

# **MODERN LOVE**

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**CONSTANCE DE JONG**

**PRIMARY INFORMATION**

**UGLY DUCKLING PRESSE**

Written between 1975 and 1977 from the heart of New York City's art world, Constance DeJong's *Modern Love* is a forgotten classic of narrative prose innovation. Working largely alone, DeJong invented a narrative form that's at once intimate and highly constructed. Wilder than the French nouveau roman, *Modern Love* cannibalizes genre and realist fiction and travels through time to explore the dilemma of being a 27-year old broke female loser who's told by the culture that she's free to say and do anything I want. A powerful influence on her contemporary Kathy Acker, DeJong's *Modern Love* feels even more radical now than it did when it first came out.

**CHRIS KRAUS**

In the 1970s, Constance DeJong's *Modern Love* played a critical role in Downtown's invention of post-modernism. How? By transporting us to other states of being, we got to visit Soho, Elizabethan England, and India. Why is this book considered part of the visual art world? Because everyone was doing everything — and *Modern Love* exactly captured its time.

**MARTHA WILSON**

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**2017**

## BOOK ONE

## PART ONE

Everywhere I go I see losers. Misfits like myself who can't make it in the world. In London, New York, Morocco, Rome, India, Paris, Germany. I've started seeing the same people. I think I'm seeing the same people. I wander around staring at strangers thinking I know you from somewhere, I don't know where. The streets are always crowded and narrow, full of men. It's always night and all strangers are men.

I hear talk of a new world. Everywhere I go: eco-paleo-psycho-electro-cosmo talk. Of course, men do all the talking. I don't get the message, my ears ache; my eyes are falling out, I don't see these street talkers as the makers of a new world. Anyway, they're not real losers. And the new world's an old dream.

They said, "Wait till you're 27 then you'll be sorry." I'm 27. I'm not sorry.

Who are 'they'? Not answered.

And the new world? I've heard tell; seen no evidence; been looking:

I saw people in India with no arms, no legs, no clothes, no food, no money, no place, no nothing but other people, people, people. Real losers. I talked to very serious people in Europe who were, were not my own age because they saw themselves in perspective. More abstract losers, but losers just as real. They saw: a convergence in the distant present coming out of the recent past: themselves. I saw the historical bogey man coming around the corner hustling for a place to crash. It scared me, made me run around Paris, Rome, Germany being noisy. Being pushy. Slamming around making up stories as fast as I could go.

"The world spins and I go around in circles ha ha I'm a dizzy blonde gibbering off into the sun setting behind the Arc de Distrust. . . ." Running off at the mouth. At the feet. Here today, not there tomorrow, gone leaving no incriminating evidence of my unpopular half-baked world view. That's a good girl.

"I wonder if I'll always be alone," I think to myself.

The misfits I've been seeing everywhere, they aren't real losers. They all have bank accounts: can afford to be losers. I'm broke. What's the exchange rate for my wealth of information? I'll drop pearls on the sidewalk, the page. I'll be drippy: "The new world's an old dream and I'm tired of dreams. Come upstairs." I whisper in the ears of passing strangers.

I was a seven-year dreamer. . . .

I think I have to have a past. I think too much. A common malady. I make a vow: restrain yourself, become more or less observant, use fewer French and/or fancy words. I have to watch myself. I was a seven-year dreamer. I live 2, 3, 4 multiple lives; I get

distracted in these crowded narrow passages. I have to watch myself, it's not safe for a woman to be alone on the streets. Have to get off. I'll take someone home. "Hey honey, come up to my place, I'll show you my best recipes. Do you have a lot of cash?" Shameless at last. It's 1975 and I can say and do anything I want. I want to prove this. Obviously, by saying and doing anything I want. "Hey honey,"

I want this guy to fit into my plans. I wonder, "Maybe he's a murderer, a cop." I'll find out:

"Do you spell 'they' with a capital or a small 't'?" I ask.

He's grinning. "All caps, toots."

Whew. He got my message. He's not one of them. Two misfits. Just like I planned it. I call him Roderigo, my favorite romantic name. All strangers are men with romantic names. And romantic pasts.

