

ROGER MAIS (1905-1955)

Red Dirt Don't Wash

He stood awkwardly, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, looking through the open pantry window with the dancing eyes of a boy about to receive a treat of good things. But it wasn't the jam tarts that the maid, Miranda, was taking hot from the oven and putting in a dish that held his gaze, rapt. It was Miranda herself, flicking her fingers smartly and putting them to her mouth as the hot baking tin burnt them.

Her trim figure in her blue uniform, chic, neat-fitting, made his eyes swim in his head. It was as though whenever she was in sight he couldn't take his eyes off her. She ravished his senses. And simple country yokel that he was he didn't know how to set about making a girl like Miranda. For Miranda was city-bred, and house-broke, and all the things that he wasn't. She had training. She had refinement, culture. She knew how to lay a table all by herself. Things like that. She knew all the tableware, all the silver, by name. She could tell them over to you, without even stumbling once. He had often helped her polish them, so he knew.

She knew which was a cake fork from a fish fork. She knew a cake server from a cheese server. She knew a tea plate from a breakfast plate, and which one of the shiny mugs was a coffee percolator, and which was for hot water, and which for cream. There wasn't anything she didn't know.

And she had let him help her after his work in the garden was over. She had let him stand near as near to her over the kitchen sink and wash dishes . . . and feel the presence of her, the delicious, maddening nearness of her go through him like sharp knives, like red hot needles. He could get the smell of her in his nostrils, standing that near to her; like you get the smell of a ripe fruit in your nostrils when you bite it! She smelt like a lady. Just like any lady. He wondered what it was that gave her that delicious, wonderful, ravishing perfume to her body; and so he had been tempted to stand on tiptoe outside the crack in the window of her room, where the gummed paper just didn't cover it quite, and take a good long look at her . . . one day after she had come out from the servants' shower bath. What he had seen had devastated him. He had come away feeling dizzy, faint; as though something was happening inside him, in his stomach.

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He had seen all her loveliness in the nude. For one devastating instant he had held within his dull, unimaginative eye, all her loveliness that was without blemish; and his heart was like a leaping fish held in the hand.

But he knew now what it was that gave her body that delicious smell, that mounted to his nostrils like incense, and held his senses within a hazy sort of swoon, and gave him that dry feeling in his throat, and that queer feeling in his stomach. It was powder!

She took powder from a large red tin and dusted it all over her body. Not just dabbing it on her face alone, like other girls did, but all over her body!

Such luxury! Such expensiveness! It made his head reel.

Made him aware of his own grossness, his own inferiority, his own lack of polish and refinement. Made him aware of his own soiled and patched clothes, and his own large bare feet, his own rough red skin, which seemed as though the red dirt of his native Clarendon hills had come there to stay, and couldn't ever wash off.

When his work was done in the garden, when he had washed down the car, and rubbed it down with a chamois cloth until it shone, she would let him carry the pan in which she washed napkins and doilies and table-runners and handkerchiefs, and small things like that (for you must understand that Miranda was no ordinary servant, but a lady's maid. She was not a cook, though she made delicious pastries. Not a washer-woman, although she was entrusted with the washing of doilies and the table-runners and the cushion covers and the table napkins and the handkerchiefs and the silk stockings, and dainty things like that). She would let him carry the pan with its heaping foam of white suds from the sink under the standpipe in the backyard to the deal table on the back verandah; and he would just stand and watch her, her arms up to the elbows in suds. Now and then she would look up from her work and smile at him, and he grinned back at her all the time.

He learnt a lot from just standing around talking and joking with her; and helping her through her pantry chores sometimes.

He told her about the place he came from. All about his people up in the mountains. And the ways in which their ways were different from the ways of the people who lived in towns. And she laughed a lot. She was a great one for laughing.

'They are simple, jealous folk, but really the kindest people in the world. We understand each other. We know what makes a man or a woman

happy, and what makes them mad. All the people in my district get along together like one big family.'

