You Gave Me Hyacinths by Janette Turner Hospital

Summer comes hot and steamy, with the heavy smell of raw sugar to the north-east coast of Australia. The cane pushes through the rotting window blinds and grows into the cracks and corners of the mind. It ripens in the heart at night, and its crushed sweetness drips into dreams. I have woken brushing from my eyelids the silky plumes that burst up into harvest time. And I have stood smoke-blackened as the cane fires licked the night sky, and kicked my way through the charred stubble after the men have slashed at the naked stalks and sent them churning through the mill. I have walked forever through the honeyed morning air to the crumbling high school - brave outpost of another civilisation.

The class always seemed to be on the point of bulging out the windows. If I shut my eyes and thought hard I could probably remember all the faces and put a name to each. One never forgets that first year out of teachers' college, the first school, the first students. Dellis comes before anyone else, of course, feline and demanding, blotting out the others; Dellis, who sat stonily bored through classes and never turned in homework and wrote nothing at all on test papers. "Can't understand poetry," she said by way of explanation. There were detentions and earnest talks. At least, I was earnest; Dellis was bored. She put her case simply: "I'll fail everything anyway."

"But you don't need to, Dellis. It's a matter of your attitude, not your ability. What sort of job will you get if you don't finish high school?"

"I'll work at Valesi's. Or the kitchen at the mill canteen."

"Yes, well. But they will be very monotonous jobs, don't you think? Very boring."

"Yes." Flicking back the long blonde hair.

"Now just supposing you finished high school. Then what would you do?"

"Same thing. Work at Valesi's or in the mill canteen. Till I'm married. Everybody does."

"You could go to Brisbane, or even Sydney or Melbourne. There are any number of jobs you could get there if you were to finish high school. There would be theatres to go to, plays to see. And libraries. Dellis, this town doesn't even have a library."

Silence.

"Have you ever been out of this town, Dellis?"

"Been to Cairns once."

Cairns. Twenty thousand people, and less than a hundred miles away: the local idea of the Big City. "Dellis, what are you going to do with your life?"
No answer.

I felt angry as though I were the one trapped in the slow rhythm of a small tropical town. "Can you possibly be content," I asked viciously, "to work at the mill, get married, have babies, and grow old in this shrivelled-up sun-blasted village?"

She was mildly puzzled at my outburst, but shrugged it off as being beyond her. "Reckon I'll have to marry the first boy who knocks me up," she said.

"You don't have to marry anybody, Dellis. No doubt you could fall in love with some boy in this town and be quite happy with him. But is that all you want?"

"Dunno. It's better'n *not* getting married."

1 knew her parents were not around - perhaps they were dead; though more likely they were merely deserters who had found the lure of fruit picking in the south too rewarding to resist. I knew she lived with a married sister- the usual shabby wooden cottage with toddlers messily underfoot, everyone cowering away from the belligerent drunk who came home from the cane fields each night. The family, the town - it was an intolerable cocoon. She simply had to fight her way out of it, go south. I told her so. But her face was blank. The world beyond the town held neither fascination nor terror. I think she doubted the existence of anything beyond Cairns.

In the classroom the air was still and fetid. There was the stale sweat of forty students; there was also the sickly odour of molasses rolling in from the mill. An insistent wave of nausea lapped at me. Dellis's face seemed huge and close and glistened wetly the way all flesh did in the summer. She looked bored as always, though probably not so much at her detention as at the whole wearying business of an afternoon and evening still to be lived through - after which coolness would come for an hour or two, and even fitful sleep. Then another dank day would begin.

"Dellis, let's get out of here. Will you go for a walk with me?"

"Okay," she shrugged.

Outside the room things were immediately better. By itself, the molasses in the air was heavy and drowsy, but pleasant. We crunched down the drive and out the gate under the shade of the flame-trees.

"I love those," Dellis said, pointing upwards where the startling crimson flaunted itself against the sky.

"Why?"

She was suddenly angry. "Why? You always want to know why. You spoil things. I hate your classes. I hate poetry. It's stupid. Just sometimes there is a bit I like, but all you ever do is ask why. Why do I like it? And then I feel stupid because I never know why. I just like it, that's all. And you always spoil it."

We walked in silence the length of the street, which was the length of the town, past the post office, Cavallero's general store, Valesi's Snack Bar, and two pubs. The wind must have been blowing our way from the mill, because the soot settled on us gently as we walked. The men swilling their beer on the benches outside the pubs fell silent as we passed and their eyes felt uncomfortable on my damp skin. At the corner pub, someone called out "Hey, Dellis!" from the dark inside, and laughter fell into the dust as we rounded the corner and turned toward the mill.

