

## The Kanak Apple<sup>138</sup> Season

**K**aatâdaa, the morning star, was still shining as brightly as ever, competing with the lingering moon which projected its cold clarity on to our damp steps slipping on the coral rock of the reef near the mangrove. We were out on an expedition with the adults, and us two *pwêêdi*,<sup>139</sup> the youngsters, revived by the coffee gulped down on my grandmother's lap, were merrily bringing up the rear behind our respective fathers and two older brothers.

The oldest of the group leading the way was my father's customary father, which made him my grandfather. The other small boy trailing behind with me and his brother were this man's sons, which made them my father's two young brothers. As such, they were the little fathers of me and my brother, who belonged to our brother clan with whom we did and shared everything.<sup>140</sup> Grandfather, who had a sack of woven pandanus over his shoulder containing a young conch shell, an *âdi* of great value, was chatting away gaily with my father just behind him. Our two elder brothers were talking about the raft that we would be using to cross a river mouth a bit further on. We two littlies bringing up the rear were enjoying ourselves seeing who could be the first to catch sight of Venus reflected on the little silvery waves of the reef's small salt-water ponds at low tide. That morning, Kaatâdaa lit up a great hope, that of being able

to get a future wife for my elder brother in the maternal clan that we were going to see.

We abandoned the star and its reflections to sink into the sludge under the mangrove trees in the swamp, as we went back up along the river's edge for a while in search of the raft that would take us to the other bank. We found it moored to the branch of a burao tree swimming in the water. The crossing was made in the still pale light of dawn, with everyone trying to keep his balance on the craft. As to each his due, it fell to the future fiancé, my older brother, to steer our raft with the help of a long bamboo rod serving as an oar. We listened to the slight sound of the surf on the bamboo as we fixed our gaze on the greyish islet all the way out there on the horizon, which was beginning to take on a reddish hue at daybreak. Patiently, inevitably, the sun continued to show its head above the sea through a mosaic in which mauve and violet gave way to pink, itself soon covered by a red that was quickly distilled into an orange-coloured sky.

Fascinated by this interplay of colour and light, we lingered a little on the sand of the beach we were now walking along, after leaving our skiff moored this time to the trunk of a young mangrove tree. Our fathers were still conversing up ahead, our brothers each in turn writing their names in the wet sand with a strip of reed, while we younger ones amused ourselves drawing straight, curved or broken lines in it. The smell of roasted coffee, the crowing of a cock and the sight of smoke between the tops of the auracaria pines led us off our path towards the hut of a grey-haired grandmother who lived there all alone and who served us coffee and baked manioc grated with coconut.

While we were enjoying ourselves opening and shutting our eyes as we blinked at the rising sun, the grandmother, truly heaven-sent, let the cat out of the bag by

telling our fathers that they would need a lot of verve and know-how if they were to win over the future fiancée's grandfather. He had apparently already told anyone who cared to listen that he did not want to see his granddaughter come over to us and that he intended her for another clan. The old lady ended by saying that while people might usually pay little heed to the likes of her or to the ravings of loners or weirdos living with the wood sprites, now at least our fathers knew what they were up against. So they would have to be careful in the way they went about making their request for marriage and mind their words if they wanted to seal the union. My father did not give anything away, but this new difficulty seemed to appeal greatly to my grandfather, who was absolutely set on overcoming it.

A short time after saying goodbye to the grandmother, we left the beach and branched off towards a narrow track that ran along the barbed-wire fence enclosing a settler's huge coconut plantation, where a few fattened cows were grazing peacefully in the company of a bull who gave me goose-bumps. The path led us towards the first huts of the tribe where we were to go. Upon our arrival in front of the hut of our granddaughter, niece and cousin, whom we would invite to become our daughter-in-law, wife and sister-in-law,<sup>141</sup> everyone in her family came out on to the grassy avenue lined with coconut trees and araucaria pines surrounded by hibiscus and cordyline bushes. There, my father presented both the tobacco signalling the end of our journey and the *âdi* for the sharing of future grief, offerings to the living and the dead. Then, roused by his own compelling language in which all his talent as an orator came through, grandfather made his plea for the girl's hand in marriage and proposed the offer of union by giving the *âdi* containing the conch.<sup>142</sup> With consummate art, he pronounced the words that have sealed alliances from time

immemorial. His speech went to the very core of our being as it galvanised us all in that yard lit by the first rays of sunlight and cheered by the chirping of morning sparrows. An uncle expressed thanks for the tobacco representing our journey and the *âdi* of mourning.