'My! And I suppose all the girls and the men work together in the fields? Don't tell me that! Really?'

'It just come natural for everybody to pitch in and do whatever work there is to be done—whether in the fields, or about the yard, or in the house—it's all the same. But mostly the men do the heavier work. And women in the family way don't do any but the slightest things.'

'You don't say!' She squealed with laughter.

'They say,' she remarked, twinkling up at him, provocatively, 'that all the people are red—like you. Is that true?'

He just grinned back at her for answer.

'Even the dirt is red. All red dirt. They say the people's skins take its colour from the dirt, if they live there long enough—all their lives, I suppose.' She frowned a little, flicking soapsuds from her forearms and hands. 'They say the red dirt gets on them, and even *inside* them, under their skins, and just stays there.'

She looked at him quizzically.

'Don't know 'bout that. I 'spects it's so! Never give it no thought before.'

'It's true. For no matter where you meet a mountain man you can always know him. I guess it must be true—that red dirt don't wash.' Once or twice she let him walk home with her, where she stayed with her cousin who was another kind of maid—an office maid—because she got along better with gentlemen, they said.

But always she led him through back lanes, and down through a dry gully course, and always she parted with him at a certain spot some little way from the house. And he never questioned her. He never thought to question anything she did.

He knew this girl was right—just right in everything she did or said. Almost a lady. Much too good for him, just a country boy. Big and clumsy and awkward and halting in speech and gestures. Almost a living caricature of a country boy, he was so bad. But he knew also that he wanted her, even though she was miles too good for him. And at first it didn't trouble him at all, the thought of wanting her so badly. But after a bit it got to haunting him at nights. Days and nights, so that he got no rest from the thought of her that was sweet torture to him.

He would lie in his bed and remember every sprightly word and vivid gesture of hers. How she looked at him, looking up sideways, like a little

bird, and laughing in his face. Well, a girl didn't look at a fellow like that unless she—she kind of liked him. A bit.

He remembered how she put out her hand once and touched his arm—and grabbed hard hold of his arm around the bicep muscles and said 'My!', admiringly. Meaning how hard and strong he was. He remembered how she let a clothes-pin fall down his back once, and laughing that squealing laugh of hers, ran her hand down after it, and fetched it up slowly from way down at his waist—skylarking—while he just sat still and let her do what she would with him. He remembered all that; and it was as though things were going on inside him all the time, in his blood, secretly.

Once or twice he saw her walking out with nice looking young men—chauffeurs, and such. He envied them. Not alone because she was walking out with them, but because of something they had that he lacked. A poise, a certain assurance that was almost swagger. Shoes on their feet. The way they wore their clothes.

He had never worn shoes in his life, but once. Once, when he was about seventeen, his Gran'pa had bought him a pair of yellow boots to wear Sundays. They were grand boots. They must have cost a pile of money. He wore them once to church. And that was enough. His feet inside boots didn't feel like his at all. He lost possession of them, and they behaved as though they knew it.

He let them go cheap to a boy he knew from the neighbouring district, about his size. The other fellow got a real bargain. They were grand boots. But he didn't care. He bought him a goat with the money. Now there were six goats the last time he heard from home, and more coming along. He didn't care about the boots. Boots wore out and got old so you had to throw them away. But a goat gave you more and more goats. He liked goats. Now there was something he knew about.

One evening as he walked home with her—they were halfway through the dry gully course when he made bold enough to carry out the desperate scheme he had been turning over slowly, methodically in his mind all along—he suddenly blurted out:

'I seen you walking out with fellows.'

She looked up at him quickly.

Her eyes, he noticed, were bright like stars, her lips slightly parted, as though she were panting from walking too fast; but they had been coming along slowly, saying nothing, mostly; their bodies just touching, or almost touching, in the dark.

He said, stopping suddenly and looking down at her face.