We're in my room. I think I have to prove something, I don't know what. I have to make up my mind: two cells collide and 27 years later I'm sitting on my Persian rug. With



Roderigo. Now I have a past. Now Roderigo will see me like I want. I want Roderigo to think I'm fabulous. I want to be like broken glass on the sidewalk; diamonds on black velvet; glitter against the ground. It turns out I want to control people. That's no good. I better watch myself.

See me. See me. From behind, sideways, above, below from every angle I'm the same. See, I'm everywhere; no different from the rug the furniture the floor ceiling walls bookshelves. See how it all fits together. Everything from the ritual objects to the easy chair is immaculately arranged, sort of a Victorian-style shrine. There's no room for accident, or an event. That's no good.

I've been seeing too many artists. I can't go through life looking at how objects are colored, cut out and arranged. I'm no painter.

I am wearing a red sweater. Holding a blue cup. Sitting on a Persian rug. This is where I belong. This room is self-sufficient, the universe. Everything can take place here, I have everything I need: I live here.

"I can see right through you, baby. I could write your diary," says Roderigo.

I'm shattered. I don't want to be like broken glass. I don't want to be a metaphor.

We're in my room. I can do anything I want. I want Roderigo. I want him to do everything to me. I want him to feel easy with me and my possessions and my burning desires. I have to turn my self and my place inside-out so he'll enter into the deep, dark, hidden, secretive, mysterious, fabulous magic inner meanings of my life. So he'll disappear. With me.

"Take this cup: it's a magic vessel that transmits legends from lip to lip. Hold it next to your ear and listen to the sweet rustle of the mysteries of the universe as they unfold. Hear the sweet angel voices come across the ages, hear the thunder. Sit on this rug: it's been handed down from generation to generation. Whole lifetimes leap up from every stain, every worn spot. Sit over here where Lady Mirabelle dropped her wine glass fainting in ecstasy into the arms of Monsieur Le Prince. See this sweater: it's my favorite. I bought it from an old lady at the Paris flea market who sold gypsy scarves and fuzzy sweaters. It's a sacred red. A deep, dark red to match the color of the blood that's zooming through my veins."

Two cells collide and 27 years later I come back with Roderigo. I want him to feel at home. I'll make some coffee.

"I'll make some coffee. You make yourself at home."

"Ok."

Roderigo leans against the wall. His fingers are twitchy. There are colors around his head. He reaches without reaching, I turn without turning, we yes each other without speaking, then we fuck like maniacs. I have no graphic images. Roderigo does everything to me. He touches me everywhere. We do everything from behind, sideways, above, below. I come from every angle. I never had it so good, he says it's the same for him.

"I gotta go now," says Roderigo. "Maybe I'll see you around."

That's modern love: short, hot and sweet.

I want to tell you my life story. It's a very interesting story. One midnight I was transported all at once from my solitude in La Soho by a stranger who came tapping at my door.

His name's Monsieur Le Prince. For seven years I'd been:

"You don't have to tell me anything. I can see right through you, I could write your diary. I feel like I've known you all my life. Don't talk. Come next to me," Roderigo whispers.

He reaches without reaching, I turn without turning, we yes each other without speaking, then we tumble together, we disappear together, down down down the deep dark, magic mysterious love tunnel. I have no graphic images. He reaches, I turn, then we fuck. He reaches, I turn, then we fuck. He reaches, I turn then we fuck. He reaches, I turn then we fuck. He reaches I turn then we fuck.

People used to tell me, if you keep on writing maybe you'll make a name for yourself. They were right: My name's Constance DeJong. My name's Fifi Corday. My name's Lady Mirabelle, Monsieur Le Prince and Roderigo, Roderigo's my favorite name. First I had my father's name, then my husband's, then another's. I don't know, don't want to know the cause of anything. They said, "You'll see when you're 30." When I was

30 I was standing at the Gate of India. I saw nothing. I'm still 30. I want to tell you my life story.

First I had the name John Henry. Until I was born, I was a boy: a typical father's assumption. Then I became my father's second choice, a very romantic name. Then I took my husband's, now another's name. I'm still writing. Obviously, nothing's been changed. I keep on seeing the same people everywhere I go. I go up and down, burning with the desires of my age. Flames leap up at every corner. Die down, flame up. I drop my control and my vow, my pretensions for inner and outer order. Ashes swirl around my feet as I tiptoe out the door. The door, my doors all open to the light. Are passages into the heart, the substance. It's an emotional association.

