

## Whalebone Collars

In her four-poster bed, Verdine Diaz is in a cotton chemise. It is a crisp and sinless white. Outside, shadow gives way to light as the sun rises over the banana plantations on the estate. Light and shadow have carried significance for Verdine from as far back as she can remember. *"The grandeur of Life obtains from the eternal battle between light and darkness and the triumph of the former over the latter."* The good Sisters of Mater Dei Boarding School had impressed this on the young girls in their care. The battle was, in most instances, tied up with the mortal coil. It took a long time for the twelve-year-old Verdine to realize that the 'mortal coil' referred to the physical body and the troubles that beset it.

It's been several years now and Verdine has since kept herself concealed beneath ankle-length skirts and long-sleeved blouses. *I haven't been deprived. I never wanted anything, just a quiet life.* Her mother had tailored her skirts, neatly pleated at the waist, and blouses fitted with whalebone collars. Verdine learnt how these things should be done. *The underskirt must be an inch shorter than the outer. Measure and cut to size. The silhouette of the legs will not be seen through good calico lining.* Her mother has departed now. She is a portrait on a wall; a starched woman who lived a life of pinched goodness. Verdine tailors her own clothes and those of her orphaned nieces, Eusebia and Clementine, who live with her.

The curtains have been drawn back just wide enough for Verdine to see faces advance and recede outside the window grills. The workers have arrived to harvest the bananas. She has provided accommodation for them in cottages on the southern side of the plantation. It is a bumper crop. She might need more hands this season, but she is careful about whom she employs.

\*\*

Verdine sits in an armchair on the balcao at the rear of the house and works on a crochet cloth for the family altar. In Goan Catholic houses, the altar is in the hall. Petitions are often scribbled on slips of paper and placed on it. Verdine's latest prayer is for good and reliable workers. She keeps an occasional eye on them now as they perspire their way through the groves, lopping off bunches of fruit and dead banana leaves.

There is someone at the gate - a young man, not more than twenty-five. He wears a hat and a checked shirt. He hesitates before entering. She knows his kind - a city boy on a break from college hoping to make pocket money by helping to harvest bananas.

In the house there are six women: Verdine herself and the two girls, as well as three domestics. Pedro and Caithan, the only male workers retained in her household, live in quarters outside. Six females rattling about in a large villa, the largest and most remote in Alemgao. She is not comfortable about having a stranger in their midst.

She appears intent on her crochet, but observes him through her eyelashes. He has a leanness that lends him vicarious inches.

He stands before her, hat in hand. "Morning", his head bobs. "I'm Joao Braganza. From Mapusa."

Verdine looks up with interest. She has heard of the Braganzas, a once-prominent family, now teetering on the edge of genteel impoverishment. She is justifiably proud of her own acumen and thrifty ways which have kept them comfortable and the table well-laden, though never lavish.

“What have you come for?” Verdine is conscious of his steady gaze. She draws her feet back under the blue-bleak stuff skirt.

“I heard from the neighbours that you might need help as the crop is a large one. And I...need work.”

“I already have help; besides, you do not look like a worker. You’re a student, aren’t you?”

He nods, “I was studying in Bombay. But my father passed away and I had to return as I’m the only son. Our home, ‘Villa Braganza’, is falling apart. We need to scrape enough together for repairs.”

She reflects for a moment. The youth’s candour is refreshing and his antecedents are known. “Well, all right. We could do with a few more hands.”

Overabundance is also a curse.

\*\*

Abandoning her native caution, she tells Joao “You will dine with us, at the family table.”

She’d really meant him to have his meals with Pedro and Caithan.

“It is out of consideration for his superior social status, of course,” she declares as she disciplines her hair with pins and a snood, before descending the stairs.

Meals are eaten around a small table in an alcove in the kitchen, except when Verdine entertains guests, which is rarely. She is seated at the head of the table with Eusebia and Clementine to her right and left. Joao sits opposite his hostess.

“Clementine, I really wish you wouldn’t curl over the table like a dying shrimp.” The child can be annoying. But it is Eusebia whom she worries about. The girl is thirteen and has a

mouth like sliced fruit: red, ripe and always slightly open. Her eyes, large and fluid, rest on Joao. Verdine also studies the young man's face: the lines running from nose to mouth speak of laughter. But this is belied by deep-set eyes which are serious. She hasn't really concerned herself with a man before. When Joao looks up enquiringly, she attends to the beef assado on her plate.

