

DEBORAH HARRIS

CAPE TRIBULATION

The red road wound like a cut through the rainforest. Four-wheel drives and laden trucks moved along it.

"Fancy a piece of chocolate?" Virginia said.

"No. How can you eat that sweet stuff in this heat?"

A truck roared past, spouting dust. Virginia coughed and fanned the dust away from her face. "It's your own fault if you're hot Dennis, you're not dressing for being here."

"Is one required to wear a certain uniform? Is there a dress code? I missed that. Safari suit? Baby poo brown? Why don't you roll up your window, I'm eating dust."

"Laugh then. Your shoes will kill you."

"You hope they will."

"I don't wish it. You are in uniform. Just because you're a real estate agent who is attending a conference, doesn't mean you have to wear a suit all the time. There are no seminars out here, no people to impress."

They passed by a small township, with a newly built concrete schoolhouse that was so small it looked like a doll's house. They passed a real estate office, its title described in untrustworthy red letters, and farther down the road a sign 'For Sale', oversprayed with green, under pressure, read 'love it and leave it'.

"What an optimistic idiot that agent must be. No-one would buy this land."

"Wouldn't you be able to sell it?"

"Of course."

"And how would you advertise it? 'New development, close to shops and school, no bedrooms, rumpus unlimited, fresh running water in nearby crocodile-infested river, ideal for young families, suit handyman.'"

He laughed, "You told me you couldn't write."

"It's easy to stack empty boxes."

They passed by a small airfield. A few light planes were sitting on a patch of imported turf and, beyond, was an area of newly cleared land. The

earth was angry red, and the felled trees were piled into cones and burning. Plumes of smoke rose from the fires, and the entire site was surrounded by an electrified fence.

"How enterprising," Dennis said.

Virginia was too angry to speak.

"It looks raw at this stage, but in a few years time it will be polished and pleasing to the eye."

"In a few years time it will be even worse. You, and the cretins who did this, and that idiot back down the road are agents of destruction, not real estate. You would gladly slice this land into neat squares, fence it, and slash it down, until it lay as bare as this block of chocolate. So that American tourists could come and complain 'that the service wasn't very good', and serious young insects would come here to live and raise crops of marihuana."

"Serious young insects. Now I know who the market would be."

Virginia lost the sharp edge of her anger as the airfield passed out of sight. On each side of the road the forest loomed impenetrable. It was deep, deep green, with glimpses of gigantic ferns and palms. The foliage on the roadside was coated with brown dust and looked sickly. It was dry here. The creeks were low, and they crossed them easily, following in the tracks of other vehicles. They reached Cape Tribulation, and got out of the rented car. Dennis spread food and drink on a rough-hewn picnic table. It was late in the afternoon, and there were few other tourists. They sat and ate together under the eaves of the forest, dwarfed by the enormity of silent growth surrounding them.

Virginia was still angry.

"Today's lecture is called 'Nature. The Unfolding Text.' she said.

"If you lecture me I'll kill something."

"I wonder that the leaves don't curl up and die as you breathe on them."

He banged the table with his fist and stood quickly, turning away from her. Virginia was pleased.

He turned and said, "Why did you agree to come away with me?"

"I wanted to see this place."

He stretched out his hand and touched a nearby tree. Green ants swarmed where sap oozed sweetly from the rough bark. He quickly took his hand away.

"See. No withering, no dying."

"You're afraid of the ants."

"I'd be an idiot if I wasn't. They sting. What have you ever done for the trees, Virginia? Laid down to die in front of a bulldozer? What do you do?"

"I read, I write, I teach."

"You take poems and gut them like fish, like a witch studying entrails for signs of divinity."

"I study the signs, but there's nothing mystical about it. I'm a deconstructionist, a playful reader."

"You're a literary vivisectionist. You fell the trees of imagination while you word-process."

Virginia was both angry and amused. They had argued over the practical usefulness of her academic career before, it was one of his favourite themes.

"You are sceptical, ignorant, corrupt and money-grubbing," she said with a vague air of superiority, "but in spite of that, don't you care what happens to this place?"

"It doesn't matter if I care or not. It makes no difference."

"Yes it does. You profit from the buying and selling of land."

"That's right, and beyond the point of transfer it has nothing to do with me."

"You should take more responsibility."

"Do you have money in the Bank Virginia? Insurance? Superannuation?"

"I have to. You know how insecure my job is," Virginia admitted, suspicious of him.

"And you want a return don't you? You want your dollars back with interest. Right? What do you think the banks and insurance companies do with your money? Do you think their investments are governed by ethics? You are just as ignorant and corrupt as you say I am," he said, grinning at her, "your money could be in mining, petro-chemicals, forestry, rampant paradise-wrecking."

Virginia sat pondering for a moment, then she said, "I'm not greedy, I just want to live. Trees of imagination, you said, that's all we'll have soon."

"Let's walk now. Let's see it while it's still here."

They walked between the trees out onto the beach. It was low tide. The sand stretched out, resplendent, warm and fine-grained. The sea advanced to meet it, the pastel water of the Coral Sea. The interface between land and sea was blurred by shallow pools and tricks of light.

"It says in this tourist handout that this is where Cook smashed into the reef. He named the site 'Cape Tribulation' because of the incident," Virginia said.

"I imagine that little has changed here since then."

"It also says that the rainforest was established one hundred and ten million years ago."

"I can't imagine that."

They walked along the beach, and saw a Japanese couple, young newlyweds, playing on the sand. The young man lifted his bride in his arms and tossed her, laughing, into the shallow sea.