I was wandering around Soho one night. The streets were very crowded: it must have been Saturday. People were walking in twos and threes, laughing, talking, going from bar to bar. I was looking at the books in a window display, thinking to myself. People were shouting to each other: "Hey, Henri!" "Hello Pablo, how's it going?" "Hey, there's Guillaume and Marie." "How ya doing,

Gertrude. Are you coming to Rousseau's party?" "Seen Eric? What's doing with him anyway, I hear he left town." Dark currents darted around the street. Flickering colors, big shadows, vapory voices brushed against me. Brushed over me. I felt the wool against the back, the blood against the vein; my head swelled with circles inside of squares, intricate structures, rhomboids, cups of coffee, pieces of furniture, parts of bodies, lists, broken off sentences . . . I saw Roderigo duck around a corner. He's out looking for a little coke and sympathy: his name's Mick Jagger. It ain't me you're looking for, babe. He thinks modern love isn't worth repeating. I think I saw Roderigo. It must have been my imagination. Anyway, he never was very interested in my fucking visions.

One midnight I was transported all at once from the depths of my solitude by a stranger. . .

Tap. Tap. Tap.

"Lady Mirabelle?"

"Why yes," I answered.

"I hope I'm not intruding. But, I happened to

be passing by and noticing the light in your window, I thought"

At first I had difficulty placing him. He appeared to be of Oriental extraction. A Tartar, or perhaps a Persian. We spoke in French. He explained that he'd seen my light burning as he passed beneath my window. It was the only bright spot on the otherwise dreary Rue Fermat. It was a long walk to his apartment on the Rue du Dragon and he thought perhaps he could rest for a moment and perhaps if it wasn't too much trouble have a bit of wine to refresh himself before he continued on his journey home. As my maid had just brought up my nightly claret, I easily obliged the stranger without having to disturb the slumbering household. Before I knew it, I had charmed the pants off Monsier Le Prince. I heard the faint rustle of my tafetta skirts as we slid—meeting by chance, but loving as if by design—into each other's arms.

Many's the time while walking in the gardens or sitting in the window or attending to one of my endless tasks, my sewing, my letters, my salon, my accounts, my friends; many's the time I've been startled by the memory of this amorous event in my life. It catches me

from behind. I feel his touch. I turn. Then I tumble down, disappear into the dark passage. I know this passage, I know where it leads. Still, I cannot restrain myself. My daily efforts, the trivial tasks and the tidy lessons, all my orderly preoccupations, everything scatters. My pearls are soap bubbles floating over the roof and out to sea. I watch them vanish; let them go. Only a child would pursue these fleeting visions. I know better. I know it's a transparent allusion. I see through it: can see a diamond burning in the night. Diamonds are forever. I can always turn to them when everything else seen, heard, touched begins to make me blind, deaf, insensitive. When I feel his fatal touch, then I let myself go. I return. I feel the hand against my heart, a tapping at my door. I don't have to keep on chipping and polishing and guarding my treasure, my memory. I have a permanent impression. Monsieur Le Prince is inside me. Forever. There's a place where the emotions are intact. A room. A permanent association. Whole days scatter into the blue when Monsier Le Prince reaches out: then my favorite lover condenses into a single, mythical moment. An instant can be an event. An instant can be a fatal event. An instant is sufficient. I'm not fooling: that's all it took. All at once my heart became a place full of light. All aflame. A brilliant shrine. A star.



It's still a heart. It's 1975 and I'm not sorry I've died for love.

Many years have passed and time after time I startle over. I use fancy words to envelop my vivid impressions. I get wrapped up in the ageless pursuit of naming an emotion as if it were an object. *Monsieur Le Prince* stands for love, truth, wisdom, honesty, etc. His memory, my memory jumps up involuntarily, like a reflex. It startles me. Makes me run through my inside-out versions of love of death of. . . "even in this day and age," I say to myself. Even in this age of insight? I say, yes, there's still room for a love story. I don't need, don't want to need a perfect, sacred explanation. I always go where these abrupt passages lead me. Rainbow-colored bubbles swirl into the sky. I told *Monsieur Le Prince*, words are just rollers that spread the emotions around. As for me, I have everything I need: diamonds are always bright. They're reliable. It's true: I'll gladly drop down when the trap door springs open at a touch. I go down once, twice, countless times. It's always pretty interesting. And, that's sufficient. No. I'm not sorry I once died for love. Now, I have a second, a better chance.

