



THE CEREUS in the yard will bloom soon. We planted a slip from the original cutting at least a year ago. That is how long it has been since I left my village on the other side of the island and moved to Paradise. I had to cajole Mr. Hector, the gardener here, who thought the plant nothing but an unruly network of limp, green leaves. Too gangly, he said, to be kept in a garden under his charge. When, recently, deep alizarin buds pushed through, his curiosity was piqued and he now visits the cactus daily and pats the cow manure around its trunk.

Judging from the way things turned out, I am sure you will agree it was no coincidence that I and the eye of the scandal happened upon Paradise, Lantanacamara on the same day.

The town seemed empty and quiet when I arrived. That was because everyone had left what they were doing and taken off to the house on Hill Side to see for themselves what was happening. Even though Paradise is spreading out, inch by inch, and taking over the sugar cane fields that surround it, it remains one of the smaller towns in Lantanacamara, so small that merely the news of one stranger passing through can be enough to ignite a wild fire of curiosity and jabber among its citizenry. But my arrival was eclipsed by the scandal on Hill Side, the discussion of which quickly became Paradise's most favoured pastime. Even the days following

brought me little notice; Paradise was clutched by a menacing cloud that hung low over the town for several days and would not budge. The only sources of light in the town were the electric street and house lamps that remained lit all day. In a situation like that I could not have expected to be noteworthy.

Being an outsider at that time—and I suppose I still am and may well always be—I thought it best to exercise propriety. I was well aware what was unfolding but refrained from taking part in the daily dissections of new gossip and from helping its spore-like dispersal. By the time interest in the scandal had abated I was past being a novelty. Hardly any fuss was made of me when, in fact, I might well have been celebrated! I was, after all, the only Lantanacamaran man ever to have trained in the profession of nursing. I had taken courses abroad, in the Shivering Northern Wetlands where, to my astonishment, there were a number of men, albeit a small number, in attendance. But I was and still am the only man in the profession here. Not just in Paradise but in all of Lantanacamara.

Nevertheless, despite all my formal training abroad, and considering that nurses in Lantanacamara generally receive their sole training on the job, the matron of the Paradise Alms House, when assigning me my first chore, pointed toward a bucket, a square of cobalt-blue soap and a scrub brush, and sent me off in the darkness of the day to scrub the residents' shower stalls. So was the tone set for my duties. Later I was called by this one or that one to run errands and do menial chores. Regardless, every morning I presented myself wearing a freshly washed, starched and pressed white shirt and meticulously pleated trousers, both of which I had made from the same cotton as were the nurses' uniforms, all in the hope that I would be sent to tend a resident. What I really wanted was to make at least one old person smile or feel that she or he was of some value.

It is an interesting quirk of fate, I think, that for all the prattling by almost everyone at that time, sowing and tilling and reaping idle rumours about the Ramchandin family, and for all the scant atten-

tion paid my presence, I am the one who ended up knowing the truth, the whole truth, every significant *and* insignificant bit of it. And I am the one who is putting it all to good use by recording it here in the hope that any existing relatives of Mala Ramchandin, be it her younger and, to this day, most treasured sister, Asha, or anyone else, might come forward and pay the old lady a visit.

Three weeks after I arrived—the suffocating cloud had mysteriously lifted by then—I was out in the yard at Sister's request, sweeping the path. The home's regular yardboy, Toby, stood watching from afar, sucking his teeth and shaking his head and spitting low curses in my direction, when a black automobile pulled up. The arrival of any motorized vehicle was still cause for a gathering in this place, where people had not easily let go of donkey carts for labourers and broughams for gentler folk, but an austere, black police vehicle brought an added element of excitement. The gathering of nurses and residents—those alert enough to notice—watched anxiously as two slender men alighted, walked to the back and opened the rear doors. Even the gossipmongers among the nurses were silent when the stretcher slid out. On it lay the home's newest resident.

Mala Ramchandin was never tried in court. Judge Walter Bissey had dismissed the case in minutes. Several times he asked the prosecution, "I'm sorry. I can't seem to follow your logic. Tell me again, what is the evidence? What is the charge?" He shook his head in disbelief that his time was being taken up in such a manner. He thought for a minute how to avoid insulting the police and the prosecutors, and finally said, "But you say you cannot present a victim. No victim! You say that there are no witnesses. No witnesses! And there is no evidence that a crime was ever committed. Regardless of what the police reportedly saw? And you want to put a crazy lady on trial. You don't have a case. Am I missing something here? Hmmm?" Had there been any evidence as alleged by the police, he explained, it would, in any case, certainly have been

inadmissible due to contamination by the ravages of time. He was not about to have an old woman, a crazy old woman, tried in his court based on a lot of words and no hard-and-fast proof of anything. No victim, no evidence, no witnesses—no crime. A waste of the court's time and taxpayers' money.

However, out of compassion for her health and welfare, he ruled that Mala Ramchandin be taken into the alms house in Paradise to receive proper care and attention until the end of her days. It is said, incidentally, that on the day of Judge Bissey's ruling, the life-robbing cloud began to break up and shift south over the ocean, letting light shine in Paradise once again. Even now a handful of people remain disgruntled about the dismissal and the ruling. They felt cheated of the rare opportunity to have a woman criminal in their midst. Some citizens believe that a crime was committed and that she was its perpetrator. Come to think of it—they scratch their heads, think a moment and pronounce—they remember this and that and the other. And for the constable in charge, the mystery of an unsolved death, evidence of which he himself saw, is like an infestation of ripe mites swarming under his skin, and the judge's ruling a cruel disallowal of his craving to scratch.

Sister, too. On hearing that hers was the chosen home for Miss Ramchandin, Sister went to Judge Bissey in protest. She was forced to accept his decision.

Now Sister's hefty heels clopped down the path toward the police vehicle. The two officers carried the stretcher, which appeared to be empty except for a white sheet strewn across it.

"Yes, we knew she was coming, but not *when*," I heard Sister say. "I should have been given fair notice. I was not notified. There is no room ready. You can't just come and drop people off like that. This is not a train station, you know. She is an extra mouth to feed. We have to plan for these kinds of things."

"Ah! No, no, no," an officer responded. "That would be the least of your problems, in truth. Look at her. She does hardly eat. They leave a plate of fowl for her one day and when they came back, they

find the plate and all the food scatter all over the floor. Then another day they give her salt fish and she didn't even go near it. She don't eat, in truth. Even a biscuit and some hot tea would be plenty enough for her."

The two men carrying the stretcher approached me. They could not have been much younger or older than I, and they looked heroic in their uniforms. Observing the narrowness of their waists where their close-fitting khaki shirts slipped neatly into slim-belted khaki pants, a fiery heat rose on my cheeks. I felt diminished by these two officers of the peace but rather pleasantly so. As they passed I averted my eyes and looked at the woman on the stretcher. Only her head was exposed. Except for a fan of yellowed silver hair, I was unable to see more because she faced away from me.

Sister kept pace with the two men, ranting that there was no room ready and no security in place. "This is an alms house. This is for poor people. This is not the place for psychiatrics. There is no room . . ." When she reached me she grabbed my arm and pulled me along. At the entrance to the main office, the officer said, "Well, Sister, we have to leave her here with you. Those are the orders. Later, I advise you, go and talk with the judge if you want. But right now we have orders. If you have a bed, we will carry her to it and save you the trouble. In any case she is not heavy, a child could lift her with one finger, she so light." He spread his legs slightly and let go of one of the rods to show that, even with one hand, he was capable of hoisting the stretcher. He gave the impression of having Herculean size and strength, and a rustle of not-so-discreet ooohs and ahhs came from the gathered nurses. I was in full agreement with their admiration but I, more prudently, merely smiled good-naturedly.

Still perturbed, Sister watched the men gently rest the motionless body on the floor of her office. She reluctantly penned her signature on the court receipt.

On his way out, a policeman turned to Sister and said slyly, "Don't 'fraid she. It have nothing to be afraid of. Unless, of course,

you used to go and pelt her house and tie her mango!" Sister's head spun around so fast and her face paled so instantly that I guessed his arrow had hit its target.