Dennis stopped and said, "Do you think they know about the stingers?"

"Who knows what they know?"

"Wait here while I speak to them. Juliet might get stung and die."

She watched Dennis walk over to the edge of the water, and speak to the honeymooners. Their gaseous costumes looked even brighter beside his designer grey suit. How urbane he is, she thought, how utterly out of place. And still wearing those pretty shoes, through the sand and water. His body fills his clothes in such a perfect way, all the surfaces of skin and cloth are smoothed - puffed out with too much money and too much pride. If only the water would rise and suck away his exterior, the shoes and soft clothes. Just suck it away, Dennis, and leave you naked and speechless in the forest.

He came back grinning.

"I tried," he said.

"Didn't they believe you?"

"I don't know. They're reluctant to leave the water."

"How was the water?"

"I didn't feel it."

"It looks enticing."

"But is full of poison."

"It's too hot out here in the sun. Let's walk back into the forest," she said.

They had to pause beneath the canopy, allowing their eyes to adjust to the changed quality of light, then walked - past trees with buttressed roots and spilling vines. They walked willy-nilly, crouching, tip-toeing and stumbling through the thickening forest. They came to a tiny clearing and stopped to rest. In the quiet they could hear the murmuring of insects, and rustlings of unknown creatures on the ground and in the air.

"The very air is green, dyed by chlorophyll," Dennis said softly.

Virginia moved and spoke as if she was enchanted.

"Shhh . . . listen, listen. In the heart of this forest, a giant lays sleeping. He's been here for one hundred and ten million years, we're walking through his breath. If he awakened and stood up the canopy would reach his knees, and the Endeavour would be like a toy to him, and we would be like serious young insects. You can feel, you can sense, his blood pounding softly in his fingertips."

"I do feel something. It is a wild place, like a strange country. Let's rest. You were right about these shoes."

He lay down on his back, resting his head on his crossed arms. She knelt down beside him.

"My poor knight."

"My cruel lady."

The sky was filled with trees, epiphytes rode high in the air on trunks and limbs. The life of the forest was palpable, every interstice was filled with a living thing.

"This is paradise, the garden, the locus amoenus, and God is nearby."

"You don't believe in God."

"Let me tell you a story."

"You already did, about the giant."

"That was an impulse."

"Your stories are always boring."

She whispered playfully into his ear, "This is an old story. Jesus gave Judas some money and sent him to the shop to buy a loaf of bread, but on the way Judas saw a beggar on the side of the road and he pitied the beggar and gave away all his money and went home without any bread."

"Now its my turn. I'll tell you my dream."

"I can guess the theme of your dream."

"Shut up and listen."

"Your poor feet."

"I dreamt I was sailing on a yacht out at sea. A big yacht, and for some reason I was climbing the sail - a big white triangular sail, and I was climbing, clinging with my hands and feet, up and up, when suddenly a gust of wind puffed out the sail and I was pushed backwards and I fell like an uncoiled spring, and I knew I was going to fall. I fell a long way. I've never really fallen, not like that. How can it seem so real?"

While he was speaking, she crouched at his feet and, gently and slowly, she slid off his shoes, then peeled away his dainty socks, and kissed his feet. She picked up his shoes, one in each hand, then stood and flung them high in the air and far away.

"You're polluting the environment," he said.

"They'll never hurt you again."

"I'll find them."

"You won't. I threw them far apart."

"Can you interpret my dream?"

"Yes. It means that you are ambitious beyond belief."

She lay down beside him. They stripped and made love, seriously and slowly, staring into each other's eyes, too frightened now to tease. Sweating, their white bodies were tinged green by the forest glow. They did not couple as gentle visionaries, but craved each other as an addict craves chocolate or opium, hungry for blind dreaming. A mosquito, attracted by the richness of their breath, came and took blood from both of them, it mingled in her now fertile body. It would end soon, and they would lay apart, silent and quivering, until some evidence of consciousness, a sound that it would

be silly to pretend not to have heard, or a shared glance, would galvanize them back into the sentient universe.

She lay beside him and studied his face - throat, lips and eyelashes - he is beautiful, she thought dispassionately. A tiny beetle scuttled among the leaf litter, its carapace shone bright brown, with swirls of blue like dark clouds in a mirror. Dennis opened his eyes, they gleamed beetle-brown, and she kissed his brow to make him close them again.

'There's never enough now,' she thought, 'we're dying every minute. As soon as I think it's good to be here and alive I know in the same moment that it's nearly over. Has paradise been and gone, or is it yet to come?' She lay back and closed her eyes, her hands on her belly, and felt as if she were immersed in that warm reef water, flecked with tiny drifting creatures. She opened her eyes and saw, fluttering overhead, a Ulysses butterfly. Blinding, brilliant blue, with wings like two pages of a book.

"Look," she whispered, and Dennis saw it then, and they lay transfixed as the creature danced around them - one wing for beauty and one for comedy. It settled on a sharp-leafed shrub. They crept, slowly and caressingly, toward the butterfly. Virginia reached out to touch it, her fingers burned to touch it.

Dennis held her close and whispered, "Leave it."

The lovers have departed. There is no twilight. Night falls swift and black in the lightless forest. It is raining, and the water flows in pre-arranged patterns through the layers of foliage - along channelled leaves to linger on drip-tips long after the rain has ceased. The dust is washed from the roadside trees, and the road is pocked and eroded - it'll soon need to be re-graded. The doomed trees on each side of the road stare sadly at each other and the branches moan with longing to meet again, high above the road. Between the bruised toes of the giant trees, weeds find purchase and drink and grow.