

Reverend arrived unannounced one afternoon at Chandin's room in the dormitory. The instant Chandin opened the door he felt a tired resignation in the pit of his stomach.

"Come walk with me, Chandin. The kanganilla are in bloom. Have you seen them today?"

Out on the lawns in brilliant sunshine Chandin remained quiet, thinking, Well, come on, I am waiting. I am ready. I know very well that you have not brought me here to see the kanganilla. Tell me whatever it is you must.

But he was not ready for the news. Reverend Thoroughly reached into the breast pocket of his jacket and pulled out a thin, twice-folded paper. He held it up as if to verify its existence yet did not unfold the sheet. A telegram from Lavinia, he said, and touched the page briefly to his lips. Chandin's heart leapt with fear and excitement. He wanted, at the very least, to brush the piece of paper with his hand, but Reverend Thoroughly had already slipped it back into his pocket.

"It is wonderful news, Chandin, simply wonderful news for a parent. Lavinia is in love—" Chandin, breathless, came to an abrupt halt. Even as he knew it to be in vain, an ember of hope spat at his heart. "—and requests permission to marry, Chandin. Our little girl, your sister, is to marry!"

A rush of blood to his head made him dizzy. Tears sprang into Chandin's eyes. He turned away to look toward the distant valley.

"Ah." The feeble response fell from his mouth.

"Fenton Thoroughly. A lovely chap, lovely! We . . ."

Chandin was startled. "Thoroughly?"

"Yes. He is my nephew."

Chandin turned to face the Reverend, uncaring, suddenly, that his disappointment would be visible. "Her cousin! She is in love with her cousin? I don't understand. And what about her schooling? I don't understand. Her cousin, sir?"

Reverend Thoroughly looked up at the sky, over to the kanganilla, at the seminary building, and continued on, trying to sound

as if he were doing nothing more than confiding in a trusted family friend.

"Yes, Chandin. I was sure that you would mention it. He is not truly her cousin. You see, my brother married a woman who had been married once before and brought with her a child—Fenton. My brother was good enough, wouldn't you say, to bring him up as his own child, give him his name and all of that sort of thing . . . but as you can see he is not a true relation. He is a marvellous gentleman by every standard, and on maturing he is slated to inherit a rather large estate from his blood father. He is a medical student."

"And he is in love with her?"

"Well, of course! We have given our blessings to them both. There will be a marriage as soon as—"

It might as well have been night time. On cue from the word *marriage*, Chandin's world spun and blackened as if the sun had suddenly been switched off. He broke out in a sweat and began to shiver. The words spilling from his own mouth surprised even himself.

"I have been meaning to talk with you. I wanted to talk with you and Mrs. Thoroughly. I too . . . I want to . . ."

"What is it, Chandin?"

"I too have been thinking about marriage. I wanted to ask your permission also."

"You?"

"I, I, it's time for me also. I have been thinking of Sarah. Sarah, you know, Sarah." Chandin wanted nothing more than to collapse in the security of a woman, a woman from his background, and Sarah was the most likely possibility.

"Sarah! Well, what a surprise! I had not realized . . . Sarah, eh? Look here, son, shall I write her parents, or go and see them on your behalf? I am . . . speechless. So surprised. Her parents will be delighted. Thrilled. But not half as delighted as I am. We must inform Mrs. Thoroughly right away. Come on, come on."

Six weeks later Chandin and Sarah were married.



REFLECTING NOW ON the story that Cigarette Smoking Nana had begun to relate to answer my boyish query, I realize I had known of Miss Ramchandin for many, many years. I often want to call out to Nana up in the heavens—where I am sure she is and quite sure that Bible Quoting Nana is not—and say, “You were right, you were right. There was indeed a Chandin Ramchandin. But there is much more to that story!” It was as though Nana had introduced me to Miss Ramchandin, and Miss Ramchandin had confirmed Nana for me.

After a few days in the wheelchair, Miss Ramchandin was strong enough to walk. I held her by the elbow as we wandered across the grounds. Being outside was what she most loved. She came alive and made her bird and insect calls. That day as we strolled across the grounds a young stray cat scuttled by, unsure but curious about us. Miss Ramchandin made her most decisive gesture yet. She dropped to her knees, put out her hand and meowed like a kitten. The cat responded immediately, running to her hand. She picked it up, stood and pressed the creature to her chest. I was perplexed, wondering if this cat might have belonged to her and found its way back. Miss Ramchandin rested her cheek against the cat’s head and whispered her first words since her arrival.