The crowd of nurses, babbling low at the office door, parted to let the officers through. I was happy to see them leave. One can engage in the act of admiring for only so long before the frustrations of desire, envy and self-criticism begin to cast shadows across one's vision—or turn one's knees to jelly.

Sister dispersed the nurses, except for two whom she took to arrange Miss Ramchandin's accommodations. I was told to stay in the office to "guard" the strapped-down figure. I had rested my broom against the wall but before Sister left, she grabbed and placed the broom in my hands. "Keep this handy!" she told me gravely. I took the broom, proud that it was not assumed that I, the only man among the nurses, ought to be strong and fearless and without need of protection.

It was the first time I had been given such an important assignment, the first time I was asked to care for one of the residents. I had spent most of the past three weeks on my hands and knees scrubbing the concrete paths around the residents' bungalows. I had prodded and poked at spiders' webs in the high corners of all the rooms on the property. Out in back yard I hosed down the garbage pails. I was assigned—only once, thankfully—to assist Toby with fixing a leak on the roof. (I will refrain from dwelling on the verbal rocks he tossed in my direction and say only that he made no effort to hide his disdain for my ways. At the end of the ordeal he told me plainly that he was going to leave the job if he was ever put to work with this pansy again.) Another time I helped Mr. Hector move heavy furniture from one bungalow to another. I saw him watch curiously as I struggled with the weight of some items and the awkwardness of others. He kept a distance but at least he was more helpful than most. When I tried to fix a broken stool, he showed me how to hold the hammer's handle lower to get more leverage, and he watched to make sure I was not about to

hurt myself or ruin the stool. But I was anxious to begin nursing again.

For such a tiny spectre of a being, the new resident breathed deeply and loudly in her drugged sleep. I squatted at the side of the canvas stretcher, peering at her. I expected her facial skin to be grey but it was ochre, like richly fired clay. Her skeletal structure was clearly visible, her thin skin draped over protruding bones and sagged into crevices that musculature had once filled. Even so, it did not take much imagination to realize that she must have once had a modest dignity. She slept on soundly. If she had slept through the trip over Paradise's dreadfully pockmarked roads, my peering was unlikely to awaken her.

The urge to touch overcame me. I rested my palm gently on her silver hair. I expected it to be coarse and wiry, qualities that would have fit the rumours. But her hair, though oily from lack of care, was soft and silken. This one touch turned her from the incarnation of fearful tales into a living human being, an elderly person such as those I had dedicated my life to serving. I needed to know the woman who lay hidden by the white sheet. Still clutching the broom, I inched the sheet off her shoulder. "Flesh and bones," I thought, but it was the predominance of bone that truly caught my attention. I wrapped my hand around the ball of her upper arm where it met her shoulder. It was like a large marble, and cold like a marble. She did not have the sweet yet sour smell I had come to expect whenever close to an old person. Instead, an aroma resembling rich vegetable compost escaped from under the sheet. I felt the skin on her neck. It was an old person's skin, in truth, nothing remarkable about its thinness or looseness, but damp and cold. I could feel the fear trapped in this woman's body, even as she slept under sedation. I was gripped by fury as I remembered the officer's words—"a biscuit and some hot tea"—and I wondered if, after she rejected fowl and fish, tea and biscuits were all that she was fed or all that she would eat. Either way, I felt as though I were witnessing a case of neglect.

I drew back the cloth further. A pile of fine bones, startling bones, on my dinner plate at the end of a Sunday meal flashed through my mind. I dropped the broom and unstrapped the thick leather bands that pinned her to the stretcher. I am not a very strong man, physically; I never have been. And neither am I known to anger easily or to express anger directly. But that day, I slipped one arm under her shoulders and one under her knees and lifted Miss Ramchandin off the stretcher. Having judged only by her frail looks, I was surprised at her weight, forgetting for a moment the density of bone. Nevertheless, outrage gave me the strength and courage to descend the office steps with her in my arms. Making my way along the path, I again became aware of her odour. She had a curiously natural smell. The words of the officer came to me again, that the plate of fowl had been scattered and the fish untouched. I realized she had likely not eaten animal flesh in a very long time.

Needless to say, when I arrived with Miss Ramchandin in my arms at the door of the room being prepared for her, Sister and the two nurses shrieked. None of them would approach me and my human bundle. Sister demanded that Miss Ramchandin be taken back to the office. I suddenly felt her weight and began to buckle under it. When it looked as if my bundle would fall, Sister again shrieked and ordered me to deposit Miss Ramchandin on the bed, which had not yet been made, and to strap her down again. I hardly had opened my mouth to explain that Miss Ramchandin was too frail to inflict even a bad thought when Sister screamed at me for being insolent and blatantly disregarding her authority. I placed Miss Ramchandin on the bed yet still hesitated to get the straps. Sister scuttled out into the yard and came back shortly with a length of rope from Mr. Hector. I raced back to the office, yanked the straps off the stretcher and returned in time to contain Miss Ramchandin myself. I made a production of pulling at the straps but in truth only loosely buckled them. Faced with the threat of losing my job, I agreed not to unbind her again. Sister did not want

me anywhere near Miss Ramchandin's room, but no other nurse would tread there and neither would she. Miss Ramchandin's care was therefore left in my hands, and I was finally able to employ my nursing skills.

The sedative wore off slowly. As the weight of induced sleep lifted, sobs escaped my new patient. By evening she tried to turn but was too weak to fight the restraints. She had opened her eyes and seemed now to be almost afraid to close them again. Tears rolled from her face. I began to talk to her, to tell her where she was and who I was, but on hearing my voice she began a deep, fearful moaning. It did not take me long to realize that my movements, no matter how slight, terrified her. I sat still on a chair by her bed, and for an hour she watched as I tried to remain still, even as the room filled with attacking mosquitoes. The light outside faded and through the window I could see electric light bulbs shining in the valley. Still I did not move. Eventually I became dizzy from hunger and started to get up. She began to moan and pulled back into the bed, as though afraid that I might hurt her. I had no choice; she had to eat and it was clear that no one was going to bring her food. I inched out of the room. Her eyes followed me to the door and her breathing became heavy. I could not tell if she wanted me to stay or leave.

The other residents had already been fed and the nurses were finishing their meals in the dining room of the house we share. Sister regarded me coldly as I went toward the kitchen.

"It's past the residents' meal hour. And past the staff's meal hour also. Exactly what are you up to?"

"I was in Miss Ramchandin's room, Sister. She woke up and I detected what I think are symptoms of trauma so I did not want to leave her alone."

"Mr. Tyler, I know that you had formal training and it was abroad and all of that kind of thing, but that does not give you the authority to make up rules for yourself. You will always find troublesome residents but in the end, at their age, they are all like children. And when

children misbehave, you have to discipline them. Not so? Don't get too thoughtful over that Mala Ramchandin. She committed—"

"Sister, I beg your pardon, but there was no trial and no concrete evidence that she ever did anything. She has not eaten for several hours. If she does not eat something now, she will surely slip away."

I heard a sigh of exasperation from one of the nurses at the table. Sister remained silent for a moment to confirm her agreement with the sigh, and then she continued.

"She is old and may well slip away whether she eat or not. That is the nature of working in a home for old people, Mr. Tyler. It have dasheen soup and egg sandwiches for the residents. See if she will eat that. If she doesn't, there is nothing else you can do. She will eat if and when she is good and ready. But if you go and make too much fuss of her, she will be no end of trouble for all of us. Is best not to start them off with bad habits. You understand me, Mr. Tyler?"

"Yes, Sister."

"You are assigned to her room tonight. Do not take the straps off until I take a look at her tomorrow morning. You understand me? I will judge when she is not a danger to herself or to any of us."

Before going back to Miss Ramchandin's bungalow, I went to my room to regain my composure. I could hear the nurses' scandalous laughter and their chatter through the floorboards. I combed my hair back and tied a 'kerchief around my neck to ward off a chill from the night air. On my way out, I had to pass the nurses again in the dining room. Sister had already retired for the evening. The chatter fell silent and all eyes turned on me. One of the women spoke up.

