



# See No Evil

MARINA WARNER

*Marina Warner is a writer of fiction and cultural history. Her family on her father's side was from the Caribbean, and her publications include the novel Indigo, a reworking of The Tempest in a contemporary setting. She is currently working on a novel, Inventory of a Life Mislaid, inspired by her parents' life in Egypt after the Second World War. She is Professor of Literature, Film and Theatre Studies at the University of Essex, where she teaches Creative Writing. Stranger Magic, a study of enchantment and the Arabian Nights, will appear next year.*

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ASHLEY POTTER

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‘That coffee machine you ordered from Rome’s on the dock now, and the man there’s insisting that you must go down in person, to be there when they open it, so as to see there’s no jiggery-pokery.’

‘Who’s he? Put him on the line, Georgina, and maybe I’ll be able to get it through his thick skull that it’s out of the question.’

‘The package’s addressed to you personally and Customs require that the addressee take delivery. I can’t do it for you, Dr. Earle.’

‘This country’s impossible! Fifteen people make a parliament, three judges in the whole damn place, and you have to have the whole caboodle as if...?’

‘Yes, that is the picture.’ Georgina’s voice was tart.

‘Play-acting cadres. It could be Cuba.’

‘In Cuba they don’t have cargo coming in from Rome, Italy, Dr Earle. And this is your own native land, and so you can’t be saying you’re outside of it.’

‘Tsk, Georgina. You know they don’t listen to me.’

‘Huh Uh, Dr Earle. They like to see you in town once in a while. And see what you’re going and buying when you’re away from home.’

‘All right, I’ll go down to the harbour office. Let them know I’m on my way, Georgina.’

‘I’ll find Rob, and he’ll drive you into town.’

‘There things you’ve to do in town, Georgina?’

‘Huh Uh, Dr Earle.’

Dr Diogenes Earle could no longer drive himself: cataracts. Next time he was in Berkeley for his annual teaching visit, he’d have the op. But he kept postponing it. The prognosis was good for this kind of procedure, and yet...

His eyes were black as lava pebbles on the surf line, with such a gleam on them that one time long ago, when they were going to a party at the High Commissioner’s for the Queen’s Birthday or some such date, his wife Evangeline had taken his chin and tilted his head towards hers as they stood in the hall waiting to be announced. He had thought she was

going to kiss him, but instead she told him to keep still and not blink while she adjusted the angle of her hat in his irises.

The espresso machine of gleaming chrome, with a gilded eagle poised for takeoff on its summit crest, had arrived at the docks less than two months after he ordered it. He was pleased: the banana boats were efficient carriers, their sailing routes, the same ones that had transported his forebears westwards, were still governed by the world's turning and by the *alizés*, the lovely chasing winds, according to their season.

'Rob, you think the coffee machine from Italy will fit in this car?' Georgina asked.

'We could take the truck...' Rob looked at her for reassurance that his decision was justified. She took charge:

'Rob'll drive the truck down for the machine as soon as we've seen to all the red tape and fine tuning of the paperwork.'

Then she opened the car door, let herself into the passenger seat, and nodded towards Diogenes to indicate he should sit in the back and demur no more.

As the car descended the slope towards the town and the harbour, Diogenes Earle anticipated with pleasure how he would pass by Peony's later with Georgina and they'd have a drink on the verandah; maybe dinner there too – the house pepper soup, a spiced fricassée of chicken and vegetables, followed by some coconut ice cream – though coconut was one of those lurking devils that leaked into your blood supply and furred it up, goddammit. Who would think that pale scented flesh was poisoned with cholesterol? At Peony's bar, *La Rose des Vents*, Dr Earle would become Diogenes again, to everyone, including Georgina, and he could bandy the old badinage with Peony, sparring partner, old time lover:

'I'm no nosy parker, but Mamma, tell me why  
Young white meat have such dark hair down there  
While old black Theresina's all snowy white?  
Heigh ho, ho heigh, Mamma, jus' tell me why?'