In their quarters, the workers are singing a manndo. Someone strums a guitar in accompaniment to a chorus of voices which are coarse yet lyrical:

*Look for me by moonlight,  
in the waves of the western sea  
you shall see my face reflected.  
And my love shall burn,  
shall burn, burn, burn  
in its vast and rolling waters...*

The song is loose and abandoned as the wind. Verdine prefers not to dwell upon the words, but imagines bottles of feni being passed around. She purses her lips. She herself drinks only Vinho do Porto. It is sweet, elegant as proper ladies and rich as rubies. When Clementine taps her foot under the table, keeping time with the rhythm, her aunt directs a warning look at the girl.

Breeze swirls into the room. Verdine feels its warmth stealing up her legs, like an invasion. She shifts about in her chair. Eusebia smiles at Joao. He smiles back, then shakes the hair out of his eyes and turns away.

“Eusebia, you will go straight up to your bedroom and get Concepta to brush your hair. You will wear it plaited from tomorrow.” Verdine disapproves of the way the young girl wears her curls all over her shoulders, like a provocation. Maybe they should be shorn off, altogether.

Thereafter, dinner is eaten mostly in silence.

The meal over she arises. “Goodnight”, she addresses Joao. The young man rises and bows his head. It is an almost courtly gesture, but Verdine is aware of faint dissatisfaction within herself.

“I would like to know about my quarters, Miss Verdine.”

“Let me see”, she taps a little foot on the floor. ‘You may occupy an apartment upstairs. The approach is by the staircase in the back verandah. It has an attached bathroom and its own balcony.’ It also has a door which communicates with the interior of the house; with her own rooms, in fact. But she keeps it bolted.

Verdine is in her dressing room which she calls her ‘vestiario de senhora’, as wealthy Goan ladies do. She stands in front of a flawless Belgian mirror and slips out of her skirt, underskirt, blouse and corset. She views herself. The light is dim. Tonight, she wishes it weren’t, so that she might study the image in the mirror, without any bias. She takes her hair in one hand and bunches it up to expose the nape of her neck. “White as an alabaster angel”, she thinks to herself, pleased. Verdine is a ‘misthis’ Goan, one of mixed Indian and Portuguese heritage. She lets the hair run through her fingers and slip down her neck. She loves the wealth of it against her skin. She bunches it up again, curls of indeterminate colour that might be brown or black.

“Vanity is a venial sin.” The grey spirit of Fr Zoze Vaz, late chaplain of Mater Dei, has an unhappy habit of creeping about whenever she looks into the mirror while, in fact, he ought to be Resting in Peace in the Capuchin Cemetery of Bardez, several miles away. “Beware, dear girl: the road to Mortal Sin is paved with the venial. It is but one short step from vanity to vainglory and the latter, as you know, stands first among the Seven Deadly Sins....”

Verdine starts. Who did the tendrils of hair remind her of? Rose pink suffuses the skin on the back of her neck. Why, Eusebia of course! The girl looks like a young Verdine, but her manner leaves something to be desired. The child must be curbed – for her own good.

In bed, Verdine’s dreams move in squiggles: Snip! Snap! The scissors in her hands glint as Eusebia’s curls collect in a heap on the floor. Another delicious clip and it’s done!

For some reason, Verdine finds herself wandering down the aisle of the Church of the Three Angels where she attends mass. Marble saints float past in procession. They touch her lightly on the bosom as they pass by. “What do you have here?” they whisper, then answer their own question, “Your soul. White and shiny as satin. *But white soils easily.*”

“How many years have we on earth? Sixty, if we are fortunate and then dust returns to dust. How old are you now, Verdine Diaz?”

“Thirty-five.” With a shriek she turns and stumbles out of the white-plastered church into the sun of Goa; its coastal greenery and toasted sands. Her corset has come undone. She stumbles awake.

Lying among her bedclothes Verdine recalls that, at a distance on the beach, she had seen two figures with their backs to her. One was tall and gangly; the other had curls which refused to be restrained by hairpins.

\*\*

Verdine is alone in the kitchen, preparing breakfast. The menu has been planned with care. It is a pleasure she has lately discovered. Her mother never let her cook. "The heat of the fire darkens the skin; most unbecoming. Heat is also unsuitable for young girls, in other ways." The *other ways* were never specified. Verdine wonders whether they had anything to do with the 'mortal coil'.