"But, eh-heh, Mr. Tyler! Where you going dress up so?"

"You are referring to the addition of my neckerchief?"

"Eh-heh!" And she turned to the others and said, "But it nice, eh? You really know how to look good. What material it is?"

"It is nothing fancy, just a light cotton 'kerchief against the cold."

"But it suit you well. Is a nice colour! I will have to consult you

sometime, yes!" They nodded among themselves, making additional comments, all in the same condescending tone. It was the kind of notice one might shower on a child. But I am not a child and I knew there to be malice in their words. Behind the flattery, the edge of mockery was plain to anyone who must, as a matter of survival, learn to detect it. I could detail for you the number of times I have come across that same tone. I am aware of the subtleties and incremental degrees in a hostility—from the tight smile to the seemingly accidental shove—and I have known the gamut. But what would be the value of laying it all out before you? The temptation is strong, I will admit, to be the romantic victim. There is in me a performer dying for the part, but I must be strict with myself and stay with my intention to relate Mala Ramchandin's story.

I will add this and nothing more: I employed then the one strategy of survival that has saved me time and time again, here and in the Shivering Wetlands. Since I couldn't hide and knew better than to flaunt, I was quietly proud and did not enter into a façade of denial. I smiled at the nurse and said, "Yes, I would be happy to give you a pointer or two. I would quite enjoy that. Sorry I have to run now, though. Enjoy your evening." I picked up the food before another word could be spoken, and considered the encounter a relative success.

From outside Miss Ramchandin's bungalow I could hear nothing but squealing crickets and frogs. I knocked on her door, not expecting an invitation to enter, but to announce that I was back. When I entered, her eyes were already alert and on me.

I began a quiet chatter. "It's soup. It smells good. I brought a cup for me, too. I thought we could eat together." I did not watch her but could feel she had not taken her eyes off me. She made no sounds, even her breathing seemed consciously regulated.

"It's cool outside. The frogs and the crickets like it when it is like this. Can you hear them? They sound like they are making music together. May I rest the tray here?" I set the tray with two cups of soup and some slices of bread (no eggs) on her bed and pulled up a

chair. I noticed her eyes, wide open and expressionless, glued to my movements. I was afraid to look directly at her for fear that the spell might be broken. Without meeting her stare I looked at her hair.

"I'll just smooth back your hair a little." I stroked her forehead twice. There was no hair on her forehead to smooth back but I wanted her to feel in my touch that I would not harm her. Happily, she was no longer damp, though she was still rather cool.

"Miss Ramchandin, are you cold?"

No response.

"Well, I'll just throw this sheet over your feet. If you get too hot, you can push it off. You know, just give it a little kick." I felt awkward, not meaning to bring attention to the restraints. There was still no recognition that she heard me. I became acutely conscious of my movements and the subtleties of my tone, which may have been all that communicated with her.

"Mmmm, this smells so good. It's dasheen soup. Only fresh dasheen leaves, water and salt. Nothing else. Just try a little." I put a half-filled spoon to her lips, then realized her head needed to be propped up to avoid a mess. She did not make a move or even look at the spoon. She just continued to stare at me. Then I detected a slight change in her face, the slightest frown, perhaps perplexity or wonder. I put the bowl on the tray, found her towel and made it into a little roll that I placed under her head.

"How does that feel? If it's uncomfortable, let me know and I will fix it for you." When I brought the spoon to her mouth again, she turned her head away slightly and muscles around her mouth twitched. Still her eyes were locked on mine. Even though her actions suggested she did not want the food, I was overjoyed to have been given an indication of her will.

"All right. If you don't want the soup, that's all right. But it's too bad to let it waste. It tastes good and clean. Just eat a little piece of bread. You must eat something. Look, I'll just make it nice and soft for you." I broke off a piece, the size one would give a baby who had just gotten its first tooth. I dipped it in the soup and mashed it

against my finger. Balancing the morsel on the tip of my finger, I put it to her closed lips. She did not protest. The bread lay in her motionless mouth. I held my breath and busied myself preparing another piece, giving the impression that I trusted she would swallow and be ready for another. I made no notice when her mouth moved, but I took the opportunity to make the next piece a little bigger. She parted her lips this time, only barely. I prepared a piece similarly for myself. As we both chewed I looked up at the ceiling, aware that she was still watching me. Then I looked out the window, at the food on the plate, at my nails, and tried to come up with something to say that might elicit a response or at least help the trust building between us. Suddenly, however, the only things that came to mind were the very things I knew better than to bring up. Her father. The prison. The rumours. The thickness and quality of the leather straps that still held her firmly. Fowl. Salted cod.

My actions spoke more eloquently than any words. She ate a full slice of soup-soaked bread and took some sips of water. Then her eyes, still fixed on me, fluttered until they closed and she slept. Filled with a sense of success, I pulled the sheet up around her neck and quietly left.

I lay wide awake for more than an hour. My eyes ached with a gritty tiredness but my brain was giddy, joyous with constant recitations of the events with Miss Ramchandin. While they played in my head, I imagined further successes, immeasurable feats that I might accomplish with my great understanding and magnanimity. Finally, nausea at my own ballooning sense of self wore me down and I slept.

It seemed I had been sleeping for hours when I awakened to find Sister over me, a flashlight in her hand, shaking my shoulder.

"Something the matter with Miss Ramchandin. Listen! Come quick, quick."

I heard a mournful wailing. How could I have slept through such an eerie and agonizing din? I threw on my dressing gown, even

though I was well aware it would be commented on later. I hurried, fearful that Miss Ramchandin had become ill, and disappointed that this might be a major setback to the evening's progress.

When I reached the bungalow, I found several night-shift nurses milling around outside. Residents had pushed their windows ajar and were peeping out. It was a frightful sound Miss Ramchandin made. Without knocking, I entered the bungalow. Sister, attired also in her dressing gown (plainer than mine), stayed at the door. I switched on a lamp. The wailing halted abruptly, only to be replaced with breathless gasps of fright. Miss Ramchandin's hair was damp, pasted to her face and neck. Strands were in her mouth. I wiped away the wetness. Her head resisted my touch. She stared ahead, past me.

"Miss Ramchandin, what's happened? What's happened?" I whispered. The sweet smell of an old person's urine was strong.

Now that she was certain the straps had not come undone, Sister tentatively approached. "What is all that noise about? You all right? What happen to you?" The loudness of her voice, as if Miss Ramchandin were hard of hearing, did not mask Sister's nervousness. "You keeping everybody awake. You not feeling well or what? You want to see a doctor?"

Miss Ramchandin shifted her stare even farther away. I wanted to offer her an antidote to Sister's harshness but I knew better than to oppose Sister. To convey my concern, I felt Miss Ramchandin's neck and cheek, as though checking her temperature. Then I drew back the sheet. I gave her damp shoulder a quick and gentle rub. There was nothing to be alarmed about but I noticed her clenched fists and recognized in them a fighting spirit.

Under her breath, Sister muttered, "Hmm! This is not a place for crazy people. Hmm! I don't know why they send her here, na!"

I jumped in quickly. "Sister, I think the straps might be uncomfortable. You know, lying for so many hours in one—" Sister glared at me and then I saw an idea crawl across her face. She spoke loudly and clearly to Miss Ramchandin.

"Miss Ramchandin, you can hear me? Listen to me. I will remove the straps tomorrow if you behave yourself tonight. You hear? You go to sleep now and don't make no more noise. And tomorrow morning I will make sure they take them off, and that Doctor come to see you. But if you make any more noise they will stay on for another day. You hear me? Then Doctor will have to give you something to make you sleep. There are other people here trying to sleep, you know. Now you go to sleep and behave yourself nicely."

Miss Ramchandin's breathing deepened to a low growl.

One thing still troubled me. "Sister, one of the nurses must come and clean her up." Not to offend, I made sure my tone was one of concern only. Sister inhaled deeply and let out a sigh. She stared at the wood floor as if waiting for me to solve this problem. I had no qualms about doing the job, but out of respect for the woman on the bed, and not wanting to bend house rules, I remained quiet.