'The trouble is with the world today,' Dr Earle, winner of the Braestrup International Prize for Biological Research, was saying to Peony after he finished laughing (though he had heard it before), 'is that

jokes like this are finished, over, not to be spoken, not to be heard.'

'Not here, they're not,' said Peony. 'We'll not be gagged, oh no, not me, not you.'

A calypso king came in and sat down with them; name of Sad Sack, old man with a banjo in his hand and six gold chains thick as gift-wrap ribbon hanging against his wrinkled rhino hide chest. He was saying, 'Diogenes, the trouble is...' – he called him Diogenes, as everyone did outside the laboratory precinct, from long before he won the big prize and with it global renown 'the old languages is dying. Creole, patois, going going, under the influence of TeeVee Miamee: 32 stations beamed at you and me.'

'Yes,' said Dr Earle. 'I came back to get away from that.'

It was true, too. He used his prestige, his success, his name, his life's work in immunology to fund the Centre in the hills of this Leeward island in the Caribbean, where, beyond the morne, in the middle of banana and coconut groves stretching on all sides, he was working with his team on an enzyme that contained the clue, or so he felt sure, to the metabolisation of HIV into AIDS.

The vervet monkeys whom the lab used had been providing for five years now the basic material for the wonder drug that had the capacity, it seemed from widespread trials, to delay onset of the full-blown virus. In the early mornings when he was a child growing up on the island and waiting for the school bus in the early morning, the young Diogenes, dressed by his mother in immaculate shirt and shorts of his school uniform, had glimpsed the monkeys springing in the tangle of the breadfruit and mangoes and immortelles that grew in the gullies of the morne. They shrieked and hooted above, a barely visible syncopation in the foliage. A mother, with a young monkey clasped to her breast, would leap from frond to frond, picking mangoes in the trees for her child, her lovely, clever tail like an interrogation mark over the folding star of her anus. They were quick and educable, too, test creatures with an aptitude to learn from the experiments he conducted. He loved their small, scholars' faces, with puckered foreheads and twitching brows, and eyes that revolved as if they were considering their miraculous agency in human health with proper wonder. The Buddhists were right, thought Diogenes, to venerate monkeys' discretion, and set them up as counselors, their long narrow subtle fingers clamped to their eyes, their

ears, their lips: See no evil. Hear no evil. Speak no evil.

The bodies his research would help keep alive required intervention, allopathic stratagems to forestall the spread of disease, and the quietism of otherworldly metaphysical monkeys could never control the forces of chemical and biological structures gone awry, as he and the team struggled daily to do in the lab. The animals lay in another kind of silence on the operating tables, their wizened hands flopped alongside their paler chests and bellies, their heads thrown back like beach ruff raff after a night on home-distilled rum, as the team worked to extract the necessary cellular tissue. Earle's thoughts roamed uneasily as he looked over the company around the table in *La Rose des Vents*: Sad Sack and Peony were still doing the dozens. He caught a fragment, and leaned towards her: 'You, Peony, you have a dirty big mouth...'

'You's growed so tall, Doctor Diogenes Earle! Soon nobody see your face up there, only that haystack of hair up inside your nose.'

She was roaring with laughter. She knew how to scald him with her tongue; and to do other things with it, too. But the thought of that other wearied him, tonight, for anything that drew attention to his age these days wearied him. The last honorary doctorate had taken him to a big city and another five-star hotel where the suite they'd given him sported a bed big enough for an orgy of six; he'd forgotten his lens cleaning fluid and so had gone out to the local all-night drug store, where he'd found the object of his need in Aisle # 3 under the direction of a contemptuous pharmacist in none too clean overalls. But before he reached 'Eye care' he'd passed under the sign 'Incontinence'. There he took in – without wanting to – stacks of nappies for adults, sized and graded for absorbency, in packs larger than babies' Pampers, with diagrams of their ingenious fastenings and padding for extra comfort and lack of odours.

