanging below. The man pushed the woman onto the floor. He was going into the new era in style and triumph. She opened her legs. It was midnight, and the new flag went up. The magic time of change. Green, yellow, white. Food, wealth, reconciliation.

When he was through he sent her home. When he awoke he preferred the whole house to himself. They had met under the jacarandas, waiting for the English Prince.

In the morning she saw miniature flags caught along the hedge: the old flag and the new.