Sister sucked her teeth. "I will never get any nurse to come in here."

Still I offered nothing. Sister stormed out. I watched her speak at length with two nurses outside, awaiting, no doubt, further morsels of gossip. Although I could not hear their words, the nurses' gestures were loud enough. They recoiled several paces. Sister returned.

"Please. If you don't mind, I know you are not on night shift, and I realize that you are a man . . . but since you . . . well, what I mean is . . . the other nurses—" She paused, clearly hoping I would simply offer my services. It worried me that Miss Ramchandin could hear such a conversation. In the struggle of wills between Sister and me, my self-preserving prudence prevailed. I nodded my head in agreement to the unstated question. Relieved, Sister exited hastily.

Miss Ramchandin did not help me turn her body. I understood and did the job quietly, trying to be as invisible as is possible when working on her private parts. She was beginning to perturb me, not because I feared her but rather because I felt an empathy for her clenched fists, defiant stare, pursed lips and deep, slow, calculated breathing—an empathy that words alone cannot describe.

She was unlike the other residents, whom, in all fairness, I had been given the opportunity to know only from a distance. Since her arrival Miss Ramchandin had been lying strapped, except for the brief moments when I carried her, yet I detected a glint of stubborn independence quite different from the easy reliance and uncontested compliance the other residents seemed to thrive on. My training in the Wetlands dealt with general nursing and palliative care of the elderly, not medical or psychiatric nursing, so I have no authority in these matters. But my intuition was that the woman on the bed was going to prove herself to be neither crazy nor failing in health, and that she would fare better given more freedom. On the other hand, perhaps my intuition was nothing more than recalcitrant yearning, for I did fancy that she and I shared a common reception from the rest of the world.

I paced Miss Ramchandin's room. I desperately wanted to unstrap her but when, for a moment, I came close to defying orders and removing them, I found myself afraid. What if I removed them and then in anger—not pure craziness, but reasonable anger—she were to hurt herself or someone else?

I brought my face inches away from hers and whispered, "If I were strapped like that, I would hate it, too." And then I felt foolish, for what was the point of empathizing without taking more positive action? I wanted to touch her again but I left and returned to my room feeling impoverished and weak.

I had not even taken off my dressing gown when the wailing started again, this time low and less frenzied. I jumped up and was heading out my door when Sister stopped me and told me flatly to let Miss Ramchandin cry until she fell asleep. She promised to call the doctor to get sedatives for the following night and to discuss getting Miss Ramchandin committed to the crazy house. Sister went back into her room and closed the door firmly, leaving me standing in the corridor.

The wailing continued. I waited long minutes until the light under Sister's door went out, and then I slipped away and headed for Miss

Ramchandin's room. This time when I entered she did not stop crying. Tears streamed down her face and her body was contorted.

Fuelled by outrage I undid the straps around her feet. Then I unfastened the ones around her thighs and across her chest. She continued to cry as if unaware of my presence, and her body slowly tightened even more into the contortion the straps had temporarily curtailed. I sat by her head, slipped my arm under her back and pulled her into my arms. I held her against my chest, rocking her until the first streaks of morning light broke through the pitch-black sky. She had by this time fallen asleep, her head leaning on my chest. I continued to rock her and stroke her hands quietly. As much as I wanted to doze, I stayed alert. When I heard the sounds of the nurses awakening, I slid from behind Miss Ramchandin and lowered her on the bed. I shook her shoulders. She opened her eyes with fear. I held her face in both my hands.

"Shhh, shhhh, shhh, it's all right, it's all right," I whispered inches from her face. "Everything is all right. I have to go now. But I will come back a little later and I will stay with you all day. I have to put the straps back on, but I promise you, I promise you, it won't be for long. Please forgive me for doing this, but trust me. You must, you must trust me! Try to go back to sleep and when you awaken I will be here." She looked at me blankly, more fatigued than frightened, and she remained still as I tied the three straps around her again. She stayed quiet and watched my eyes, the fire of life beginning to burn in hers again, until the door closed between us.

As I walked back to the house quickly, nervous that Sister would catch me, I tried to decipher the words in her eyes. I did not see fear in them but a pleading. I took that pleading to mean she hoped I would be true to my word.

Miss Ramchandin had hardly been in the home a full twenty-four hours before she had visitors. Three gentlemen in one day. The home's doctor was the only one Sister permitted. The other two neither Miss Ramchandin nor I had the opportunity to see. Sister

received them and their gift of a plant clipping. She then turned them away, explaining that the new resident was incapable of having visitors so soon. She brought the plant to me and said "Do something with it."

I recognized it immediately. I had seen one in bloom in the Exotic Items Collection of the SNW National Botanical Gardens: the rare night-blooming cereus. Without blossoms the plant appears to be little more than an uninteresting tangle of leafage, hence Sister's dismissal. However, in bloom it is stunningly gorgeous. I put the ample greenery in a milk can filled with water to let it catch. When I entered her room, Miss Ramchandin watched me closely but paid no attention to the clipping. (Without blossoms the plant soon became as much a part of the room as her bedpan and even I forgot all about it—and about them, the visitors. I had decided, illogically, that they must be solicitors or the like.)

That the doctor's presence made me blush is not important to this story, but to ignore how alive and frisky I felt in his presence would be to deny the part of me that hopes for freedom. What he thought of me as I tried to accommodate his needs during that visit I do not know. What I do know is that he talked and joked with me in the same manner he would have with any of the other staff. I know my propensities are not invisible yet he did not recoil. For the first time in weeks I was not a curiosity. I was so accustomed to being seen as one that when treated like a regular fellow, I fumbled and blushed. And became aware of how desperately I want to be—and be treated as—nothing more than ordinary.

The good-natured and good-looking doctor laughed rather nervously when he saw the straps still on. He teased Sister about being afraid of an old, frail woman, and reiterated that no one knew if she really committed the crime. I refrained from interjecting that no one knew for certain that a crime had even been committed. He made a show of regarding Miss Ramchandin pensively, walking (elegantly) around her bed and taking her in from different angles. He then pronounced that, based on his experience, she did not

have the personality of a criminal and removing the straps would bring about no incident.

"Unless, of course," he said jovially, "you were one of the people who used to harass the poor lady!" The comment seems to have been the joke about town.

The doctor himself unbuckled each strap. As he chatted with Sister about a mutual acquaintance, he coiled the straps around his brawny right hand and slapped the three blunt ends against the palm of his left. He left Miss Ramchandin's bungalow taking the straps with him, wishing her and me, with no special nuances, I should add, a good day. Miss Ramchandin made her biggest gesture since arriving at the home. She followed his body not only with her eyes but with a turn of her head.

That night I fell asleep holding her, just in case. When I awoke in the middle of the night she was sleeping, her face serene.

The next day I put her in a wheelchair and rolled her along the path. The other residents were not as wary as the staff. They passed close by, a couple of them trying to introduce themselves and make conversation, happy and curious that there was someone new to get to know, to show around or show off to. They quickly lost interest in this new resident though; she was uncommunicative and seemed to live in a world that did not include them.

Miss Ramchandin made no sounds besides crying, moaning, wailing and sighing. I talked often to her though I truly thought she was unable to speak, and I watched her eyes, which I had come to believe were what she used for communicating. Then one evening, perched on the edge of the grounds, we were taking in the yellow sunset and the purpling of the distant valley—well, I was taking it in; I did not know what she was up to in her mind—when a pair of parrots flapped across the sky, squawking leisurely. She made no movement but I distinctly heard a perfect imitation of the parrots' calls. I dropped to my knees at her side.

"Miss Ramchandin! Was that you? That was perfect! That was so beautiful! Can you do it again? Please?" She did not respond but I

detected a brightening of her eyes, whether at the sight of the parrots or my surprise I could not be sure. Then, as I rolled her back to her bungalow after the sun had fallen behind the hills, I heard a high-pitched, pulsing tremolo and saw the vibration in her throat, as though a cricket had begun its evening ritual. I looked into her face, my jaw dropped in admiration and disbelief. She looked directly and proudly back, for the first time a hint of a smile lighting her face, and continued the humming long into the evening, not missing a fraction of a beat.