Halfway between the corner and the mill, Dellis said suddenly, "I like the red. I had a red dress for the school dance, and naturally you know what they all said .... But the trees don't care: That's what I'd like to be. A flame-tree." We went on in silence again, having fallen into the mesmeric pattern of stepping from sleeper to sleeper of the narrow rail siding, until we came to the line of cane cars waiting outside the mill. Dellis reached into one and pulled out two short pieces. She handed one to me and started chewing the other.

"We really shouldn't, Dellis. It's stealing." She eyed me sideways and shrugged.

"You spoil things." I tore off strips of bamboo-like skin with my teeth and sucked at the soft sweet fibres.

We had passed the mill, and were on the beach road. Two miles under that spiteful sun. Close to the cane there was some coolness, and we walked in the dusty three-foot strip between the road and the sugar plumes, sucking and chewing and spitting out the fibres. The dust came up in little puffs around our sandals. We said nothing, just chewed and spat. Only two cars passed us. The Howes all hung out of one and waved. The other was a utility truck headed for the mill.

About one and a half miles along, the narrow road suddenly emerged from its canyon of tall cane. A lot of cutting had been done, and a farmhouse stood alone in the shorn fields, white and blinding in the afternoon sun. The haze of colour around the front door was a profusion of Cooktown orchids, fragile waxen flowers, soft purple with a darker slash of purple at the heart. "Gian's house," said Dellis as we walked on, and into the cool cover of uncut cane again.

Gian! So that was why he always had an orchid to tuck brazenly behind one ear. He was seventeen years old, a Torres Strait Islander: black, six feet tall, a purple flower nestled against his curly hair any time one saw him except in class. Gian, rakishly Polynesian, bending over that day after school till the impudent orchid and his incredible eyes were level with mine.

"Did you know that I killed my father, Miss?"

"Yes, Gian. I was told that when I first arrived."

"Well?" The eyes were incongruously blue, and watchful under the long silky lashes.

I knew the court verdict was self-defence, I knew his father had been blind drunk, a wife-beater on the rampage.

"Well?" Gian persisted.

I said lamely: "It must have been horrible."

"I hated him," Gian said without passion. "He was a bastard."

"I gather many people thought so."

"Well?"

"What are you asking me, Gian? How can I know what was the right thing to do? Only you can know that."

"I am the only person in this town who has killed a man. Do you realize that?"

We stared at each other, and then outrageously he let his eyes wander slowly down my body with blatant intent, and walked away. I was trembling. After that I was always afraid to look Gian in the eye, and he always dared me to. When I turned to write on the board, I could feel two burning spots on the back of my neck. And when I faced the class again, his eyes were waiting, and a slow grin would spread across his face. Yet it was not an insolent grin. That was what was most disturbing. It seemed to say that we two shared a daring and intimate secret. But he knew it and I didn't.

Dellis and I had reached the beach. It was deserted. We kicked off our sandals, lay down, and curled our toes into the warm sand. The palms cast a spindly shade that wasn't much help, but a tired wisp of sea breeze scuffled up the sand refreshingly from the calm water. So amazingly calm inside the reef. I never could get used to it. I had grown up with frenetic surf beaches, but from here you had to go a thousand miles down the coast before you got south of the Great Reef.

"Dellis, you must visit Brisbane this summer, and give yourself a swim in the surf for a Christmas present. You just can't imagine how exciting it is."

"Let's go swimming now. It's so bloody hot."

"But we don't have swimsuits."

"Just take our clothes off."

"But somebody might come."

Dellis stood up and unbuttoned her blouse. "You spoil things," she said. It hurt when she stood naked in front of me. She was only fifteen, and it wasn't fair. I almost told her how beautiful she was, but envy and embarrassment stopped me. This is her world, I thought; she is part of it, she belongs. She was tanned all over; there were no white parts. She ran down into the water without looking back.

I stood up and slipped off my dress, but then my heart failed me, and I went into the water with my underwear on. We must have swum for half an hour, and it was cool and pleasant. Then we ran along the water's edge for ten minutes or so to dry out. We dressed and lay on the sand again. "It's good to do that," Dellis murmured. "It's the best thing when you're unhappy."

"Are you often unhappy?"

The look she gave me suggested that if I had to ask such stupid questions, why did I call myself a teacher?

