

Shell woman.

The sun keeps the Earth at this point, unbearably hot. I am in Kenya Kumari, which is located at the southern most tip of India. After dropping my one small bag of clothes in my hotel room. I will leave in search of a friend I made some 12 years ago. I am not sure I will recognize her after so much time has passed. I ask a small boy and girl, who are selling shells in front of the hotel. If they had heard of Antonia who lived over there– I pointed toward a Catholic mission. The boy understood a little English and told me to walk around a wall and kept asking "you friend?" I didn't think he knew her. So walked away from him, drowning in miserable imaginings about Antonia.

Maybe I never really met her– it was a beautiful dream, but dances with seaweed, her holding my hand and leading me across the red black sands to her woven house. Then I became frightened. What if something happened to her? Maybe she got leprosy and is paying any colony, was she starve to death in a famine– was she buried alive in a cyclone!?

It is November 1978, and so far. My travels in India have yet to show the extreme poverty I saw in 1966. Of course, now India has a powerful woman for prime minister and the news media is most likely destroying her. What can be wrong. When masses of starving people are now being fed? I ask myself this, and bumped into a squalling pig.

I looked behind me toward the ocean to a wide hilly area with grass that has been eaten by wild pigs, goats have chickens that are meandering here and there as though Kanyakumari were a large farm fenced in on three sides by the ocean.

Some children are calling me from behind a rock, "Madam! Madam!" They want me to follow them. I am hot and thirsty. Plus I feel silly, and I think they are laughing at me– I'm the English lady I've read about in novels, whose plant, wears gray slacks, and after administering medication tries to convert the pagans.

A tiny girl in a raggedy dress keeps poking her finger into the freckles on my arm. Some other children asked, the only English they know, "what is your name?" Then looked confused. When I tell them and them for name.

We are at the village. Many little mud huts– a number of them are close together– and open space, and one here and another hut there, then a line of huts in a row. There is a well in what seems to be the center of the village– perhaps it was simply a convenient place for a well. Then, a row of huts– some hemp spun cots with dogs that are first resting. Then when they see us began barking nervously. Thatched roofs, rustle in the breeze. Some of the small children around me are carrying babies. I was led to a newly built huts with whitewashed walls that nearly blinded me.

Then I saw her! I pressed my palms together in greeting. "Antonia. I am so glad to see you once again," I said. She spoke in the same tone in her language. Her face! her face! She had become

fuller as I had. We did not take our eyes off of one another. She grabbed my shoulders and pulled me behind a partition, where her husband was napping— he rushed out like a frightened rabbit with a Fox following. A crowd gathered outside the hut, and on the other side of the stone partition. Antonia and I squatted together, never taking our eyes from one another's face. Were her cheekbones always so high? Her lashes so long? There were.

In her face, as there are in mine. She asked me in Tamil, if I wanted to eat. I understand and say. "Illae," no. If she ignores me and brings all the food she has then sets it at my feet and addresses me in the most respectful way. One woman, regardless of age, can show another—she addresses me as mother.—I am so honored and wonder if I would have anyway in my culture of showing the same respect for her.

Antonia sells shells as her business. There were baskets of shells in the corner. I ate a little of the food she gave me and drank some water from a silver tumbler.

By this time we'd moved into the main part of the hut. Antonia's sister from the next hut had a radio blaring a South India cinema song. I ask Antonia, what happened to her other house And drew a picture of it with a stick in the dirt floor. Though women pointed to a heap of gray woven leaves outside the hut. "All old house." One of the children understood, and when she translated, Antonia's second to eldest sister laughed. When I tried to pair the children with relatives, I found it was difficult in this village. I could have adopted a child, or maybe more for the entire time I was there and never have known who the parents were.

Antonia and I were sitting next to one another in a circle of women and children. Peter Flor was cool, and the room was nicely ventilated. I looked outside and saw two dogs jump on a cot and stretch out. The people inside were slapping their knees and singing with the music. Antonia cupped my chin in a powerful grip and pointed to her mouth in a way that demanded I should sing like her. When I tried everyone laughed playfully.

When it was time for Antonia to do her business. She balanced a basket of shells on her head as did the other women and headed for the rocks at the shore. I took the basket from her head and tried to walk like the other women with my hands flying this way and that as I spoke. The basket kept slipping from my head. How did they do it? The women all had an iPAQ as though saying could try!

We comfortably positioned ourselves on the stand with our backs against the rocks. Antonia was picking lice for my hair. Her sister was picking lice from an adolescent girl's hair. I asked the young girl if she wore a half sari, by crossing myself from shoulder to shoulder. She was wearing a long skirt and blouse. If she had already begun menstruating, she would have been wearing a cross between a sari and what she had on. She flushed, shyly. When I ask— the other women answered for her teaching as they did, "Ah half sari!" They told me she refused to wear it. Maybe she didn't want to grow up. I didn't either. I gestured pointing to her, then to my long slacks and out beyond the ocean. "America". She nodded her head, excitedly in agreement. I tried to picture her in jeans and a little T-shirt.