Days passed with her calling out, only loud enough for me to hear, perfect imitations of all the species of birds that congregated in the garden and dotted the tropical Lantanacamaran sky. I would catch her watching me through the side of her eyes, as she did bird, cricket and frog calls as though she meant to entertain me.

The rumours about Miss Ramchandin continued. The staff quickly sensed that I was becoming protective of her and would hush their tales in my presence, but I could tell they were still talking. Sometimes, I have to admit, I thought of the stories I had heard. I would edge myself out of Miss Ramchandin's sight whenever I tried to imagine her in the roles they had cast her in, for it did occur to me that this unusual woman might know what was going on in my head.

I remember the first time I heard the name Chandin Ramchandin. It was long before arriving in Paradise to work in the alms house. Indeed, the recent rumours were elaborations of what I had heard many years ago when I was too young to pay attention.

I was ten or so. I was in the back of our house passing time with Cigarette Smoking Nana (to differentiate her from Bible Quoting Nana, whom I couldn't bring myself to get too close to, nor she to me since I was not turning out to be boyly enough for her church-going satisfaction). We were sitting on the back steps, and I was working up a froth pondering the specifics of family relationships. Could a nephew be the father of his uncle? I wondered, or could a

mother ever be any other relationship to her child? Could she be the father? (I implore you, please keep an open mind and hold your judgement. I was, I remind you, a child, and children were innocent, if not ignorant, in those days.) Could your sister be your brother too? Could your brother be your father? I decided finally to ask Cigarette Smoking Nana.

"Nana, I have something on my mind."

"Uhuh. Tell me. What is on your mind, child?"

"Nana, can your Pappy be your Pappy and your Granpappy at the same time?" Nana cocked her head toward the sky and wrinkled her nose.

"Huh? Come again?" Exasperated by her slowness to catch a question that seemed plain enough to me, I merely repeated myself, but slowly, stressing and drawing each word out. She stared at me grimly for a long time. Her eyes were open wider than usual. I thought the look on her face was because it was, after all, such a good question and it made her think extra hard. She took a long, pensive drag on her cigarette and she thought and she thought and she thought and made several attempts to answer, but she kept hesitating.

Then finally she said, "Yes, child, it could happen. The father could be the grandfather too. But it doesn't happen often and it's not, well, it's not good, it's not nice, you know, son."

"Yes?" I said, and waited. I had no idea what she was trying to say.

"Tyler, boy, why you so inquisitive? Why you thinking about these things?"

Still I waited. Suddenly she seemed to perk up as if she'd seen a vision of the perfect explanation. "Look here, son, you see, there was a fellow . . . not from near here, he was from Paradise, a fellow name Chandin, Chandin Ramchandin. You know, he only had a handful of years over me but when I was your age or so, they used to tell us that we must study hard so that we could have the luck of that Ramchandin fellow. Hmmm, I wonder what become of him? Nowadays you don't even hear his name. It's like he disappeared off the face of the earth."

Nana took another pull on the stub of cigarette, and as she exhaled long and slow she stared up into the sky.



OLD MAN RAMCHANDIN, who was only ever known as Ramchandin, was an indentured field labourer from India. He was relaxing as he did every evening after work, rocking himself in the burlap hammock that hung from a cashew tree at the back of the estate barracks. His eyes were closed but as usual he was not asleep. The old man kept himself awake by worrying about the future of his only child. He had been turning mathematical estimations this way and that, inside out and upside down in his head. He had, as usual, whipped himself up a headache with his obsessive predictions of what the state of his finances could be if he and his wife, Janaki, were to work one hour more, or even two hours more per day, so that enough funds might be accrued to send Chandin to a college in the capital, or even abroad to study a profession. With the rhythmic flicking of his thighs, he rocked in the hammock and calculated how many years it would be before Chandin were eligible for enrollment in a college, how many extra hours there were in that many years—times two if his wife were also to work the extra time, factoring in a possible raise in their salaries—and he even went so far as to do a little division and addition to account for the inevitable rise in the cost of living.

Old man Ramchandin thought about life in the barracks and life in India before his recruitment to Lantanacamara. There was no difference. But by making the long journey across two oceans, he hoped to leave behind, as promised by the recruiter, his inherited karmic destiny as a servant labourer—if not for himself, at least for his son who had been born just before they left India. In Lan-

tanacamara it was easier to slip out of caste. He planned to work hard, save money and educate Chandin out of the fields.

In the midst of all this mental confusion he heard the crunch of gravel and the ruckus of a horse and buggy manoeuvring the dusty path. Ramchandin pulled himself out of the hammock. His daydreaming evaporated like dewdrops in morning heat. Before him lay the harsh reality of his two-room ajoupa quarters in the barracks. His two thin cows were yet to be tied up for the approaching night. He was exhausted. He could have told Chandin to tie up the cows but he considered the task too menial for the gold bead of his life. Ramchandin straightened and smoothed his white kurta and dhoti, which hung loosely on his stiff frame, and made his way to the front yard with as much dignity as age and fatigue would allow. His son stood by the front porch and scratched the dry clay soil with his bare foot. The rumble of the buggy coming down the path so late in the day had not surprised the boy as much as his parents. He was, in fact, awaiting the arrival of Reverend Thoroughly. His mother, smelling of coals and charred eggplant and a sweat that embarrassed him with its pungency of heated mustard seed, had left the clay oven at the back of their quarters. She quickly pulled her orhanie over her head and nose and mouth, and hurried around to the front.

The graceful Reverend pretended not to notice the large cloud of dust his horse and buggy had whipped up, or that he was covered in it. He declined a cup of well water and stated his case without formalities.

Before the Reverend had returned to his own home, his visit and the name of Chandin, son of Ramchandin, were known to immigrant workers throughout barracks across the width and breadth of Lantanacamara. Even at the farthest end of the island, in Nana's humble and unremarkable village, the Reverend's visit and Chandin's bright and prosperous future were discussed and debated.

"Is a Reverend who come from the Shivering Northern Wetlands.

A white man who set up school and church for Indians. Is he who make the trip inside of the cane field area up to the barracks."

"So he gone all that distance in all that dust!"

"He travel dirt road to bring them such a news. And I hear he face and he hair and he clothes and he shoes was covered, like white sheet, in dust by the time he get to the house."

"Eh-heh!"

"So he taking the boy to go and live in he own house?"

"Yes."

"In he own house. Hmmm!"

"To raise like he own child?"

"Eh-heh."

"He is the oldest student in the school, so that mean that he will be the first one, the oldest one, to make the first graduation, with ceremony and thing, na! And the Reverend want to send the first graduate from his school to college to study. So he taking him to make sure he study good good."

"But that child lucky! What is the family name again?"

"Ramchandin. The child name Chandin. Chandin Ramchandin."

"Well, the father and wife lucky!"

"You think so? I hear they did have to convert. That was the condition if they wanted the child to go to school. I can't do that. No. I just don't want to do that."

"What you talking? What you mean you don't want to do that! If it is the only way for your child to get education and not have to work like a horse sweating and breaking back in the hot sun for hardly nothing, you wouldn't convert? I will say my piece now. Listen. Since the Africans let go from slavery, all eyes on how the government treating them. It have commissions from this place and from that place making sure that the government don't just neglect them. They have schools, they have regular and free medical inspection. Now, you see any schools set up for our children, besides the Reverend's school? When we get sick and we have pains, who looking after us? We looking after our own self, because nobody have

time for us. Except the Reverend and his mission from the Shivering Northern Wetlands. All he want from us is that we convert to his religion. If I had children, I would convert! Besides, nobody but you really know which god you praying to. Convert, man! Take the children yourself to the mission school. And when you praying you pray with you eyes and you mouth shut. Simple so. That is all."

"Is true. Yes. I suppose is true. It make sense."

"Mm-hmmm."

"Chandin Ramchandin will be the first one of all of we to get profession. The first Indian child in Lantanacamara to get a title. Remember that name. I tell you if I had children is what I would want for them too. I don't see nothing wrong to want the best for your child."