Here's the story. I'm in my room. It's a long sentence: I sit, I stand, I drift back and forth

between these walls, flitting over the floor boards, wearing myself to a shadow, comparing myself to the flickering gleams on the ceiling the walls, attempting to merge with the background, trying to become anonymous, hoping to stay forever in the total freedom of obscurity, I'm imprisoned, dreaming hard. This goes on for seven years. It was a long sentence. I'm recalling it as the time of solitary refinement. I'm free to say whatever I want. I tell Roderigo, I want to be a guard at the gate of indecision. Want to know the cause of everything, all things. I've an inkling he doesn't get my drift. He doesn't have time on his hands. No time for long pretty intricate explanations. He twitches when I talk. Probably all he ever thinks about is fucking. I think he's fabulous, I want to find him flawless, I'm ready to kneel at his feet. I think men tire me. I'll show him. I place you in a picture flooded with moonlight. That's where you belong. Permanently framed in a romantic episode. I'll tell you more.

There are two strangers in the room. Three strangers in the room. In the seven-year dream, I 2, 4, 6; I multiply. The room's crowded. I'm running around in hot pursuit, attempting to find, attempting to be the originating cause of everything. I don't believe in

numbers. I'm after a total effect, wanting to see how it all fits together. There are presences in the room. Vague. But presences just the same. As real as numbers. They're my visitors: station masters, generals, writers, artists, countless corpses, editors, nurses, lost children, various animals, a long procession of the living and dead. I don't actually look for them. They come to me like guests who have rights of a sort. They come, I accept them. When they sit, I stand. When I talk, they listen. When they stand, I turn around. When I look, they stare back. When I've had enough of this, I create situations in which they'll leave me: I tell them, "My name's Etoile, I come from France, I live here in the Eiffel Tower, I'm the center of the universe, ha ha I'm a star, the world revolves around me." When they leave me, I wonder if I'll always be left alone.

I think, "Maybe I read too much."

One day I exclaim, "I'm surrounded by fools and foolish ideas! I want a better world!" I'll make up a better image. This is my idea: I place the earth on the back of an enormous elephant in order to hold it up in space. The elephant is supported by a tortoise which in turn is floating in a sea contained in some sort

of vessel.

That was one day's total effort.

The next day, I'm sitting, reading a book on Hindu mythology. I read: "In Hindu mythology, the earth is placed on the back of an enormous elephant in order to hold it up in space. The elephant is supported by a tortoise, which in turn is floating in a sea contained in a vessel." That was depressing.

I don't like seeing myself in other words; I feel foolish.

The next day, I am sitting, standing, drifting around, moaning and sighing, feeling sorry talking to myself:

"Will the world come to me or will I go to it?" she said.

"You have to make up your mind," she said.

I flit over to the book case. I reach without choosing. I'm reading: "I view her," he said, "with a certain unaccountable excitement, living in her tower, supplied with telephones, telegraphs, phonographs, wireless sets, motion picture screens, slide projectors, video moni-

tors, glossaries, timetables and bulletins. She has everything she needs. She wears an Egyptian ring. It sparkles when she speaks. For a woman so equipped, actual travel is superfluous. Our twentieth century has inverted the story of Mohammed and the mountain; nowadays the mountain comes to the modern Mohammed."

I hated that description.

I read it; felt no deep emotion; the dream ended. In other words, I saw the light.

That night, I sat at my desk writing: (1) THE ECLECTIC IS NOT UNIVERSAL. (2) NOT ALL COINCIDENCES ARE INTERESTING. These were the daily lessons: seven years wrapped up in two sentences. I better think this over. I worry that my messages are cryptic; too obscure and/or too personal. I pinned them to the refrigerator door and went out for a walk.

It must have been a Saturday. Everyone was on the street. I ran into Jorge Luis Borges. A likely coincidence. . .

I ran into Bob Dylan.

I ran into Jorge Luis Borges and asked him if it was Ok to quote him in my book.

"Is it Ok, Jorge? I want to use the part about the person who's confined. You know, the modern dreamer. I'm writing a prison novel. I'll just make a few changes from your original words. Add a little here and there. What do you say. Is it Ok?"