'I would like for you to come out with me, once in a while. Eh?'

'How? Where?'

'Movies?' It was a bold gesture. He had never been to a movie in his life . . . now he was asking this girl to go with him. Just like that.

Unconsciously he was taking on to himself some of the easy swagger of the young men he'd seen Miranda with.

He said, coming closer to her, 'What say we go to a movie Sat'day night? You'n me. Eh?'

She looked up at his face . . . and away . . . and down at his feet.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, she burst out laughing. She just fell on the bank and squealed with laughter. She *was* a one for laughing!

But it did something to him. For one thing it made him lose all his recently acquired swagger; for another it made him all of a sudden fiercely resolved within his mind to make her take it all back. To make her look at him as she looked at her natty young men. Plus the special look she gave *him*—that said as plain as anything that she could like him—and more than a bit.

'All right,' he said, in a terrible, calm voice. 'I know I'm not good enough for you. But all the same I love you, see.'

She stopped laughing immediately. She put the back of her hand to her mouth.

'Adrian,' she said. 'I—I'm not laughing—at what you think. I'm just laughing like—oh you don't understand about women, or you would know.'

He was silent for a while, chewing on this. Of course she was right. He didn't understand about women, either. Not her kind. She was miles above him. She would take *some* understanding. Of a sudden he felt great humility, standing before her . . . great humility, and with it a great resolve.

The very next day he put the first part of his resolve into effect. He asked for time off in the afternoon and went to town to one of the big stores where they sold shoes and things.

'How much for the yellow ones in the window?' he asked, after the man at the store had showed him half-a-dozen pairs from the shelves.

'Now there's a pair of shoes for you! Genuine vici kid. You can't do better than that at any price, anywhere. It's marked twenty-five shillings. We sold the lot before this at twenty-seven and six. But I tell you what. Now I'm doing the best I can for you. It isn't like I'd do this for everyone. But I'll put them in for you—special—for twenty-two and elevenpence.

'I'll take them,' said Adrian, without hesitation.

All that money for a pair of shoes. But he didn't mind that a bit. They were genuine vici kid. Goat skin leather, he knew that too. You could buy two goats, let alone the skins, for twenty-two and eleven. But he didn't mind that a bit. She put powder on all over her. He seen it himself. He knew!

Came Saturday night; and to Adrian it seemed none too soon, either.

He put on his best Sunday clothes of blue serge, and his yellow shoes. He looked down at his feet and admired the gleaming shine of them.

He went round by the back of the tennis court from the garage, through the little enclosed vegetable garden, to the back porch, where he knew he would find her, his shoes creaking faintly across the grass. His feet felt as though they were taking him places. This was different to just walking. Just walking you set your feet down, one before the other, without thinking about it. He'd heard about a man walking on a clothes-line wire high above the ground. He'd often thought about it, wondering how it felt. He didn't anymore after that night. He knew.

The family had dined, and had gone out in the car. He knew just where she would be, what doing, and that she would be alone.

When she saw him, she just stood looking at him for a time. Then she suddenly burst out laughing, as though she wouldn't stop.

She said: 'Where you all dressed up going to, Adrian?' Like that.

He said, coming up close to her: 'We're steppin' out.'

'My! Who an' you?'

'You an' me. Remember? You said if I got myself some shoes . . . remember? Well, I got them. They cost a heap of money too. But I don't give it a thought.'

He swelled out his chest. He was almost as big as a barrel around. For a moment she looked at him with slightly troubled eyes. His body looked so strong and fine, beneath all the marks of the country lad on him. The awkwardness. You could see at a glance his flesh was good and strong. Her eyes sort of misted over a bit. For a moment though. And then they dropped to his feet again.

'What's the matter, don't they look all right?'

'Sure. They're swell. They must have cost a pile of money, I bet.'

And she burst out laughing.