American TV had accustomed him to slim, sweet-voiced, grey-haired, well-preserved and no doubt pinched and tucked former beauties recounting their constipation and haemorrhoids. But the 'Incontinence' section sent him back to his luxury suite and all its playthings in such sad heart he couldn't even try the Adult channel out of curiosity, and instead curled up between the cool and expensive fabric of the sheets on his enormous bed, feeling that his genitals had shriveled up to the size of slugs and his bowels would shame him if he ever tried to have a fuck

again.

His problem was very clear. Women liked famous men, but access to them became trickier the more visible he became. As honours grew, so did wearisome company, with a tendency to interfere in the successful outcome of an attempt at seduction. If he took Mrs Earle (Evangeline was most cordially included in all these invitations), he escaped the terrors of solitude in those capacious beds and minatory aisles. But Evangeline did not enjoy travelling any more and would not put up any longer with the tedium of official lunches, dinners and those obligatory visits to colleagues' labs and research establishments.

Even if a new lover was... well, there could be many disappointments in novelty, he knew. Occasionally a woman could not see him at all but only the story she could tell her colleagues afterwards about making out with Dr Diogenes Earle. But even so, the risk, the discovery, the variations, made the attempt exciting in itself. He was an experimental researcher, always had been.

Nobody else heard Peony's taunt that evening, or bothered to take it in, but it smarted, and he stared out across the soft blur of darkness to the town lights between the morne and the sea.

He knew that the Italians, on the occasion of his most recent prize, a medal with many thousands of Euros attached, would have turned a blind eye if he'd taken another woman with him. He could have invited Mignonette, his on-and-off young lover, who lived in town where he sometimes could visit her if she was feeling like letting him and he could fit it in between Georgina's protectiveness at the lab and Evangeline at home. But he'd gone alone, and he'd ordered the coffee machine on an impulse one morning after he had been wrapped all night in memories of Mignonette's skin and smell, the close silken weave of her flesh and the peach fullness of her lips, above, between, below, and how she whimpered at the suck and stroke of his tongue and how he felt the tips of her nails on his buttocks where she pulled him deeper into her; in Italy, she might have stopped her objections, which changed daily but couldn't be gainsaid: his position, his wife, his other women, her age, her future. He knew enough about women: Mignonette wanted more from him in return.

Maybe he should offer to divorce Evangeline.

He and Mignonette were flesh of one flesh, he felt, so close when

interlocked and laced that he thought the sweetness of it might change his outer as well as his inner self, and that he would look in the mirror afterwards and find himself dipped and renewed like one of the oil drums under the hammers of the steel pan makers, polished to a flashing shine and tuned to a ringing note. He thought that Mignonette even looked like him, perhaps through certain quirks of shared ancestry (a Scots planter in the shadows?): at a shark sandwich stand on the north shore one day, Mignonette had been taken for his daughter by the vendor, and he'd felt proud.

He remembered leaning over Mignonette, so close he could see into the fibres of her irises; they were smoky-grey with spokes of gold around the dark well of her pupils, dilated in the light of a single bedside lamp; he felt a rush through his heart and limbs, spearing him into a five-limbed sea creature, all consciousness blazing in the pleasure at the crossing of his groin; her white bed, with its thin mattress in the small sparsely furnished flat in town, hung in his mind's eye. Maybe he should propose a grand hotel – one of the tourist palaces further up the coast – but you needed to book, it was high season, and besides, he wasn't sure she would agree, without more assurances from him, to spend the night with him in a place where he would be made a fuss of, clamorously.

He would phone her now. He signalled for the bill, and unfolded some notes and laid them down on top when it came without reading it, waving away the protests of the gathering. A look shadowed Georgina's eyes; she was always vigilant, and it both gratified him and annoyed him. He avoided responding, yawned, said he was tired, he had a breakfast meeting with a journalist from New York; the company guffawed, ribbed him, but he rose, smiling, on the gusts of their chaffing. On his way out, he stopped to kiss Peony and throw in extra for more booze for the company to drink after he was gone.