Today it will be special scrambled egg with soft fried onions, tomatoes and green coriander for seasoning. She chooses six large eggs. The rest must be returned to the larder to be stored in an earthen crock. She arranges them in a bowl and is carrying them to the door when Joao enters. "The bullock carts have arrived...oh, but allow me, Miss Verdine." He reaches out. The bowl slips from her hands. Eggs tumble down and shells fragment and scatter.

"Not to worry, Miss Verdine", Joao gets down on his knees and mops yolks and whites that pool wickedly on the floor.

"His fingers", she thinks, "are those of an artist. Just like father's were." Joao is gentle as he wipes egg off her skirt of flowery printed cotton. She lifts the edge, just a little, so that he can clean her bespattered home slippers and slight ankles.

By lunchtime, she arrives freshly bathed and fragrant with English lavender talc. She has dusted herself down because the offensive odour of raw egg has a habit of clinging to the skin. Annette appears with a slip of paper on a tray. "I found this on the altar, madam. I thought you should know."

"Thank you, Annette."

Verdine recognizes Clementine's childish scrawl. The prayer reads, "Dear Jesus and St Anthony, please make Joao stay here - forever."

She summons the girl. "Did you write this petition and place it on the altar?"

"Yes. Eusebia told me to."

"I see. Where is Eusebia?"

"Out in the plantation. She's helping Joao to load the gunny sacks of bananas."

"My foot", Verdine thinks inwardly. Aloud she says, "Take your place at the table, child."

Eusebia will have no pudding tonight.

That evening she writes a letter to the Mother Superior of Mater Dei convent. She requests her to admit Eusebia in the school and boarding house at the beginning of the next term.

She will ask Pedro to post the letter the next time he goes to town.

On a whim, Verdine wears a crimson lace blouse and a black taffeta skirt to dinner that night. Her lips look moister and pinker than usual.

\*\*

She is unaccustomed to such heat as afternoon has brought and Verdine feels trapped between remorseless sunshine and the sullen humidity of the earth. The workers are sucking on ice candy bought from a local hawker. They have improvised caps for themselves with cabbage leaves. Their images and voices are hazy. Verdine retreats into the house and goes up to her bedroom for a siesta. She closes the door behind her and settles into her easy chair by an open window. Sleep when it comes, she is not even sure it has, is tangled.



The girls' voices come floating up to her. It's a game they often play when Eusebia and Clementine pretend to be each other.

Clementine cries, "Today, I am Sebbby and Sebbby is me."

Her giggle gets mixed up with Verdine's own voice. 'No, Clemmy, no! That's an untruth. *Eusebia and I are one. Eusebia is Verdine. You know that.*"

"Sebbby!!"

'Clemmy!"

"Verdine!"

Verdine drifts into Joao's apartment and searches among the things in his bags, unlocked wardrobe and chest of drawers. There must be something about his past; his attachments; at twenty-five there might well be an affair of the heart. Someone taps her on the shoulder. She starts and turns around. It is her mother.

"It is improper to enter a man's room."

"Mama, is that you? I thought you were dead!"

"I'm in your mind, dear. In your mind." Her mother's voice echoes.

Verdine rushes past her and down a staircase as dark as guilt.

"Madam, your tea."

"Oh! Where's everyone? Eusebia? Clementine?"

"Having their baths, Madam."

The earth has sent out shoots of petrichor. Somewhere rain is falling in slanting spikes of silver.

“Concepta”, Verdine tells the maid, “On my writing desk there is a letter to the Mother Superior of Mater Dei convent. Bring it to me.”

“Madam.”

After Concepta leaves the room, Verdine tears the letter and puts it into the wastepaper basket. “You’ve been a hypocrite, Verdine Diaz”, she tells herself.

Joao joins the family for after-dinner cocoa in the drawing room.

“There’s a haunted bridge over the stream at the end of the plantation”, Eusebia announces. “Will you take us there, Mr Joao?”

“If you show me the way”, he replies. “You will accompany us, Miss Verdine?”

Verdine permits herself a smile, “It’s really a whole lot of nonsense. The usual stories about star-crossed lovers who took their lives there. Some say, it’s the ghost of a girl who slipped out of her bedroom one night on the lookout for adventure and drowned in the stream below. But yes, I will.”

“Do you believe in ghosts, Aunt Verdine?” Clementine has warmed to the theme.

“That’s a story for another time, Clemmy”, her aunt replies.