And so the news of Chandin's fortune spread, and even before he entered the Reverend's seminary he was unwittingly helping to convert Indians to Christianity.

Nana rolled herself another cigarette. I liked the smell of sulfur when she outed her match and was fascinated by the way she cupped the cigarette in both hands and sucked erratically before she got a good enough light.

"He was bright, Nana? He went to study abroad?"

"He was bright, yes. But I don't think he went to study abroad." Seeing my face fall, because she knew it was my dream to go abroad and study, she slowed down.

"He didn't have to go abroad. I'll tell you more. You see, the Reverend set up a seminary right here in Lantanacamara, right there, in Paradise and it is there he went . . ."

Once the Ramchandin boy left the barracks he was not inclined to return. He hardly saw his father but his mother went to church services at least once a week, especially to see him sitting up there in the front, looking very foreign in spite of his dark skin, all dressed up in his jacket and tie, right next to the Reverend's wife. The few times

he went back to the barracks to visit it was evident his mother had not really converted to Christianity. When he inquired after the foot-long brass crucifix the Reverend had given her to put above the doorway, she shyly said that she had wrapped it carefully in a clean white cloth and put it away, for safe-keeping, in a trunk. However, he noticed that the number of statues of Hindu gods and goddesses lining the walls had increased since his move to the Reverend's house. Sometimes sacred camphor and incense used in Hindu prayers coloured the air, and always a faint cloud of pooja smoke permeated his parents' hair and clothes, replacing the odour of coals and spices that used to emanate from his mother's body. He was embarrassed by his parents' reluctance to embrace the smarter-looking, smarter-acting Reverend's religion, and there soon came a time when, to his parents' dismay, he no longer visited.

A name change for Chandin was briefly discussed by the Reverend and his wife. Mrs. Thoroughly thought that a Christian, if not Wetlandish name was more suitable for a son of theirs. Chandin was eager to have his Indian name replaced. Mrs. Thoroughly suggested Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. Even Ovid, Errol, Oscar and Atticus were considered. She half-joked that it was her first and probably her last opportunity to name a boy child. The thoughtful Reverend, however, suggested that Chandin Ramchandin would one day be a Christian teacher, theologian and missionary whose success in the field would be due, certainly to the blessings of God, but also to the novel idea that people were most likely to be swayed by one of their own kind. Chandin and Mrs. Thoroughly gave in to the Reverend's idea that Chandin's own name would win his people's trust.

Chandin went everywhere with his new family. When they travelled to other towns and held church meetings under tents, he sat on the stage among the other Wetlander missionaries and was often the centre of attention. He was introduced as the Reverend's son, and his story, already well known to every labourer, was expounded as a tangible benefit of conversion.

Being the adopted son of the Reverend and Mrs. Ernest Thoroughly, Christian missionaries from the Shivering Northern Wetlands, did have its benefits, the greatest of which, in Chandin's mind, came to be the daily presence of Lavinia Thoroughly, his newly acquired sister.

Chandin's favourite time of day was after the evening meal when the family gathered in the living room for an hour of relaxation. At other times he was unsure of his place in this new household. He often felt conspicuously lost. But evenings, sitting quietly in the living room with his new family, he had a very definite place. The Reverend had a chair that he alone sat in, as did Mrs. Thoroughly, and Lavinia invariably lay on her back or stomach on the very same portion of rug, or sat on a footstool near her mother. Chandin found that a straight-back upholstered chair had come to be marked as his. Although it was only a physical place, the chair became an antidote to the chaos of his uprootedness.

He was mesmerized by the chandelier that hung low in the middle of the room. While he should have been studying he would spend long moments staring at the leaf-shaped glass pendants that kicked off flickers of blue, red and violet light. He wondered how many of the people in the cane field barracks had ever seen such a fine thing. He wished he could show them not only that item, but also the fine cabinets, carved chairs and side tables and lamps with fancy shades. At first he wanted the labourers to see it all because everything was new and exciting. Then he desperately wanted them to see the inside of the Reverend's house so they could embrace not just the Reverend's faith but his taste. In his innocence he felt that his people's lack of these things was a result of apathy and a poverty of ambition. He thought of his parents' mud house and the things there, the peerahs they used for sitting on, the rough planks of wood used as shelves, the cattiyas instead of mattresses on high wood frames, the enamel wares, the paltry pitch-oil lamps, and most saddening of all, the latrine with that particular odour that etches itself on one's brain. He felt immense distaste for his back-

ground and the people in it. Gazing awestruck at the chandelier, he would daily renew his promise to be the first brown-skinned person in Lantanacámara to own one just like it.

The living room had two large windows through which scented breezes from undulating fields of sugar cane sailed in from the valleys below. While the Reverend and his wife cooled themselves in the benevolent breeze, chatting one minute, silent the next, absorbed in reading or in writing in their journals, Chandin observed his new family and listened to their conversations, the kind that families have only among themselves. At those times, he felt most thoroughly assured of a place, more significant even than a chair, in this new family.

When he first went to live in the Reverend's house, Lavinia was a quiet, unremarkable child, a little younger than he, who begged not to be noticed. As far as Chandin's classmates were concerned, her only noteworthiness was in her fair skin, her white hair and the fact she was the principal's daughter. Those attributes, however, were more than enough to win her admirers. The boys would perform antics and heroics in her presence in the hope that she would glance their way, but she appeared self-absorbed and blind, which only made them try harder.

There was only one other girl in the school but the boys were not as concerned with her. She came from the same barracks as Chandin. Her parents had made a more convincing conversion than his, taking name changes for every person in the family. She had been given the name Sarah by Mrs. Thoroughly. Sarah was the only person in the school whom Lavinia was close to. The only thing that pleased Chandin about the friendship was that it indicated Lavinia was not prejudiced against people like himself. A friendship with Sarah, to Chandin's mind, would encourage her to become comfortable with the Indians, and so with him. Chandin would regard Sarah jealously and wonder what attributes she had that he lacked. He wished Lavinia would talk and laugh with him the way she did with the small, dark girl from the barracks. On days that Chandin

and Lavinia were encouraged to invite one friend each from the school to spend the day, Lavinia uniformly invited Sarah, while Chandin, ashamed of the boys' barracks ways, invited no one.

Over the course of a couple of years, Lavinia, confounding even her parents, sprang into an unusually tall and handsome young woman. Her sullenness turned into an attractive independence. At the mission school, interest in Lavinia, which for a while had waned, was renewed. The boys became even more absorbed by her presence. They competed against her remarkable strengths on the playing field and her brilliance in the classroom, both of which, coming from a girl, stunned them and made them more attracted than before.

Chandin watched the other boys' brash, competitive ways. A rash of jealousy darkened his days and made his nights sweaty and fitful. Dizziness would drench him whenever he saw her. He spoke with her less and less as his words seemed to jumble in her presence, and he would momentarily lose his ability to make such a simple decision as whether or not he was thirsty. For a while he stopped looking at her, fearing that the flame he could feel burning brightly in his cheeks and the odd and unspeakable sensation filling his trousers and the pleading in his eyes were all too visible. His feelings were all the more unbearable because he knew that he dare not express them.

When Lavinia failed to notice him, his passion did not wane but was transformed. Embers of adoration and desire smoldered but what sprang up were flames of anger and self-loathing. He began to hate his looks, the colour of his skin, the texture of his hair, his accent, the barracks, his real parents and at times even the Reverend and his god. It began to matter to him that he and Lavinia were not in fact siblings.

At school the flames of self-loathing were fanned. Lavinia remained uninterested in any of the boys despite their willingness to perform miracles for her, so the boys decided that a girl like her would fall in love only with a boy like herself. They would then

jokingly mimic the Reverend's gait and gestures. In the privacy of his bedroom Chandin watched himself in the long mirror on the door of the armoire, and saw what he most feared: a short and darkly brown Indian-Lantanacamaran boy with blue-black hair. Without question, he resembled the other boys in his class and from the barracks in the fields.