“Pohpoh, Pohpoh,” she cooed into its ear lovingly, seeming to call the cat by name.

When I asked if it was her cat, she closed her eyes. “Pohpoh, Pohpoh,” she said again. It was a common nickname affectionately given to children and I supposed not an unnatural name for a kitten as well.

The cat came back to the bungalow in Miss Ramchandin’s arms.

That night I hesitantly asked Sister if it were possible to keep the animal. She shrugged and said, “It have mice in the kitchen. It might be a good thing.”

That Miss Ramchandin got to keep the cat was both fortunate and a mistake. Fortunate because it gave her something to exercise concern about; a mistake because in time I learned that when she had pressed her cheek against the cat’s body and called the name Pohpoh, it was not a cat that she was calling.

By the time Nana got around to addressing my specific question, she was, in the end, unable to tell me everything.

“So Chandin Ramchandin married this Sarah and she made two children, two girl children,” she said. “And well, you know, Tyler child, one thing lead to the other and, well, to make long story short, Chandin pick up with the older daughter. Now she never had any children with him but it could have happened. That is the thing. It could have happened, yes! Now if the daughter had made a child for him, that child would be his—”

Right then we heard the front door open. Nana stopped, outed the cigarette and tried to mash it into the earth, swiping frantically at the smoke with her arms. She got up quickly, making herself look busy. You see, Ma had just returned from her day’s work in town. Nana’s talk came to such a screeching halt that I sensed from her stony silence that the story had ended right there and then because these were things my Ma, her daughter, would have disapproved of her telling a little boy like myself. Even in its pre-empted state, what she was telling was alarming. The insinuation at the tail end of her story stayed with me. Over the years I pondered the gender and sex roles that seemed available to people, and the rules that went with them. After much reflection I have come to discern that my desire to leave the shores of Lantanacamara had much to do with wanting to study abroad, but far more with wanting to be somewhere where my “perversion,” which I tried diligently as I could to shake, might be either invisible or of no consequence to

people to whom my foreignness was what would be strange. I was preoccupied with trying to understand what was natural and what perverse, and who said so and why. Chandin Ramchandin played a part in confusing me about these roles, for it was a long time before I could differentiate between his perversion and what others called mine. Some instinctual fear stopped me from bringing it up with Nana again, and I noticed that she avoided it, too.

Two decades and more have passed since then, and so too has Nana. She made a long story short yet I wonder how much she really knew. If she were still here, would she and I be able to go through and finish that conversation we started on the back steps, and now that I have grown up and found my own nature, would this particular nature be coarse sandpaper drawing blood against her? I wonder if she and I as adults could today have that same talk without grudges surfacing. I fancy the affiliation blossoming between Miss Ramchandin and me to be a clue to these musings. The relationship between Nana, my Cigarette Smoking Nana, and me, her Peculiar Grandson, was special, for we both had secrets from my mother, her daughter. Miss Ramchandin and I, too, had a camaraderie: we had found our own ways and fortified ourselves against the rest of the world.

I wonder what Nana would think if she knew the positions I was in that enabled me to gain the full story. For there were two: one, a shared queerness with Miss Ramchandin, which gave rise to the other, my proximity to the very Ramchandin Nana herself had known of.



SARAH GAVE BIRTH to her first child ten months after the marriage, and a couple of years later she was pregnant again. Chandin thought often of Lavinia but his love for her had soured and mostly

he felt betrayal. He was a dispassionate husband to Sarah though he enjoyed observing his two daughters, albeit from a distance. He was composed and diligent performing his duties as Reverend Thoroughly's interpreter and field assistant. Yet he often felt chained to both the church and the Thoroughlys, and impotent to reverse the path his life had taken since the day the Reverend made that trip to his parents' quarters.