The next day, he was meeting Larry Sulter, the journalist from *THE WASHINGTON POST* for lunch, not breakfast, and he wanted to see more of the island, and had hired a car, a sporty red Japanese model and wanted to drive it around himself. On an impulse Diogenes asked him to pass by Mignonette's to see if she'd come with them, and she was in a sweet mood, as it turned out, and quickly tied some light cotton wrap

scattered with tiny stars around her long limbs, and fastened sky-blue sandals on her narrow feet with their silver nails and ankle bracelet. Just the sight of her, bending over to do this and that, smoothing herself and nodding into the small mirror on her bathroom wall, gave Diogenes Earle the sensation that he'd been grasped by a sky goddess and dipped in a fountain of *Jouvence*. He laughed and patted her on the bottom as she went through the door, and then she tossed her head crossly, but she did not turn back.

They took the road out of town to the east shore where the coast was jagged, the rocks fretted by the Atlantic tiderips and the coconut palms arched like the ribs of Gothic vaulting in colder places. Or, as Diogenes Earle thought privately, like girls throwing their hair about as they thrashed sitting on top of him.

They stopped at a crab-and-beer bar on the beach; took seats at a crooked wooden table with a gingham plastic cloth, secured by drawing pins that had rusted in the salt air. Diogenes let himself enjoy the breeze lifting off the sea; the criss-crossing lines of foam chasing up and down the sand like a flame running rapidly along a fuse laid to a firework. He rarely had the chance for such an outing during the week, especially now he could no longer drive himself, so he made it hard for Sulter to embark on the interview; besides, Mignonette was communicative, she had taken charge of him, she was charming the visiting young American, of course. She'd been going to personal growth therapy; she'd made all kinds of discoveries about herself, it was weird what you could forget or never suspect. It was pleasant to listen to her, almost like standing under the strong jet of a shower after a hot day; when she was animated, her eyes seemed to shoot golden lights, and she had a way of twisting on herself that drew attention to her soft in-between-nesses as she sat at the wooden table, occasionally drinking from the melting bottle of beer that had come, frosted, from the icebox whirring to a portable generator under a clump of allamanda at the back behind the shed.

She was saying, how, at the age of fourteen, she'd been doing her science homework:

'Shit, my father volunteered to help and the next thing, there was all this heavy breathing and he was touching me up and putting his hideous hot sweaty hands up my legs...'

Diogenes Earle put down a crab claw.

‘Mignonette,’ he said, ‘You know I dislike a dirty mouth – I think you could spare us the details of this horror.’

She had twisted differently coloured ribbons in her hair, creating cords that she’d then tied at the back on the nape of her neck; Diogenes didn’t altogether grasp the architecture of this new style, and it looked forbidding to the caress of a hand; but it made the narrow column of her neck seem even more slender and her eyes even larger: he was reminded of the way a young vervet turns and stares at a stranger, before burrowing back into its mother’s fur. At that earliest stage, he reflected, the babies had not yet learned to imitate warning signals, the ak-ak-ak of repeated scatterfire telling of the approach of a stranger.

‘That’s just awful.’ Larry Sulter looked flushed, concern crinkled his eyes.

By contrast, Diogenes realized, he had sounded callous. But why was Mignonette bringing up these things now, and telling this American? Things she had never told him, her lover, things not to be bandied about with strangers like so much small talk.

He wanted to cry out, We are lovers, for God’s sake, we have been the closest two people on this earth can ever be. He wanted to pin her down against the bed and kiss her throat and eyes and mouth and breasts. He wanted to beg her, Don’t appeal to this young hotshot from Washington with your stories, don’t make monsters of old men like me. You don’t know the power you have over us.

A silence fell, and grew lumpy; the breeze brushed through the palm fronds and seemed to swell. The journalist looked out pointedly across the beach to where some young boys were playing with a ball; Diogenes signalled for the waiter.

Larry Sulter then put his first question to his subject – as Diogenes knew, it was always at the coffee stage that the real argument was raised. Here, by the beer and seafood shack on the beach, there was no coffee, but they ordered another beer – though Mignonette, the same new vacancy in her face, signalled no.

‘What are you doing about the growing protests by animals rights campaigners against your kind of research, Dr Earle?’