\*\*

They have set out later than is advisable. The monsoons are sweeping southern Goa and an advance guard of showers shimmer over the Diaz estate in the north. Verdine’s parasol is not proof against rain. But today the bridge draws her. It is a wooden one which creaks

satisfyingly in a sudden squall. The girls are bounding ahead. Verdine and Joao follow at a leisurely pace. "It has a century-worth of ghosts, by all accounts", Verdine remarks. Joao and she smile at each other.

The girls' voices reach them. "Clemmy, if you look into the stream on the anniversary, you will see the faces of the lovers looking up at you. Maria told me that."

"And I heard from Concepta that you can see the girl who drowned floating in the water - in her nightdress", Clementine shivers deliciously. "Wonder which story is true...."

"I think, both", Eusebia replies.

The sky is smudged purple and thunder howls across the plantation. Verdine knows that they should immediately make for the villa, but the moment holds her there. She and Joao bend over the wooden railing.

She tells him, "Some say the woman wore a bridal gown because this was to be the final union with her lover." They look down, past the scuffed and sodden wood and into the waters.

Joao turns to her, "You never answered the question about ghosts, Miss Verdine. Do you believe in hauntings?"

Verdine's voice is husky, "I am haunted by the ghosts of all my mistakes. And you, Joao?"

"We are all haunted, Miss Verdine. Mostly by the things we should have done, could have done; but didn't do."

'Like what things?'

Joao bends forward so that his face is only inches away from hers, “Like the business of living itself. Some of us try to survive by pretending that life isn’t happening at all”, he whispers.

Lightning whiplashes the trees. They see their reflections rippling up at them from the stream.

“I suppose we’d better go home.”

The girls giggle and scamper ahead with their arms around each other’s waists. On the banks of the stream, Verdine’s foot slips and her ankle twists. Joao helps her up and supports her with an arm around her shoulders. Her skirt is soiled with slush and lapping water. It clings to her form and the damp sends a shiver down beyond her skin to the inside of her.

“It’s a pity about your dress, Miss Verdine. But it still looks quite beautiful...”

“I should have been more careful, Joao. White soils easily.” The rain and her heart beat with the same rhythm.

\*\*

Verdine is in the library with the girls. She has asked Joao to join them there. He enters the large, curtained room that smells of all things dead. The girls are poring over something.

Eusebia shrieks, “Come here, Mr Joao! Look at this!”

Joao sees a tome lying open on the floor.

“A book of paintings on canvas. An heirloom handed down generations of Diazs”, Verdine explains. “I call it *The Book of Evil*.”

“Aunt has never let us look through it before.”

Joao studies a painting of gleeful fiends stoking hellfire in which the Damned, arms and legs entangled, convulse for all eternity. The realism of it springs off the page. “Hmm...neither would I”, he murmurs.

Clementine obligingly turns a page for him. “See, a skeleton.”

“The Grim Reaper, from the looks of it.” Joao observes that the Reaper’s harvest includes a woman with wild locks of gold and lips of carnadine. The title of the painting reads, *The Harlot’s End*. “Was there a *Book of Good*, Miss Verdine?”

“It did have a companion tome. Lost long ago or given away. Mother kept this one carefully. She said it offered greater motivation to save one’s soul. Mother altogether preferred chastity to charity. What do you think of this painting, Joao?” Verdine points to another.

It depicts a dying man on a pallet. A bottle of wine and a strumpet offer further elucidation. Under the bed, Satan, with ill-concealed impatience, awaits his new minion. The footnote states that the man who had lived a wholly Christian life, committed a mortal sin on his deathbed thereby forfeiting his soul to Lucifer.

“Is it at all possible that a man on his deathbed could commit a carnal sin?”

“Being a man, myself, I should think not, Miss Verdine. I doubt anything would be in working order.... You know, it seems to me that you can live fully with your body, without losing your way to Heaven.”

Verdine laughs and so does Joao. His teeth are uneven, but have a personality of their own.

Eusebia and Clementine laugh too, but don’t know why.

Concepta enters to take the girls down to the kitchen for milk and biscuits.

“Will you help me, Joao? I’d like to put this away where it rightfully belongs.”

Joao places the *Book of Evil* in a teakwood chest and lowers the lid.

Verdine draws the curtains and throws a window open. A wet gust blows the muslin scarf off her shoulders. Today, her blouse has a boatneck and short sleeves.

“The harvest is done, Miss Verdine. Perhaps I should leave for Mapusa tomorrow?”

“One doesn’t travel in the rains, Joao.”

---