Even when news came from the Wetlands that Lavinia had broken off her engagement, Chandin could only think with curdling cynicism, I knew this would result! I could have told her that it would not have lasted! As long as she stayed in the Wetlands he would be able to keep at bay his unquenchable desire for her and his ferocious hatred, not of her but of the effect she wielded. But a crisis would arise, he knew, if he were to come face to face with her again—if, that is, she were to one day return to the island of Lantanacamara.

Before Lavinia returned to live in Lantanacamara, Pohpoh's parents seldom spoke to one another unless it was absolutely necessary. Sarah, whose reserved nature did not suit an occupation in the church, occupied herself grinding spices downstairs in the yard, which was cooler than the kitchen, or weeding the front yard once the sun had gone behind the house, or washing clothing.

Chandin's relationship with Reverend and Mrs. Thoroughly slowly changed. His body began to accede to its inherited nature. A faint echo of his father's curvature developed, all the more evident as he shed Wetlandish fashion and fell into dressing like an overseer. He gradually extricated himself from the Thoroughly family, a move the Thoroughlys did not comment on but seemed to respect and perhaps even welcome. In public, though, they displayed more warmth for Chandin, his wife and two children, Pohpoh and Asha, than they did for the other Indian converts, all of whom they treated as their children.

When Chandin was not at the rectory studying or translating a sermon, or at Reverend Thoroughly's house discussing church

business, he could be found in his own home, which he bought with a loan from the seminary. Years before he had dreamed of a stone and mortar house with special rooms for this and that—a library, a pantry, a guest room—like the Thoroughlys', but Chandin bought land cheaply in an underdeveloped section of Paradise called Hill Side, and hired two men to clear all but one tree from its stand of mudras. Using the hardy wood, he contracted them to build a two-storey house typical of modest dwellings in the area. The house stood atop mudra stilts. On the top floor was a drawing room, an ample kitchen and two bedrooms, the smaller shared by the two children and the larger by the adults. Porches ran on the front and back sides of the upper storey, each with a stairway leading to the ground. Between the bedrooms was a doorway leading down an enclosed stairway, the only access to a storage space that occupied a quarter of the downstairs, commonly known as the sewing room, whether or not it was used as such. The other three-quarters was open air. At home Chandin, who took no interest in the house itself, was invariably to be found lying on his side in the hammock, rocking on the back porch, reading until the sun went down and blackness fell.

The families of other, younger clergymen, who were rapidly spreading across the country, took regular excursions—day-long retreats, they called them—to the seaside or parks in the city for communion with God's nature. Chandin's family seldom made such trips. Their main outing was to the church on Sunday mornings. Chandin had lost any verve he had in the days when the chance of seeing Lavinia was his sole motivation for living.

Then one day without warning, even to her parents, she returned. Everything changed overnight. Chandin had not seen her, merely heard of her arrival, yet he clearly brightened. His children were surprised and pleased when he pointed out butterflies and flowering weeds, and purple and mandarin in the sunset sky. His colleagues noticed that he was now quick to enjoy others' wit and humour. Still, he was shy to visit the Thoroughlys' house. Sarah returned

home one afternoon to say that she had gone to pay her respects to Lavinia and that Lavinia was to visit them within the week. Chandin was like an excited child. He returned home the next day with a modest chandelier, and paid a man to install it in the drawing room. He paid another to put two coats of whitewash on his weathered mudra house. He bought a small imported rug for the living room. Out came his white shirts and trousers. He had Sarah bleach, starch and press them. He bought himself an expensive straw hat with a narrow velvet band, imported from the Shivering Northern Wetlands and purported by the retailer to be the season's top Wetlandish fashion statement. He began to dress impeccably, to speak with the accent and strut with the airs of the Wetlanders he once again seemed to so admire.

Chandin woke unusually early the day Lavinia was expected. He complained a little to Sarah about feeling unfit and lethargic, and decided to take a walk up Hill Side. He returned after the children had awakened, just as Sarah finished preparing breakfast. He was in great spirits. He complimented his wife on the meal and, after eating, he cleared off the table and, to Sarah's surprise, passed the broom across the drawing room and kitchen floors. He then swept the front and back porches and stairs. Inside he arranged and straightened and rearranged the furniture. He went out on the front porch and re-entered the house, imagining what a visitor would see on first entering. He stood on the porch again, and looked in and admired his chandelier.