He would change, he decided once and for all, what he had the power to change. Chandin took note of the Reverend's rigid, austere posture, so unlike his own father's propensity to bend or twist or fold his body whichever way the dictates of comfort tipped him. He practised sitting upright, with his back unswayed and his legs planted firmly on the ground or crossed severely at the knees. Other times he diligently studied and imitated the Reverend's pensive stroking of his chin or tapping of his fingers against a book. When he walked, even though he had, by the age of fourteen, reached his full height and was quite short, he made strides as wide as the towering Reverend's, and he clasped his hands, similarly, in a little entwined knot behind his back. His usual thoughtfulness turned weighty. He now brooded with an air of romantic sullenness. He stroked his chin habitually and revelled in the tragic knowledge that his love-sickness could bleed so freely within him and yet be invisible, or so he thought, to the family with whom he lived and to his schoolmates.

It came, then, as a surprise when Reverend Thoroughly burst into Chandin's room one evening to invite him to the rectory, an invitation that seemed more like an order. The rectory was hardly a five-minute walk away. The Reverend placed the palm of his hand on the back of Chandin's fleshy neck and held it gently but firmly, as if ushering Chandin along. His hand was hot and its weight reassuring, intensifying an intimacy between them that Chandin welcomed. In the bond of that moment he considered confiding in Reverend Thoroughly his feelings toward Lavinia. He would, he decided, take more time to consider his words, to avoid any ineloquence, and then within the week he would seek the Reverend's counsel.

Inside the rectory Reverend Thoroughly sat at his desk and began

leafing through a ledger. Chandin stood about idly, as he imagined a son might stand and wait for his father. He went to the bookshelf and fingered the spines of a few volumes, feeling the little gullies the letters made. His mind strayed back to the living room. He walked over to the window and pressed his face against the glass, cupping his hands to block out the light's reflection. He stared in the direction of fields that had long ago been sucked up into the dark night. He thought only of Lavinia and wished he was back in the living room with her and her mother. She had been lying on the woven straw rug reading. He wished he was brave enough to move onto the rug with her and ask what held her attention. After all, he reasoned, even though they were not really siblings, they were supposed to treat each other as such, and a sibling should be allowed to do that. At the same time he knew that once on the rug next to her he would shake like a mango leaf in a hurricane. As he pulled his face away from the window, he could see in its reflection that Reverend Thoroughly had swung his chair around to face him.

"Chandin! I am talking to you!" Reverend Thoroughly had never called him so sharply before.

"Oh, sorry sir. I was . . . I was just . . ."

The Reverend softened. Lowering his voice he asked, "What were you thinking about?"

"Nothing really. Everything. Nothing." Chandin half-smiled, again considering taking the Reverend into his confidence.

The Reverend remained serious. "I will speak as plainly as I might, Chandin. If I sound harsh, please forgive me. I have found from experience that to deal with delicate matters too delicately serves only to prolong and unnecessarily muddle discussion."

Chandin's dark brown ears immediately flushed scarlet. He had never heard the Reverend speak so formally or firmly, except at the pulpit when in prayer. Chandin felt his chest shrink and his breathing become shallow. He crossed his legs against an urgent need to run off and find relief in one of Mrs. Thoroughly's flower beds. He wondered if he were about to get a lecture about his school studies. Had

C E R E A
he disappointed the Reverend and his wife? For a long moment Chandin had the uncomfortable feeling he was about to be informed that he was to be sent back, a failure, to the cane fields, to live forever in the midst of his parents' shame and disappointment.

"Sir?" The word he intended to say with dignity came out in a gravelly whisper. He stared with discomfort at the concrete floor.

"Your brooding has not been unnoticed. Besides being as unpleasant as those sour cherries of which you boys seem so fond, or as a thunderstorm at a garden party, brooding will never charm a young lady."

Chandin's eyes flicked up to look at the Reverend. His face burned. So his interests had not been invisible. Believing he heard an ounce of advice in the Reverend's comments, he broke into a nervous grin. The Reverend stood up and walked to the bookshelf. With his back to Chandin, he continued.

"Chandin, how long have you been sharing our home with us, with my wife and I?" Instinctively Chandin felt that what was about to come was not a smiling matter, but the muscles in his face twitched and his grin, a grin of embarrassment, grew wider.

The Reverend spun around on the heel of his shining shoes and looked directly at him.

"You are having a good time, are you? Answer me! How long, Chandin? Three years. Hasn't it been three years, son?"

Chandin tried in vain to wipe the painful grin from his face. He looked at the floor and nodded.

"Do we not feel like a family to you?" There was disappointment in the Reverend's voice.

Tears collected in Chandin's eyes. His smile had become rigid and aching.

"I have, in good faith, taken on the role of your father. Mrs. Thoroughly has done a good job of being a mother to you, hasn't she?"

Chandin nodded, unable to give sound to his answers.

"If I have performed as your father and my wife as your mother, what is the relationship of my daughter to you?"

Chandin's heart leapt up in fear. The room seemed to spin. He prayed that no tear would fall and embarrass him. Finally the smile dissipated.

"I think you understand me well. Your attentions have not been unnoticed by my wife and me."

He paused as though waiting for a response. When none came he shook his head in exasperation and continued.

"Look here. You are to be a brother to Lavinia and nothing more. A brother. She is your sister and you her brother. A brother protects and helps and supports and comforts his sister. There is no harm in loving your sister. Or your mother or your father. But that love must remain pure, as pure as God's love is for his children."

The Reverend walked to his desk and slammed the polished mahogany top with his fist. "You cannot, you must not have desire for your sister Lavinia. That is surely against God's will. Do you understand? Do you understand me, Chandin! Otherwise, otherwise . . ." The Reverend, seemingly spent, sat down in his chair. His tone softened as though he were enormously tired. "It is past your bedtime. I will stay here and pray to our Father in heaven. I suggest you go to your room and do the same. Go on, now. Please tell Mrs. Thoroughly not to worry, that I will stay here for a while longer."

Chandin did not immediately return to the house. He stayed outside holding his stomach, which had turned into a hard knot. It cramped unbearably and he was unable to stop an onslaught of hot tears. His world seemed suddenly to have shrunk. He looked up at the stars and mumbled to himself. "Imbecile! Why do I have to grin and smile whenever I am embarrassed. Imbecile! Grinning like an imbecile. She is not my sister. Why couldn't I say that instead of grinning? She is not my sister. It's not really wrong, is it? It can't be."

It was some time before he noticed the fireflies flickering in the pitch-black night. One would glow for a few seconds, then shut out and disappear. Soon somewhere nearby a tiny light would burn again. His eyes still stinging from crying, he began to try to trace an

insect's flight by its flickering light. Absorbed in this manner an idea dawned on him, which he took as a response to his question. His love for Lavinia would never die. He would hide it away so well that no one would be able to trace it. Only he, in the privacy of his room after he had turned out the light, would know his love still glowed. And when the time was right he would take it out and it would burn as brightly as the cane fields afire, by which time Lavinia would be older and would declare her interest in him.

So, in the years that followed, even past the time that he graduated from high school and moved into quarters at the seminary some miles away, the Reverend and his wife remained pleased that Chandin had responded to that night's talk with remarkable maturity and earnestness.

Chandin Ramchandin was the only person of Indian descent at the seminary. He was, in fact, the only non-white person there. He and seventeen other men lived together in the institution's dormitories. The others had all come from the Shivering Northern Wetlands to study theology and get first-hand experience in a tropical climate among non-Christians. Most of the young men planned to remain in Lantanacamara, while some had intentions of joining the church's other missions in India and Africa.

Chandin seemed to be well liked by the taller, fair, heavily accented men, but he wondered constantly whether it was because he was the Reverend's adopted son and Lavinia's brother, or because he was of the race that it was their mission to Christianize. He scrutinized every aspect of these men. Most were his age yet seemed so much more worldly. He copied their manners and dressed like them in the white shirts and trousers the Wetlanders considered the height of tropical fashion. He would turn their accented phrases over and over in his mind until he was brave enough to air them: "I'd be very much obliged, Chandin, my good fellow . . ." ". . . upon your honour!" ". . . how infinitely superior . . ."