Diogenes pulled himself back from his daydream, closed down the image of the young Mignonette stuttering alarm cries as one family member after another fondled and molested her sparse baby fur, and

concentrated on the journalist.

‘Oh, we torture animals, and we smile...’ He bared his teeth. ‘We’re worse than beasts, we’re Mengele and Eichmann and Stalin’s death camp doctors all rolled into one...’ he broke off, pleasantly enough, holding his grin.

Diogenes put his hand on the young man’s tape recorder, tapped it and said: ‘Turn it on. Is it on now? All right: here is what you are going to hear from me: epilepsy, diabetes, cancer, heart disease, emphysema, asthma – anyone you care about suffer from these conditions? AIDS? If we can find some ways to forestall the fatal consequences of these illnesses – and not only for the sufferers but for all those around them who watch them suffer, while we’re talking turkey, for society and the economy too that have to support so many sick and failing members – we hardly expect to find remedies, we’re not into playing God, you do realise, Mr. Sulter – we are perhaps allowing a child someone loves to grow up as other children do, allowing a parent to survive to bring up his or her offspring, allowing loved ones to continue to live together. Monkeys are our brethren, but they are not our children. And you are welcome to inspect any time to see the operating conditions in which my team works. We could use humans – that’s what the Nazis did. If this animal rights stuff continues, we may have to recruit volunteers: is that something you desire?’

Mignonette interposed, brightly, ‘Dr Earle had a British education, you know. He is very ironical.’

Diogenes softened the outburst with another show of laughing; and called for the waiter.

Then he turned back to the journalist. ‘In truth, we make the animals as comfortable as possible; we’re grateful to them for their collaboration in our endeavours, we respect their role: without them there would never have been the breakthrough we’ve made with the new T-cell inhibitors. We’re not testing shampoo, you know.’

‘This is on me, sir,’ said Sulter.

‘On your paper?’

‘Sure.’

‘Then you may go ahead and pay,’ said Diogenes Earle. He gave another laugh. ‘We’re all United States colonials now. Everyone waiting on their green card.’

‘You don’t know what it’s like, when you haven’t got one,’ said Mignonette. She was still staring straight past him.

He could recommend Mignonette for postgraduate work in the States, of course. Then maybe she would meet him there, stay with him there. Maybe a drama course? There were enough affirmative action initiatives for overseas students still in place.

Two boys scrambled up to the verge and hailed the bright new car the journalist had hired. They were skinny, tall, dark brown kids; one held a machete, the other a bunch of coconuts, which he held up and waved into the car’s rear view mirror.

Diogenes, sitting sideways on the back seat, tapped Larry to stop the car.

They reversed down the road.

‘Ever had the milk straight from the nut?’ he asked Larry. ‘Have some. And for you, Mignonette?’

‘I like the jelly,’ she said. And then to Larry, ‘The soft flesh inside.’

‘If you’ve only had the dried kind, you’ll be surprised,’ Diogenes endorsed her, fishing out coins to give the boys.

The boys ran up, serious but eager; they laid the nuts on the tarmac and slashed them open.

When asked, they answered that they were brothers; their eyes were round and brilliant, their thin and naked torsos and lanky limbs tensile in strength in spite of the fragility and narrowness. Barefoot, in faded cotton shorts, they both rubbed their noses on the heel of their free hands as Diogenes engaged them in talk. But on their side, it remained scanty; they danced a little on their feet.

Diogenes tipped up the pierced fruit and drank the liquid to the last drop, urging the journalist to do the same.

‘Nectar,’ he said, with a dramatic sigh of contentment. And he handed it back to the elder boy to be cut open for the ‘jelly’. ‘It’s no good for the arteries, but if you could drink moonlight, it would look and taste like this.’

A jeep in camouflage paint passed them, swinging over to the wrong side of the road to overtake their parked car, then slowed, and began to reverse towards them fast.

‘So, you boys, where’s you getting that big bunch of coconuts?’ The policeman poked at the younger boy. ‘And you, hand me that machete now.’