Lunch time passed and Lavinia had not arrived. Trying not to show his nervousness that she might not come, Chandin lay in the hammock on the back porch and rocked. He thought about his wife and felt strangely distant from her, unrelated to her, as if a thick veil had dropped between them. His children's skin seemed suddenly too dark and their manner of talking crude. He wanted to remove himself from his wife and his children but knew it was impossible.

Lavinia arrived around tea time. She seemed genuinely happy to

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see Chandin. She showed him the presents she had brought for his children, and though he appreciated the gesture, it unsettled him: she seemed too willing to acknowledge his married state. He took two kitchen chairs out on the front porch and invited her to sit with him, while he had Sarah make a pot of tea. When Lavinia motioned to help, he quickly said, "She has learned to make a good pot. Let her do it and you come sit with me. Tell me everything that has happened since we last saw each other." He put his arm on her shoulder to guide her to the porch. He patted her shoulder in large, visible gestures, hoping to come across as brotherly.

When Pohpoh and Asha, playing out in the backyard, realized that the much anticipated Aunt Lavinia had arrived, they pelted up the back stairs. Hearing their excited entrance, Lavinia rushed toward them and, in the midst of the commotion, tea ended up being served in the kitchen, much to Chandin's disappointment. When Lavinia gave them the presents—books of Wetlandish nursery rhymes and folk tales—they asked her to read aloud right there and then, and a bond instantly formed.

Lavinia was so taken with the children that Chandin, unable to chat quietly alone with her, felt she had once again dismissed him. He watched peevishly from the back verandah as she was willingly led on a tour of the yard by the eager children. Sarah ambled alongside, grinning at their excitement. By the time the visit ended, Chandin could already feel the familiar sting of Lavinia's unattainability.

Much to his relief, Lavinia and Sarah rekindled their friendship, and Lavinia visited often. The hours between visits tended to be filled with tension in the Ramchandin household. Asha or Pohpoh, unable to stand the waiting, would sometimes ask for Lavinia to come along on excursions to the beach or river. Pohpoh noticed on these occasions that both her parents would relax. Soon Chandin became bolder, initiating outings he knew well would be of interest to the adventurous Lavinia. She never turned an offer down. When Sarah began to extend her own invitations, Chandin became sullen.

S H A N I M O O T O O
"She and I knew each other long before I married you. I wanted to marry her before I really knew you. I am not in the least comfortable that she and you are so close," Pohpoh heard her father shout one night.

"But you and she grow up like sister and brother. You couldn't marry her."

"This is utterly ridiculous. You know very well that she is not my sister. And another thing, is this how you speak with Lavinia?"

"What you mean?"

"Why don't you speak as you were taught in school? It is appalling that the educated wife of a man like myself refuses to exercise her knowledge. It just doesn't look good. What on earth would Lavinia herself think?"

"If you still so concerned with she, why didn't you wait until she returned from abroad to marry? You and I married now, boy. Ask her if she still interested in you. Ask her. Besides she never correcting how I speak. Is only you who always correcting me."

On Saturdays, when Chandin spent the day with Reverend Thoroughly going over school and church business, Lavinia would head over in her buggy to the Ramchandin house. Sometimes she arrived with her long golden hair in knots and tangles whipped up in the windy ride, her basket filled with candies and sweet-smelling potpourris from her grandmothers in the Shivering Northern Wetlands. Other times she came with her hair piled in an untidy clump on top of her head, strands dangling in her smiling face, carrying the gramophone she had brought from the Wetlands. She would play the little disks all day, and the children would dance and prance and laugh until they were sputtering with glee in the drawing room.

Lavinia loved the freedom and wildness in Sarah's garden, so unlike her mother's well-ordered, colour-coordinated beds. She brought clippings and whole plants ripped from Mrs. Thoroughly's garden, the fresh, rich dirt still under her fingernails. She brought flame ixoras for Sarah, and one memorable day she arrived with

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cactus plants, one each for Pohpoh and Asha. Cereus, she called them, pronounced like the bright, fuzzy star, a climbing succulent whose leaves and trunk were ragged and unsightly until they bloomed. "Only once a year," she said. "The flowers will offer their exquisite elegance for one short, precious night." She took them out into the yard and made a production of choosing the best planting spot. In the roots of one of the cacti was entwined a large, bulbous periwinkle snail in a gold and buff shell. Pohpoh insisted she must have the shell for an ornament. Aunt Lavinia held her back from prying the live snail from its shell, urging her to wait until it died and shed its housing naturally.