The maternal grandfather who would not have us for his granddaughter then suddenly appeared brandishing his axe. His voice fired with anger and magnified by rage, he let fly with a rough, sharp and cutting speech. Seeing red, he flayed us with words just as timeless, words of war, which cut us to the core, right there, in that same yard, while the same birds were singing and the same sun was shining. Fear crept over me, the image of the bull in the coconut field sprang back to mind, and I got goose-bumps all over again. Everyone around me bowed their heads, with the exception of my grandfather who, his eyes riveted on the jerky movements of the other grandfather, was getting ready to counter-attack. Then suddenly, as if in response to a silent call, my brother ventured a glance into the other camp, a glance returned by his future wife furtively wiping away a tear that was forming in her eye.

Still firmly holding the *âdi* with the conch wrapped in shimmering cloth, grandfather quietly cleared his throat before humbly approving of the vindictive speech his cousin had just graced us with. He acknowledged the truth of the criticisms that had been levelled against us, for without any doubt we were bloated with bumptiousness in presuming to tread upon the earth of a garden whose fruits had already been secretly promised to other, more prestigious, clans. We were nothing more than beggars with tawdry fields on niaouli hills wedged between mountain and sea. What good were the mule, the lobster and the cowrie if we were lacking in fine yams and if the water in our taro fields had run dry? All manner of seafood would lose its salt in ovens that had been extinguished for

want of condiments. We had neither hardwood to build our huts nor thick straw to cover them with. We had no rest mat, our banyan tree no longer provided any shade through lack of leaves and the grass of our front entrance path was wilting.<sup>143</sup> Beneath our roof with gaping holes, our sacred basket was now devoid of any treasure.<sup>144</sup>

All that was true, and still we had come, now standing here empty-handed before the maternals and uttering strange things as if we were creatures possessed by the spirits of the forest. We had not lost our way, though. We had taken the path laid down by our common ancestors, a path that we wanted to make stronger and longer. We wanted to give new life to the union to which we are grateful for being here alive all together. For how could the mutual bonds between us through our maternal side have existed if each camp had not been nurtured on the fruits of the other's garden? We had not lost our way, but came in all humility to ask for the hand of a girl who would not be our granddaughter, niece and cousin, if in her veins there did not flow our blood. We had not lost our way, but the word and honour rested with the maternals in their yard, under their coconut trees and araucaria pines, and it would be as they decided, as our traditions decreed.

The sobbing of the grandmothers, the sniffing with emotion, the clearing of throats and the slight coughing on account of the occasion were now muffling the teary voice of the old maternal relative who clasped grandfather to his chest, thanking him for his words of wisdom which would console him for the state of confusion and distraction into which the thought of the impending departure of his favourite granddaughter had plunged him. The grandmothers, mothers, aunts, sisters and cousins surrounded the two *pwêêdi* while the grandfathers, fathers, uncles and cousins took our elder brothers over to a mat where there soon appeared a steaming

pot of coffee together with a sugar jar, china bowls, plates of boiled green bananas and dishes of baked manioc. The women took us younger ones away with their children to feast on ripe bananas, delicious pawpaws and slightly acidic mangoes for hours on end. They vied with each other in getting us drunk on fresh green coconuts, juicy sugar cane and other passionate fruits.