"What I meant, Dellis, is that I'd like to ... if you're unhappy, I would like to ... I mean, if there's any way I can help .... "

"You don't even know how to chew cane properly." She was looking at me with a kind of affectionate contempt, as though I were an idiot child. "You don't know anything. You really don't know *anything*." She shook her head and grinned at me.

I smiled back. I wanted to tell her how much I was learning. I would have liked to speak of poetic symbols, and of the significance which flame-trees or Cooktown orchids would henceforth have for me. Instead I said: "Dellis, today .... Who would have thought? How could I have guessed, this morning, that today would be so ... would be such a ...? Well, a *remarkable* day."

"Really? Why?"

"You spoil things. Don't ask me why."

She giggled. "But really, why?"

"It's very complicated. It has a lot to do with a religious and sheltered background that you couldn't even begin to imagine, and it would take a lot of explaining. But to put it briefly, it is a truly extraordinary thing for me to have gone swimming naked with one of my students."

"You didn't even take all your clothes off," she laughed.

Now the silence was close and comfortable, and longer and drowsier. We must have dozed, because when I sat up again the humidity was even more oppressive and monstrous dark clouds had billowed up out of the sea.

"There's going to be a thunderstorm, Dellis. We'd better get home quickly."

"Too early in the year," she said sleepily. And when she saw the clouds, "It'll ruin a lot of cane."

We were walking quickly, and nearly at Gian's house again, when Dellis pointed into the shadowy green maze of the cane field and said, "That's where Gian and I did it."

"Did what?"

"*Did* it. He laid me."

"Oh! ... I ... I see. Your first...?"

She looked at me, startled, and laughed. "He's the only one I loved. And the only one I wouldn't take money from."

Virgin and child in a field of green. No madonna could have beheld the amazing fruit of her womb with more awed astonishment than I felt. Something hurt at the back of my head, and I reached up vaguely with my hand. There was a whole ordered moral world there somewhere. But I couldn't find it. It wouldn't come.

I said, inanely: "So you and Gian are in love?"

"He was going to give me money and I wouldn't take it. But he was gentle. And afterwards he took the orchid from behind his ear and put it between my legs. I hoped I'd have a baby, but I didn't."

The storm was coming and we fled before the wind and the rain. At the mill we separated, but Dellis ran back and grabbed my arm. She had to shout, and even then I thought I hadn't heard

her properly. Our skirts bucked about our legs like wet sails, runnels of water sluiced over our ears. She shouted again: "Have you ever been laid?"

"Dellis!"

"Have you?"

"This is not ... this is not a proper. ... " "Have you?"

"No."

"Gian says you're beautiful. Gian says that you .... He says he would like to .... That's why I hated you. But now I don't."

Then we ran for our lives.

All through my dinner and all through the evening, the rain drummed on the iron roof, and the wind dashed the banana palms against the window in a violent tattoo. For some reason I wanted to dance to the night's jazz rhythm. But then surely there was something more insistent than the thunder, a battering on my door. She was standing dripping wet on my doorstep. "Dellis, for God's sake, what are you doing here? It's almost midnight."

"They were fighting at home again, and I couldn't stand it. I brought something for you."

She held out a very perfect Cooktown orchid. Somebody's prize bloom, stolen.

"Come inside, out of the rain," I said vaguely, listening to the lines from Eliot that fluted in my head - fragments and images half-remembered. I had to take down the book, so I showed her the passage:

'You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;
'They called me the hyacinth girl. '
- Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden,
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
Looking into the heart of light, the silence.

"Dellis," I said, as (teacherly, motherly) I combed out her wet tangled hair, "for me, you will always be the hyacinth girl."

"Poetry!" she sniffed. And then: "What do hyacinths look like?"

"I don't know. I imagine they look like Cooktown orchids."

Discussion Questions

1. Why does the teacher (the narrator) find it difficult to reach out to Dellis in the beginning?
2. Why is Dellis' "attitude" a barrier in her relationship with the narrator?
3. What is the significance of the narrator's invitation for Dellis to go for a walk with her?
4. How does Dellis' dislike of the narrator's classes explain her character?
5. During their "walk", what changed in the relationship between Dellis and the narrator and what happened to break the barrier between them?
6. Throughout the story, Dellis constantly repeated "You spoil things" to the narrator. However, her tone changes and it becomes less hostile each time. How does this explain the transformation in their relationship?
7. How did the "walk" change the narrator?
8. Why does the narrator call Dellis, the Hyacinth girl? (*this question can only be answered with an analysis and understanding of the poem at the end of the story*)