At first he didn't understand, and he started laughing too, with his hearty country lad's guffaw. And then he saw her face; saw how she looked

at his feet, and looked up and laughed again. And suddenly the laughter died out of him. Leaving him, as it were, standing there foolishly, with his mouth open, staring at her.

She said, curiously enough: 'Don't make me laugh!' gasping.

'But what—why—what's the matter with them?'

'Nothing, big boy. The shoes are fine. But they're not yours, that's all. They don't fit you, see?'

'They's a bit tight. But my feet'll get used to them after a spell.'

'That's where you are wrong. They never will. They'll always look just what they are—a pair of shoes carrying your feet around. All your life you've never worn shoes. You know that's true.'

He nodded.

'You can't educate them feet to shoes, big boy. Not as long as you live. You'll always *feel* as though you were wearing shoes, and you'll *look* just the way you feel. Always. No, it's no good. Better take them off now. Perhaps if you clean the soles a bit they might even take them back from you at the store where you bought them.'

'But I don't want them to take them back. They're mine. You know why I got them,' he said, looking down at them self-consciously. 'It was all for you.'

At that she burst out laughing again.

'Do you think I'm going out with you, in *them*?' she demanded scornfully. It was no use. No use at all thinking about sparing his feelings. He just didn't have sense enough for a child. Nothing short of this could make him understand. It was a pity, but none of her cooking, she was sure.

'I get you,' he said, slowly. 'I'm not good enough for you. Oh I know it. Still, you said if I got myself some shoes, like . . . ?'

'Don't take it hard, big boy.' She laid a hand on his arm. But for a moment only, then she took it away. 'I tell you what,' she said in a low, husky voice. Perversely the firm, strong, clean touch of his flesh stung her like nettles; went driving with sharp pangs through her, stirring something in her blood. 'Tomorrow night we'll go for a walk. I know a place we can go where nobody'll be around.' A pause. 'That's a promise, now.'

But he remained for a space, looking away, saying nothing. Then he turned slowly, painfully away, with the unaccustomed pain of walking in tight shoes. But he was resolved upon this thing. He was going to walk them in . . . going to walk those darned feet of his in. He'd do it if it broke his heart, if it killed him. After walking about a mile, he came to a lonely spot on the road. He didn't even know where he was, but he didn't care.

He sat down on the side of the road and pulled off his shoes. He took each foot between his hands and chafed it gently, wriggling his toes until they felt like his own again.

She was leading him on, she was. Playing him for a sucker . . . all the time laughing at him, and carrying on with other fellows . . . and laughing at him behind his back.

He felt in his pocket for his clasp knife and opened and tested the blade passing it along the ball of his thumb. There was a cold, still, sullen look in his eyes. Deadly like anger burned down the glowing coals of a still white heat.

What she wanted to make of him a blooming Cinderella for? Just so she could laugh at him.

He lifted his head and stared blankly up at the cold stars. There was nothing there. Beyond them the sombre mountains. They reminded him of his own mountains that seemed so far away, almost unreal—veiled as with a mist—and the mist was in his own eyes—trying to see beyond the St Andrew hills, beyond the stars, horizon; space limitless like that.

He tested the edge of the blade against the ball of his thumb. And it was right. What she want to make of him a blooming Cinderella for?

He took the shoes, one at a time, and cut them into thin strips—all but the soles, which, because of their toughness he just cut anyway.

Back there he belonged, where there was red dirt everywhere, and people didn't go around wearing shoes. Red dirt everywhere, on the tilled land as far as the eyes could see, and on the faces and bare arms and legs of men and women. Good, clean red dirt that he loved, that was the symbol of home to him, and more. Clean, happy faces that he loved, that were all frankness and homeliness. All that went for cleanness and wholeness. It was clean, the red dirt of his land, the place of his birth.

He looked down at the jagged strips of leather in his hand, and his face became wonderfully luminous. He even smiled.

They were good shoes. Genuine vici kid. He paid twenty-two and elevenpence for them at the store.