The midday meal brought us all together again around hearty servings of chicken *bougnas*,<sup>145</sup> interspersed with large dishes on which the red shells of crabs and lobsters competed with the white smoothness of trochus shells or the grey coarseness of dawas. An old female cousin declared, as she gave me a knowing look, that the stomachs of kids who were hearty eaters looked like those of balloon fish and their sting like the arrogant nose of a dawa. Everyone burst out laughing and I rubbed my tummy with satisfaction. At day's end, when it was time to leave, my future sister-in-law held out to me a small basket woven out of coconut palm leaves containing very pink, very ripe Kanak apples. 'Here, take this for the trip back, and sow a seed from it down there for me, in remembrance of this day.' That was the pact marking our mutual adoption, which was never to be broken thereafter.

Actually, I am the youngest of three brothers. While the clan's elders had opted for the path of traditional marriage for the first-born, they left it up to the next in line to choose his own wife. He met her while staying in the mining centre where they would subsequently spend the greater part of their lives. We were to learn much later by word of mouth that he had at first been head over heels in love with another girl, who turned out to be the cousin of the one he ended up marrying. Their story was known to the parents of this first fiancée, since they used to receive him at their place, which signified their tacit agreement to a possible official union.

We never found out, nor will we ever, how my second sister-in-law came into the picture. There were those who talked of violent scenes of jealousy in which she was supposed to have wielded a dagger and machete to intimidate all other rivals who dared come near my brother. As she lived rather far away from us, my father and grandfather were to go by boat, on foot and on horseback to ask for her hand in marriage. It was obviously out of the question that the *pwêêdi* would take part in what was a veritable expedition. But we went with them as far as the tribe's small jetty where, pensive and sad, we stayed a long time, waving our hands after the little ferry that was sailing off into the twilight.

On their return, grandfather would tell about a girl who was very sick during their stay up there. He had had the impression that, on hearing this news, my brother had been shattered. In answer to my grandmother's question inquiring what my second future sister-in-law was like, her husband told her something like, 'We'll have our work cut out with this one!' He even added that the gleeful manner in which their offer of union had been accepted looked to him like the way you welcomed someone who was finally going to relieve you of a real millstone around your neck. He agreed with my father and the other leaders of the two clans on the same date for the wedding of my two big brothers, and they made it known to all our allies by taking to each of them the piece of cloth for tying the knots in the network of kinship relations.

Our relatives would come one by one to offer their *âdi* of bank notes, fabrics, clothes, mats, yams, taros, manioc, chickens and pigs so that my two sisters-in-law and their families could have a memorable celebration, and to honour them as best they could. Having to allow for the days when the ferry called in, the clans from the mining region, accompanying the fiancée from the red land,<sup>146</sup> as I would call

her, arrived a few days prior to the start of the ceremonies. This fiancée, as proud as the nickel peaks of her red land, and perhaps as flayed as them — who knows? — proffered neither a smile which could have tamed me nor a gesture which could have charmed us. And how could she have, as never for a moment did she leave my brother's side or take her eyes off him, and she spoke to him only in her own tongue.<sup>147</sup> The long and the short of it was that, for the fiancée from the red land, we simply did not exist.

So, more than ever, I waited for our other cousin and sister-in-law, especially to show her our young apple tree which was springing up. On the morning of the festivities, while she was sitting head bowed on a beautiful long-fringed mat with the sister-in-law from the mining country waiting in front of all our assembled relatives for the speech that was going to entrust them to us, my gaze fixed on her blonde head of hair glistening in the sunlight. I was secretly hoping for a little sign of complicity that would confirm in front of everybody that she had not forgotten our pact. And, in fact, just as one of the speakers was talking about the black *âdi*, the colour of the alluvial earth of riverbeds and the almond colour of burnt bancoule nut,<sup>148</sup> about the *âdi* woman as source of life and mourner of the dead, her sparkling eyes flashed a smile in my direction.<sup>149</sup> While all around everyone was holding back with contained emotion, I was practically beside myself with laughter. However, unable either to roar with happiness or jump for joy, I just kept on fidgeting, with a big grin on my cheeks. I pinched the arm of my little brother and bosom buddy, the other *pwêêdi* who, half-surprised and half-amused by what he thought was a new game, asked me in a whisper, 'What's up? What is it?' 'Nothing, nothing,' I repeated, my eyes

riveted on golden locks that were gradually disappearing under the weight of all the fabrics of welcome ...