Often they all congregated in the Thoroughlys' garden for tea or

croquet, and Chandin watched them flutter around Lavinia. She flirted back good-naturedly but if she paid special attention to anyone, it was to him. He might have been honoured yet he knew all too well that it was their supposed sibling relationship that brought her to him with giggles and little whispered confidences about this or that seminarian. Pray as he might, nothing indicated that she might ever be drawn to him or expect one day to share his life. He feared that without some firm action on his part, someone else with more aplomb would step in and steal her away. He had proven himself in school and in the seminary. They were now both adults. And furthermore, they were not siblings, he shouted in the silent space of his own head. He decided he would speak with Lavinia at the first opportunity.

The opportunity came quite unexpectedly. A cricket match for the seminarians had been arranged by the Thoroughlys and two missionary families from other parts of the island. It was to be a fun-filled day to celebrate the end of the dry season, which coincided with the coming holidays. Lavinia, who had just graduated from high school, was there, as was Sarah. Sarah was the only other non-Wetlander besides Chandin. Each man, dressed in brilliant cricket whites, seemed to be batting, bowling and fielding for the two young women.

Chandin batted long and hard. After each stroke he would adjust his V-neck sweater and glance proudly toward Lavinia. At the start of his batting she cheered him on, calling out, "Bravo! Bravo!" Her public acknowledgement all but dizzied him. When the game broke for lunch, Chandin was still not out. Reverend Thoroughly, holding a plate of cheese sandwiches, called him aside.

"Chandin, what splendid batsmanship, my boy! Inspired, simply inspired!"

Chandin, sweating in the heat yet still wearing his cricket sweater, blushed and mumbled thank-you. He was aware of being spoken to by the Reverend as though he were a third person standing off to the side observing the two of them.

C E R E
"I must tell you of our great fortune. I ought to have informed you a while ago but with all the business of graduations it simply slipped my mind. Lavinia has been accepted into the seminary."

Chandin thought, You are the seminary, in other words, you have accepted her. But he succeeded in sounding pleased when he answered, "Good news! Well done! She must be very happy."

"Indeed, she is. We all are. And this is the thing. Before the term starts up again, I have decided to take the family to spend the next few months back home in the Wetlands. You know we have not been back in a long while."

Chandin's heart leapt, thinking he was to be included in the family journey.

"Mrs. Thoroughly, Lavinia and I will leave in a matter of days," said the Reverend.

"But, sir, there are no sailings for at least four more months, until the end of the storm season," Chandin interrupted indignantly.

"Ah, but an unscheduled sailing takes place in three days, precisely to beat the storms. Fortunately our affairs are such that we can leave on short notice."

The Reverend continued to talk as Chandin became filled with fear. In her homeland Lavinia was bound to meet some Wetlander with whom she would fall in desperate love and marry. He heard the Reverend saying something about how much they would miss him. Chandin's only concern was to declare his love to Lavinia right there, that very day.

She and Sarah were strolling along the edge of the field, heading away from the crowd. Chandin took off in a little run, shouting Lavinia's name. She seemed not to hear. When he caught up, he did not excuse himself but grasped Lavinia firmly by the elbow.

"Lavinia, I must talk with you."

"What! What on earth could be the matter? You have not even excused yourself, and why this?" she said looking down at his hand still clutching her.

"Please excuse me. Sarah, would you please excuse us. I have a matter of some urgency to discuss with Miss Thoroughly."

"Chandin, Sarah calls me by my first name. You know that. Why so formal? What can be so urgent?" When Sarah walked off with a hint of a glare, Chandin apologized and softened his manner.

"I have been meaning to talk with you for a while now, but I haven't had the opportunity before today's match . . ."

"By the way, you batted marvellously! I had no idea that you were such an asset!"

He stepped in front of her and took both her hands, bringing them up to his chest. "Every one of those was for you, Lavinia. I have been meaning—"

Understanding his intent all too clearly she pulled her hands out of his and said in disbelief, with a hint of a laugh, "I think you better stop right now!"

"Lavinia, listen to me please. I think only of you. I have only ever thought of you. I must tell you that I love no one quite as much as I have always loved you. Your father has just informed me that you are to leave in a matter of days. I will wait here for you, and when you return I will ask your father—"

She slapped her thigh.

"You will do no such thing. You are nothing more than my brother."

"Lavinia, stop this please. We are not siblings. I love—"

"No! No! No! This is ridiculous. Let's just stop this conversation right now. I think you must have batter's sunstroke."

Chandin fell silent. He stared blankly at her.

"Don't speak a word of this to anyone, Chandin. Please. I disapprove and do not consent—"

"Lavinia—"

"Shhh, shhh, do not speak to me of it either." She turned and saw her mother carrying two pitchers of mango juice. Without another word she ran off to relieve her.

Chandin was caught out with the first ball of the first inning after lunch. From the corner of his eye he could see that Lavinia had not even noticed. Her back was to the field and she was chatting with Sarah, who was laughing, clearly unaware of the state of the game.

The holidays passed miserably. Chandin, with little or no appetite, dwindled in size. One letter came from Mrs. Thoroughly, who wrote only that they were thrilled to see their relatives and happy to meet old friends again. She added, "We miss you and talk of you often," but said nothing about Lavinia. On the day of their return Chandin took special care in his grooming, changing his clothing no less than three times, trying to find the look that might catch Lavinia's eye without being too obvious. He arrived at the harbour in time to watch the steamer coast its last half-mile to port. Among the hundreds of pairs of hands waving wildly he picked out the Reverend and Mrs. Thoroughly, who had long ago spotted him, one of the few brown-skinned people on shore not employed in bringing the ship in. He was unable to see Lavinia.

The Thoroughlys warmly greeted him. The strained smile on his face, his nervous laughter and his scanning of the crowd were not unnoticed. Mrs. Thoroughly held both his hands, squeezing them in hers.

"Lavinia has stayed on in the Wetlands, Chandin. But not for long. Not for too long. My, my, it is indeed rather hot, isn't it? We have hardly been away for very long and I have already forgotten just how hot this place could be! I am delighted to be back, though. How are you, Chandin?" Her Wetlandish accent was thicker than Chandin had remembered. She let go of his hands and fanned herself with a scented handkerchief.

Reverend Thoroughly was quiet. He had his eyes on porters unloading trunks of luggage. As fast as he wiped perspiration from his forehead and neck with a large handkerchief, beads sprang up again. Seeing their luggage he excused himself. Mrs. Thoroughly

faced Chandin squarely and began to talk quickly, as though trying to answer the questions she read in his eyes.

"Our family has very strong ties in the Wetlands, Chandin. All my family and Ernest's, I mean, Reverend Thoroughly's, live there. And they all know everything about you. You were the subject of many wonderful conversations, and people who have never met you have sent their greetings and blessings! It is good that Lavinia will stay on. But she will not be absent long—only until the very next sailing. As you know, Chandin, it had been many years since Lavinia and her grandparents had seen each other. She met cousins, several of whom were either babies or not yet born when we left to come here—"

Pain engulfed Chandin. He had an urgent need to say something, if only to assure himself that he was still breathing. "What about her plans," he interjected feebly "to attend the seminary? Does she not want to attend?"

"Of course she will attend! Her father has promised to hold her seat for her—she will, after all, be the first woman to attend! She will return, Chandin, on the next sailing. She is just so fascinated with the Wetlands. So much family there, you know, so many relatives. And it's so damp, so cool, so richly damp . . ."

The Thoroughlys regularly invited Chandin for supper, but it was impossible for him to enter their house and not obsess over information about Lavinia, about her pending return or her interest in him as her life's companion. Citing the need to study for this examination and that test, he more often than not declined. He spent much time by himself, sequestered in the library or his room in the dormitory. Despite what Lavinia's parents said, he had lost hope that she would return. His lack of appetite continued. His nights were sleepless, and he grew thin and morose. Even his gait changed; his muscles sagged and his bones seemed to bow under the weight of despair. The will to imitate the Reverend's posture of confidence and power had completely withered.

A month had not passed since the Thoroughlys' return when the