"Killing snails amounts to courting bad luck, sweetheart," she said, narrowing her eyes and shaking her head. "But let me tell you a little secret. Protect a living snail and when it dies, it doesn't forget. Snails, like most things in nature, have long memories. A snail's soul, which is invisible, mind you, will come back after it has died, looking for its old home. It will have grown bigger and stronger, and will hover around its old stomping grounds, guarding and protecting you in return—as long as you protected it first! Just wait until you find some naturally emptied shells, honey. And this is what you do: display them nicely so they can be spotted by the floating souls of the snails that once occupied them. You press them into the earth—around a bed of plants or just make pretty patterns—and you, my sweet Pohpoh, and your Mama and Asha, and everyone whom you love will be ensured the fullest protection of the benevolent forces in the universe."

Aunt Lavinia winked at her. Pohpoh giggled at the whole idea and at Lavinia's telling. Sarah smiled and shook her head, for she too enjoyed the many tales that Lavinia seemed able to spin in an instant.

"Just you wait," Aunt Lavinia, enjoying the encouragement, continued, "just be patient. You will have your collection. But I'll tell you another thing: recently emptied snail shells can have the most unpleasant, most nauseating smell—especially a bunch of them. You must make sure to boil all empty shells before you can keep

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them as ornaments. Boil them in plenty of water, for a long time, until the water has almost evaporated from the pot. And another thing: salt, lots of salt in the water is a must . . ."

During the week Sarah and Lavinia would make trips in the buggy to other towns or the market. Pohpoh and Asha enjoyed these outings. They stopped to play on the swings in El Dorado Park and for things to eat, and Aunt Lavinia was sure to shower them with pendants and charms for their hair. Lavinia commanded the buggy herself. Unknown to Chandin, she taught Sarah to handle it too, but Sarah knew better than to be seen taking the reins until she was past their village and deep into the cane fields, out of sight of the other villagers. Chandin admired things in Lavinia that he would have been ashamed to have his wife do. In the fields between towns Sarah would drive until Aunt Lavinia shouted out to stop. Aunt Lavinia would stand on the seat of the buggy or hop off onto the unpaved country trails, uncaring that the ground underfoot might be muddy or treacherous, and she would pull out her Eastman Brownie camera and click away. Before they reached the town again, Lavinia would once again take the reins.

Aunt Lavinia continued to visit but the Saturday trips to town and market gradually came to an end. It seemed to the children that their Mama and Aunt Lavinia were wanting to conduct all their visits indoors, or only as far outdoors as the backyard. There used to be a photograph of Mama leaning back against the kitchen sink, facing the camera. Perhaps it was only the photograph that caused Pohpoh to later imagine that Aunt Lavinia had also stood there with Mama, because she had an indelible impression of them both leaning on the narrow sink basin, their sides pressed tightly together. The image stayed in Pohpoh's mind, fortified with a memory of Mama trying to send her and Asha out to play, and of Pohpoh feeling something was being concealed. She had a vague memory of leaving the kitchen, noisily descending the back stairs, and then surprising them by returning quietly for candy. She crept upstairs and stood outside the kitchen listening. It frustrated her that Mama

and Aunt Lavinia seldom spoke any more except in soft, abbreviated sentences. They seemed to communicate more with their eyes, and with long looks.

Pohpoh's heart leapt when she saw the tips of Aunt Lavinia's fingers grasping Mama's waist. She understood something in that instant but save for a flash of an image of her father's face in her mind, she had no words to describe what she suddenly realized was their secret. She looked again. She tried not to let her eyes rest too long on Aunt Lavinia's fingers. Aunt Lavinia removed her hand and walked over to Pohpoh. Pohpoh stood frozen, sensing she had been caught and fearing the consequences. Aunt Lavinia squatted in front of her and took Pohpoh's face in her hands. Pohpoh inhaled lavender and remembered the little packages of potpourri.