"It's Ok, darling. Many times I've said, 'All collaborations are mysterious.' Just remember, always write what you know about."

"Ok."

I'll write about the past. In the past, everything is immaculately arranged. All things have the same value: people, books, events, chairs, numbers, me, love, New York are of equal value. Are interchangeable. A little of this, a little of that; everything is coincidental, is interconnected. It's so simple, it all fits: events are things; people are things; objects are colored, cut out, arranged; are simply things following from/ leading to other things. That's all very nice. I hate this dream. This modern dream, love of complexity. I had this dream. It had me. In it I become a fixture in a crowded, airless setting. No different from the rug, the furniture floor ceiling, etc. My head was filled with intricate nonsense which made all coincidences so interesting. I'm remembering:

"There are stains and worn spots all over this rug. If I connect the individual marks, I can map the generations who walked off their lives across this Persian landscape. I can graph an image of the procession of life. It'll be called The Shape of Time. I'll be famous for my insight." My visions images ideas, my vows, my burning desires, my thinking, my occupation: I was dreaming hard.

"Hey honey, I want to tell you a secret."

"Great."

"See this cup? I want you to have it."

"Is it worth anything?"

"All you ever think about is money!"

"That's right."

"Don't you know money isn't everything? You're famous and that's what counts."

"Right."

"Can't you just appreciate my precious cup? I want you to have it because it means something very special to me."

"Oh."

"Because you're someone special to me. You're my real friend. Do you know what I mean? Do you know how hard it is to find a really dependable, true blue friend in the world?"

"Sure I know. That's no secret."

"Oh."

"I gotta go now." I don't know: "Can a young girl really find happiness in the world trusting only me and objects?"

When he leaves me, I invent reasons to keep on living. I remember people always told me, write what you know about. I know a lot of artists. I'm surrounded by people making art; misfits like myself. I don't really believe this. Actually, I believe there's something to art. And, I even know what it is. Art is. . .

"No, no, no!" scream the editors. "SEX. REVOLUTION. VIOLENCE. The big stuff. All caps, sweetheart. We can't sell art, your friends, your crummy insights. Listen, angel, don't you want to make a name for yourself?"

"Yes," I murmur. "I want a lot of money. But what's a poor girl to do?"

"Come upstairs," they said. "You'll see."

The People are screaming, "No! We want Education, Food, Houses. We want our rights!"

People are shouting, "Don't sell out to the Man."

"Yes, yes, You're right, your rights, I



stutter, I stumble, I have to run run run, have to work hard, have to get off the streets. Threats and accusations and insults rain down; my head swims; the street's whirling with blood and dirty water, broken-up furniture and parts of bodies. It's dark, it's crowded, I'm running fast, it's a narrow escape.

Gosh, I made it. I'm safe in my room. (1) The Universe is a mythological expression: I read that somewhere. (2) The universe is a great big soap bubble that starts in a jar, ends up in bubble heaven. There are people up in Nova Scotia who send their kids to Bubble Island instead of college. Let them go; maybe they'll have a better chance. Maybe not. I'm no parent. Me, I'm self-sufficient. That means: I'm off in some remote corner. Pacing off the safety zone. Wearing myself to a shadow. Holding onto my precious integrity, worrying: I can't spend my whole life trusting only artists. I need to see more of the world, to get in touch with better energy. Can I take a big chance? Can I afford a ticket to India?

## PART TWO

The sun was behind the hills, the town was afire with evening and the sky was filling with

light. India's on slow time. An even train of days hooking onto nights shading into another day steadily shading out over the water over the desert the mountains the plains. The sky was filling with light, the sun was clear in the sky and there was a cool breeze from the sea. It was fairly early in the morning. Fortunately it wasn't going to be too hot a day. But the dust was everywhere, fine and penetrating. In the moonlight the garden became very beautiful. Motionless, silent trees cast long, dark shadows across the lawn and among the still bushes. The birds settled down for the night in the dark foliage. Hardly anyone was on the road. Occasionally there was a song in the distance. Otherwise, the garden was quiet, full of soft whispers and the trees gave shape to the hazy, silver sky. It had rained all night and most of the morning and now the sun was going down behind heavy, dark clouds. There was no color in the sky. The frogs had croaked all night, persistently, rhythmically; but with the dawn they became silent. The morning was gray. The sun rose out of the woods, big with burning radiance, but the clouds soon hid it. All day the sun and the clouds fought each other. Clouds had been coming through a wide gap in the mountains; piling up against the hills. They remained dark and threatening over the valley and it would probably rain towards evening. The night was silent and