An older woman with the yellowing hair joined us. She was coughing and mumbling to herself. This is Antonia's eldest sister. Antonia told her sister to lie down in the sand. Then Antonia makes circling crisscrossed gestures on her temples and across her abdomen while muttering something. I thought, eldest sister, must have T.B. I have never known anyone with T.B.. So how can I know for sure?

The sun is near to the water. All in one direction is a Catholic Church in the other direction is a Hindu temple and in front of that is a Gandhi Memorial building. Out on a rock in the ocean is a recently built temple. People come from all over the world to see it. Tourist buses were lined up in a marketplace. Boats at a dock were crowded with people going and returning from the rock temple. The two small children from the hotel when I first arrived, stood in front of me. The little girl has dimples like Shirley Temple. They are both holding shell necklaces in their hands. Although there are exactly like the ones that don't sell, the children sell them for much less.

Tourists are awaiting huddled on the rocks for the sun to set. I am watching Antonia and the other selling their shells. Some people buy them and others pushed to shell people rudely away. I sit far away. The sun sinks into the ocean and is swallowed by waves. Everyone is standing and applauding. What would happen if the sun never set, I thought wiping the perspiration from my forehead – I also stood and applauded.

The next morning, I thought saris for Antonia and her daughters and sisters. Then I brought her to my hotel room and asked her to stay with me until I leave. I do this by pointing to the floor. Then the two events, and then to her and me. She agrees and pushes the mattresses on the floor next to one another. In a while, she is bathing. She feels a bucket with water and pours a dipper water over me. Then over her. She is upset because I have pubic hair and runs her hand straight across my pubic bone and says in English. "Blade". I know as many words in Tamil as she does in English. Our communication must come from other sources than the spoken word. She has never gone to school and cannot write her name.

When we dress, she says again. "Blade" and disappears into the night. I think she indicated she was coming back, but I don't know. I can hear the people in the kitchen, banging pots and talking loudly and rapidly. A young couple across the hall are arguing in a baby is crying somewhere.

She was disgusted because I have pubic hair. Outside my window quarter moon is lighting a line of yellow across the water. Little lizards that make a clicking noise crawl up and down the walls.

"Madam! Madam!" It's Antonia, calling me from the window. She has brought a Blade. So I address again. I'm standing with my legs apart, and she is bending down, and I can hear the blades scratching hair. I am very nervous– she pats me on the leg a few times to make me relax.

After all, my body hair from my neck down, has been removed, we sit on a quilt on the mattress. With pen and paper. I am showing her how many years old I am. She knows how to count to five in English. Two rupees madam-four rupees sir -for a string of shells. She also knows the word Christmas. I draw straight lines– one Christmas, two Christmases– and tell I arrived at 35 Christmases– she is also 35 Christmases old. I learned many things from her those few sunrises,

we had together. Her mother died when she was very small. Before she died she had a hex tattooed on Antonia's arm. She remembered it hurt. Her first child died as an infant. Her son was 12, and her daughter 18. She did not like carbonated water and was getting bored with selling shells. When she had her. She'd tie her petticoat up between her legs and under her sari.

She gave me something to chew— betel nut leaf and tobacco dipped in something. Minutes after chewing she'd twirled her finger over her head and rolled her eyes— "oh y-e-a-h!" I realized I was floating. She was laughing. I flew across the mattress to check her teeth. They were perfect, except for the red stains from the betel nut. Although she was a full body person. There was not an ounce of flab on her. She was the color of warm chocolate milk on a cool evening. And as sweet as coconut oil. I drank her up.

Sometime during the night. She wrapped her arms around my head and whispered. "Sister sister." In my ear. She had chosen me as her sister. We were twins, sharing the same will and our life experience only began then.

There was a knock at the door. A turbaned man brought our breakfast—, scrambled eggs toast rice, tea for her, coffee for me. We both bathed before eating. I opened the curtain, and we sat on chairs and a table under the window watching the seagulls circling over foamy breakers. We giggled over silly things— before neither of us used, the sari that I didn't wrap properly. Then she taught me what to turbans together was in Tamil. Another word for to saris together. As for a sari and a turban. I said the word in a near whisper times, and she would bite her lip and blush. To turbans, and to saris was something she didn't seem to mind. My repeating out loud. So I surmise from this (mind you, this is my own assumption) a sari and a turban together is a dirty word.

Since the written word and the spoken were limiting our communicating our loose only able to create an ancient matriarchal village in my imagination or Antonia and I must first have met each other in another lifetime.

The few sunrises with Antonia went by much too quickly. During our time together, we went to the marketplace, I learned to clean my teeth with my fingers, we took a boat ride to the rock temple and took a bus to the nearest town and made friends with a woman who spoke only Hindi and was on vacation and had 12 children in northern India. We collect sea shells from the rocks and shared so many things that people share. When they understand that real wealth can not be hoarded, but appreciated in the moment.