Lavinia spoke gently to her. "Pohpoh, your mama is my very best friend. You have a very special mama. And you and Asha are very, very special. You're the best little children I have ever known. I wish you were my own children. I love the three of you very much." Pohpoh was unable to respond. But from that day on, she spent Aunt Lavinia's visits listening anxiously for her father. Whenever Mama and Aunt Lavinia did not seem to hear him return she would bound noisily up the stairs or barge in on them. At first Aunt Lavinia did not leave until Chandin returned home and she had spent some token minutes with him. But when Chandin started complaining to Sarah that Lavinia was losing interest in him even as her brother, she began leaving before he was due.

Chandin passed the school holidays travelling throughout the island with Reverend Thoroughly, dressed in white shirt, trousers and hat—like the minister—and spreading the Gospel and converting field labourers to Christianity. Aunt Lavinia and Sarah spent most of those days in the sewing room downstairs. They no longer tried to conceal their closeness from Pohpoh and Asha. The girls now woke early, anxious to see Aunt Lavinia, who still played games with them, chased them around the yard, and braided flow-

ers, seeds and feathers into their hair. She made them garlands that tinkled with the shells of dead snails that she boiled first to dull the fetidness. After a night's rain, when the clay soil was well watered, Aunt Lavinia would gather a mound of the slippery earth, carry it to a bench next to the sewing room and teach them to mould baskets the size of her palm, and fill the baskets with clay eggs.

Even with her back to them, Pohpoh was aware of Aunt Lavinia and Mama down by the mudra tree whispering and giggling to each other, or Aunt Lavinia and Mama down in the sewing room, Aunt Lavinia and Mama sitting on the sofa bed down there, Mama leaning into Aunt Lavinia's arms, or Aunt Lavinia braiding Mama's hair or standing behind Mama with her hands wrapped protectively around Mama's waist. Pohpoh turned her head away when she saw them facing each other once, and she felt them come together and hug. She imagined them kissing. She imagined Papa finding them kissing.

One day during the holidays Papa hired a hansom and driver to take the family and Aunt Lavinia to the beach. Aunt Lavinia and Mama sat on one side of the carriage and Papa, Pohpoh and Asha sat on the opposite side. Pohpoh detected an unusual hardness in Papa's face and she lurched across, placing herself between Mama and Lavinia. She leaned against Aunt Lavinia, took her hands into her own and occupied them in one game after another. Asha slept sprawled on the vacated seat. Mama looked in silence at the fields and houses scattered in the countryside. As the moments ticked by Pohpoh was conscious of her father staring at her mother as if he were seeing her for the first time.

Mama and Aunt Lavinia did not go into the water. They walked the beach while Papa sat in the surf with Pohpoh clinging to his back, trying unsuccessfully to distract him. Asha sat on his outstretched knees. His body washed from side to side with the push and pull of each wave, yet he seemed always to keep Mama and Aunt Lavinia in sight. His children jabbered incessantly, but he seemed to hardly hear what they were saying.

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After the children's swim, Aunt Lavinia took out her camera. She took a picture of Mama and Papa and then several of Pohpoh with Mama, Asha with Mama, Mama alone, Mama with both children. Pohpoh asked to be allowed to take one of Mama, Papa and Aunt Lavinia together by the water's edge. Papa got an idea from Pohpoh, grabbed the camera with playful force from Lavinia and told Pohpoh and Asha to stand aside. He watched through the lens. In the midst of their laughter and frivolity, he did not fail to see Lavinia place herself behind Mama, and he saw Mama press herself against Lavinia. Through the lens he watched carefully and saw Lavinia's hands rest tenderly on Mama's waist. He saw it all only because, that day, he intended to. And Pohpoh watched him as he did.

On the ride home, no one spoke. Even though the salt water, slapping waves, tangy sea breeze and play had made Pohpoh sleepy, she forced herself to stay awake for the entire trip. Had it not been for the wheels of the buggy crunching the stone and dried earth beneath, and the horses' hooves clopping along steadily, the speechlessness would have been unbearably loud.

That night, after the lights were put out, Pohpoh lay in her bed staring at the pomerac tree outside her open window. She listened hard but all that came from her parents' room were quiet, indistinguishable exchanges. Abruptly, there was silence.