still. It was very early in the morning and the sea was quiet, lapping at the white shore. There was a sparkle in the sea, and a blueness and it was old. Smoke from a steamer far out was going almost straight up in the sky. The sun wouldn't be up for two or three hours. There wasn't a cloud in the sky. The villagers weren't up yet. The sky was enclosed by a dark outline of encircling hills. The night was completely still. The moon was just coming out of the sea into a valley of clouds. The water was still, blue. Orion was faintly visible in the pale, silver sky. White waves lapped against the shore. The moon was rising above the valley of clouds and it was huge. There was rain. It came down in sheets, flooding the roads and filling up the lily pond. Trees bent under the weight. The crows were soaked and could hardly fly. Suddenly the frogs were silent. It was particularly beautiful that evening with the sun setting below the dark town, behind a single minaret, which seemed to be pointing the whole town up towards the sky. The clouds were golden red, aflame with the brilliance of a sun that had travelled over a beautiful, sad land. And as the brilliance faded there was the new moon. There over the dark town was the delicate new moon. The sun was now touching the treetops and they were aglow with soft light. They were giving shape to the sky. A single rose was heavy with dew.

The rains had washed the skies clean; the haze that had hung about was gone and the sky was clear and intensely blue. Shadows were sharp and deep, and high on the hill a column of smoke was going straight up. It was still very early and there was a slight ground mist hiding the bushes and flowers. The sun was just coming up behind a mass of trees, which were quiet now. The chattering birds had already scattered for the day. It was quite early. The Southern Cross was clear and beautiful over the palm trees. A heavy dew made a circle of dampness around each tree. There weren't any lights on in the houses yet. And the stars were very clear. But there was an awakening in the eastern sky. It had been raining for days. Hills and mountains were under dark clouds. In the distance, the land was hidden by thick fog. There were puddles everywhere and the rain came through everything. It was a lovely day and as the sun had only just come over the treetops it still wasn't too hot. The sea was pale blue and very calm. White waves came in slowly. There wasn't a cloud. And the waning moon was in mid-heaven. As the sun climbed higher, the plains were covered with long shadows. It was a beautiful day, clear and not too warm. It had rained recently. One of those soft, gentle rains that go deep. The sky was intensely blue; the horizon was filled with enormous clouds. Early in the morning, just

before the sun comes out of the sea, when the dew is heavy on the ground and the stars are still visible, this place is very beautiful. Everything is quiet against the thunder of the sea. The morning star is fading. A golden rim is showing at the water's far edge. Shadows are slowly casting across the ground. The sea is very calm. The sea was resting before the north-easterly winds began. The sands were bleached by the sun and salt water. There was a strong smell of ozone and sea weed. No one was on the beach yet. The eastern sky was more splendid than where the sun had set. A mass of clouds was full of flashes of lightning, twisting sharp and brilliant. There were other weird shapes. And every imaginable color. Towards the west there was a pure orange. It had rained for days. It was a very clear, starry night. There was not a cloud in the sky. The waning moon was just above the tall palms, which were very still. Orion was well up in the western sky and the Southern Cross was over the hills. Not a house had a light in it and the narrow road was dark and deserted. The sea was calm. The horizon clear. It would be an hour or two before the sun would come up behind the hills and the waning moon set the waters moving. Nothing was stirring in the bushes, nothing yet moving. The birds were quiet. It was a lovely evening, cool after the hot, sunny day. A breeze was coming across

the water and the waving palms gave shape to the sky. The sun was setting. The day was shading slowly, evenly into a black Indian night. The woman was standing on the beach. She was riding in a train, walking up from the valley, sitting on a hill. The woman was travelling alone in India. She was eating ice cream because it was her birthday. The dark blue waters were full of reflections. For an instant she cast about for a thirty-year old opinion. It was another lovely, Bombay evening, cool after the hot, sunny day. The sun was fading. A breeze was coming across the water and little sparkles began to stand out against the darkening background. The palms were waving. The water was full of reflections; she was standing at the Gate of India; it was a very clear, starry night.