‘My auntie’s tree...’ The elder boy tossed his head slowly back towards the forest. ‘In there.’ He had no conviction, and the man shot back, ‘And where in there might be your auntie’s coconut grove?’

Mignonette was standing with a wedge of the perfumed, glistening fruit in her hand, frozen in the act of lifting it to her mouth; Larry Sulter was midway through quaffing the lunar milk, and Diogenes Earle was reaching out to take another nut from one of the boys.

The officer went on, placing a hand on the boy’s shoulder: ‘We’re taking you in.’

Another policeman, with a club stuck through his belt, swung down wide-legged from the jeep, lifted the bunch of greenish-yellow bearded fruits from the younger child, and hoisted them over his shoulder with a negligent finger.

‘Officer,’ began Diogenes, addressing the first policeman in his crisp uniform with his shiny leather straps and weapons. ‘We’re responsible. I have a visitor from Washington DC, and we’ve been on a little sightseeing tour. We were thirsty. I merely wanted to treat him to one of our island’s delicacies. The children fetched the cocos for us – at my request. I undertake to make sure everything is fine with the... their auntie.’

The second policeman was now pushing the bigger of the two youths towards the jeep.

‘He’s my younger brother...’ the boy began protesting, twisting his head to look back at the child standing forlorn now on the verge. ‘I can’t leave him here.’

‘So we’ll take him in, too.’

Diogenes tried to look casual as he fished in his pocket, pulled out some ID and with it, some US greenbacks, folded underneath, which he slid out unconcernedly, moving closer to the first officer’s gaze.

‘You Dr Earle?’ the man said, with a smile that had no smiling in it.

Diogenes nodded, fingering the money.

‘We’re proud of you.’

The officer threw a glance at the American, at the car, at Mignonette, and calling out to them, said, ‘Dr Earle is an example of what this

country can do.'

Diogenes saw that he'd mistaken his man: this one wanted to put on a show, play the big man with the big men.

'Let me at least...' Diogenes began. He wanted to say, 'Come with you to the station,' but the boys were already bundled into the back, their eyes staring through the panes in the doors that closed on them.

'We're not ashamed of this country,' said the policeman, as he secured the rear doors, and swung himself into the driver's seat.

Diogenes Earle put his wallet away.

In her flat later that evening, Mignonette was weeping for the boys; Diogenes had utterly failed to help, he'd let them fall into the hands of that vicious power freak. It was all his fault; with him around, they'd been conspicuous, and that jeep was manned with the only officers on the whole island who wanted to show how the law was the law because of his fucking fame and that journalist from the *Post* who would have gone back home and said, 'Those islanders'll never change their spots. The boys were probably now lying battered and broken in some filthy cell, terrified out of their wits at what was still to come...' She was sobbing, she was railing at him.

'Aren't you being a little melodramatic, my dear child?' said Diogenes. He had been about to take off his trousers. 'They'll give them a warning, and then they'll let them go.'

'That's what you say,' she said, passionately, turning her face into the mattress.

'Mignonette, my little one,' he began. He tried to stroke her, but she flinched and pushed her face harder into the mattress.

There was no staying with her longer that night, he could see.

'I will do something, I promise,' he said, letting himself out, with a glance back at the small, austere room.

He walked down the hill from her street to the Hilton, where he picked up a taxi. He asked the driver to take him to the Centre. The man was surprised: 'You work all hours, Dr. Earle!'

It was nearly midnight.

He let himself in, reassured the security guard with a squeeze on his shoulder.

In the lab's operating theatre, one monkey was lying on a bed, recuperating from surgery. Diogenes stroked the scant fur on the sleeping animal's belly and checked the screens on which her life systems pulsed in streams of stars.

'There, there, my beauty,' he murmured. 'You're doing fine.'

Then he put his face next to hers and smelled the mixture of antiseptic and animal heat in the residual warmth of her sleeping existence. Truly, she was all right, this creature with her slender black fingers crooked on her groin and her crinkled face with the lids beseechingly swollen over her eyes. There was another gurney lying empty alongside; Diogenes Earle climbed on to it and stretched out; the vervet being near, he was able to sleep.