Next morning she awakened with a start, angry at herself for having fallen asleep. She was terrified that she might have missed the outcome of her father's discovery, but he had already headed out to the school house. The only sign that something might have transpired was that Mama blinked her eyes rapidly until Aunt Lavinia arrived. She sent the children out of the house, and they too spoke in clipped, hushed voices. Pohpoh feigned sullenness so that Asha would prefer not to play with her, then she sat on the back stairs, pretending to scratch at the wood with a fingernail while straining her ears. Aunt Lavinia as usual spoke far more audibly than Mama. Pohpoh was unable to catch the full conversation but the snippets that floated down were enough for her to understand.

"We have no choice but to make a decision." There was a pause and then Aunt Lavinia said, "Don't worry. Please don't worry about that. I have known that at some time in my life I would have to face it. It looks like the time has come." Pohpoh could tell that her mother responded but was unable to hear anything distinct.

"I will leave them a note, partially explaining, and then I will write them in detail once we're there. But they will never accept any of this, and if they learn of it beforehand, they will separate us at once . . . Look, Sarah, either we do it now or we will never be able to. There would be no point for me in living if I was unable to see you every single day of my life."

Another pause. Pohpoh heard little of what Mama said.

"They are every bit a part of our lives. I too want them with us, no less than you. We will *never* be parted from the children. I promise you that."

Again Mama's words were inaudible.

"It is, dear. But I have access now to my inheritance. What better use to put it to than taking you *and* the children some place where we can be a family, where we will never be separated. Ah, my sweet, don't be afraid. Sarah dearest, tell me, is this what you want or shall we stop all of this at once?"

This time Pohpoh heard her mother. "Yes! Yes, of course. As long as the children can be with us, I want to go far, far away with you, some place where we can be together."

"Then I will get the passages. I will get them. I will arrange it all. We will be able to be together within the next few days. We can sleep at night and hold each other and . . ."

Mama did not go to the gate to see Aunt Lavinia off as she had in the past. Pohpoh suddenly felt very grown up. She also felt weak and dizzy, knowing that she and her sister and her mother were going to go away—where she could not imagine—without her father. While she had no desire to tell him, she knew she was holding a terrifying secret.

For the next few days Pohpoh shivered even in the sunshine,

while Asha sweated in her ignorance. She withdrew from Asha and began to collect things in a little bag. She gathered seeds and shells from the garden. She carefully snapped a leaf off the cereus plant, which was thriving but had not yet blossomed. She was determined one day to see the spectacular blossoms that Aunt Lavinia had described so rapturously. When the white sap stopped flowing like blood from the snapped-off end, she wrapped the leaf in a handkerchief, also a present from Aunt Lavinia, and placed it in her bag.

During the next days, Aunt Lavinia did not visit. Mama and Papa avoided each other's eyes but it was noticeable even to Papa how busy Mama kept herself, and how much attention she was paying to getting meals on time, to cleaning up and straightening the house.

Then the day arrived. It was a cool morning. Rain had fallen all night and only recently let up. Insects were clamouring. Pohpoh saw the signs early that Aunt Lavinia would be coming. Once Papa was out of the house, Mama dressed in clothes she might have chosen for a special church event. She insisted on dressing Pohpoh and Asha, even though both were capable of readying themselves. When Mama slid the new dresses off their hangers, Pohpoh knew they had been chosen a while ago, for the garments had been pressed and placed in the cupboard for easy access. She made them wear their fancy shoes and new socks. There was such urgency in Mama's actions that neither child protested or asked questions. Pohpoh wondered if Asha also understood what was happening, for she noticed how unusually agreeable and attentive she was to Mama's every wish.

Aunt Lavinia arrived before they had finished their breakfast. The children were startled but Mama didn't seem at all surprised, even though Aunt Lavinia had entered through the back gate, one that was used so seldom it had all but grown over with brambles. Neither did Mama seem interested that she had brought the buggy and horse all the way into the backyard instead of parking in front as usual. Pohpoh noticed that even though bright sunshine had followed the night's long rain, the buggy was fully covered. She

observed too that Mama and Aunt Lavinia regarded each other with a strained formality.