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It is the Kanak apple season. Some of the apples were rotting in the tall grass that had been trampled underfoot in the shade of the old apple tree that was now nearing its 40th year. It was like those memories of scenes featuring my sister-in-law that came flooding back to me there. The grass, like other apples, had been squashed by men who had come with the three soothsayers.<sup>150</sup> The latter had maintained that our cousin and sister-in-law had been practising her craft there for a long time, just as she had been up under the banyan tree of the ancestors, down by the mangrove swamp and, at night, at low tide, out near the reef. The Kanak apple season was becoming the season for charlatans, or the time for sorcerers.

The soothsayers and others accompanying them had been staying in our community for two days for a witchcraft trial against our sister-in-law and two other relatives. As they kept on denying everything, it dragged out and the pressure mounted. Rumours grew louder, threats increased and insults rained down at different times. Yesterday morning, when the men got back from their investigations under the banyan tree, a lot of people ran away shouting at the sight of them, scared by the creeper wrapped around their foreheads. This cleared the way for them to visit the places they wanted to. The psychosis was setting in and my sister-in-law was wilting.

‘If you’re really a witch, you’d better show us quick smart where you have your stone and leaves hidden, ’cos, let me tell you, I’m sick of bringing food here every day to feed everybody!’ the wife of one of the accused called out to her in

the afternoon. Later, one of the seers took her husband aside, without witnesses, saying that maybe that way he would feel freer to tell what was being asked of him, but after a long while they came back empty-handed, and noticeably drunk.

‘Hurry up and start talking, for at 10 o’clock I’ve got to go home and sleep, because tomorrow’s Monday, and I’m working on the State plan, and have to be at the village by six o’clock!’ the same seer, upset with our sister-in-law, yelled at her in the evening. Then he went out and called one of the other two over into the half-light, saying loud and clear that he had something important to ask him. The other went over to the pick-up truck in which they had come to get a little string shoulder bag. As he was handing it to him, he pulled out a bottle that he gulped eagerly down. Back in the courtroom-hut, he was again threatening our sister-in-law with things like, ‘If you keep on denying it all, I’ll make you shit your pants right here in front of everyone!’

I came to her defence, for I don’t believe a word of what they are accusing her of, and I’m also finding that there are more and more shenanigans in this trial. The sister-in-law from the red land was not impressed at all and went at her and at us even more ferociously than before: ‘That’s why you’re sterile and have never had a child, because you were feeding your dead skulls! And you, it’s no surprise that you support her, as everybody knows you’ve been sleeping with her ever since your brother’s death!’

We both know full well that there is no truth in any of this. But I’m afraid for her, as it seems to me that she’s now stopped eating. And this afternoon under our apple tree is really the first time that those happy hours of yesteryear have come flooding back to me so clearly, with something like the quickness and imminence of a god.

Yes, I really am quite afraid that she won’t get over this trial.

## ‘Dos montes ...’

I was on my way back from Betty’s in Redfern, where I had gone to check the schedule for Katie’s meetings. She was coming to spend two days in Sydney on her way back from London before going on via Hawaii and San Francisco to New York, where she was to meet up with Eric and the others for the final details about their delegation’s stay in Cuba. I made my way towards Martin Place,<sup>151</sup> where Ken was to give me some copies of the program for the Sydney meetings. I would show it to her as soon as she arrived at Mascot,<sup>152</sup> where it was my job to collect her later in the morning.

She did arrive, fresh and smiling as usual. I had often said to myself that she was one of those over whom time held no sway and that it could go on indefinitely like this. Once again I wondered how she could emerge as she did, calm and relaxed, from those long and endless trips, all that jetlag and those marathon meetings. Was it possible to be both so ‘speedy’ and so composed at the same time? But maybe she actually found her energy and peace in the constant spin of such permanent exile! After we greeted each other, she wanted to know what we had concocted for her for these two days in Sydney.

‘My final afternoon is free, so we could go for a walk and have a bit of a talk, just the two of us, what about it?’ she announced after glancing through the sheet I handed her.