Then Aunt Lavinia spoke quietly and urgently to Mama. "He has already gone off with my father. But I don't know how long they will be gone. We'd better hurry." Mama didn't move but held her hands up as if uncertain. Aunt Lavinia moved closer. Mama instantly backed away.

"You manage all the passages? The ship sailing today self? Look how it rain last night. It won't postpone, Lavinia, eh? It don't have another sailing for months, right?"

Aunt Lavinia stood still. She bit her lower lip. Then she very calmly but firmly said, "This is the last sailing before the rains. We *must* hurry, my sweetest."

Mama became unfrozen and began clearing off the table.

"Are the things in the sewing room?" Aunt Lavinia asked. Mama nodded and Aunt Lavinia bolted downstairs and started hauling boxes and trunks up into the drawing room, then down the back stairs and out to the buggy. Her shoes squeaked sharply with each step in the wet earth. Insects carried on their ruckus.

Pohpoh watched from a distance. There were already two trunks atop the buggy, strapped down with thick leather belts. She wondered where Aunt Lavinia got such strength. Asha followed Aunt Lavinia down the narrow stairs to the sewing room. Pohpoh could hear her asking Aunt Lavinia questions—what this was for and what that was for—and for the first time Aunt Lavinia was too preoccupied to answer carefully. Her tone was unindulgent and oddly sharp, and so the questions, obtuse and pointless, kept coming, as though answers were not what Asha really needed. Pohpoh stood in the doorway between the verandah and the kitchen and watched Mama busily closing windows and gathering photographs off the walls. Then Aunt Lavinia came up the back stairs and said it was time, and they must leave at once if they intended to make the sailing. It was only then that Mama, holding the children's velvet hats in

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her hand, pulled Asha and Pohpoh close, stooped down to face them and whispered, as though there were someone else in the room who should not hear.

"We going on a long trip, far away. We going with Aunt Lavinia on a boat. For a long time. Papa doesn't know. Is a surprise. I pack up all your things. Everything pack up." She placed a hat on each child's head. She bit her lip and blinked her eyes rapidly as she pulled firmly on the ribbons and tied a bow, first under Asha's chin and then Pohpoh's.

"Now I want you to go like nice girls quiet-quiet inside the buggy. You have to sit down and stay quiet-quiet until we get far away, you hear me? Okay now go, quickly. Aunt Lavinia will take you downstairs."

Aunt Lavinia placed her hands protectively on their shoulders and ushered them down the back stairs. At the bottom they waited for Mama. The sun had suddenly come out and the wet leaves on the trees and shrubs were glistening. Mama stood on the top stair, looked around at the yard and then, with a deep breath, ran down.

Just as they entered the buggy Pohpoh remembered her bag with all the seeds and the shells and the cereus cutting.

"My bag, my bag. I have to get my bag." She ran toward the steps shouting.

Mama and Aunt Lavinia tried to grab her but she was already ascending the back stairs. Aunt Lavinia headed after her and suddenly stopped. Pohpoh came to a halt, for she too heard footsteps.

"Come on. Pohpoh, come now! Come here!" Aunt Lavinia snapped an urgent whisper.

Pohpoh froze in terror. Her father had returned. Unsuspecting, he had strolled up the front stairs and across the verandah, had already unlocked the front door and was walking through the drawing room toward her.

Pohpoh stood still, unable to breathe, the whole world turning black around her. She saw her father hesitate, the cock of his head

and the sudden twist of his body revealing he had noticed that pictures were missing from the walls, that the curtains were drawn, that the house was uncommonly tidy. She imagined what he was seeing—things cleared away or cleared out. She heard his unsure footsteps walk to the bedroom he shared with Mama.

Aunt Lavinia no longer whispered. "Pohpoh, Pohpoh," she called out sharply. She tried to grab Pohpoh's hand when she heard Chandin cry, "Sarah!" The nervousness in his voice made her pull back. When he called the second time his voice was unrecognizable.

Chandin swept through the kitchen and onto the back verandah. Aunt Lavinia backed down the stairs in haste. He saw Pohpoh and ran past her. She turned to watch him but the sun had caught on the jagged edge of the porch's iron roof and the spot dazzled like a blinding star. She heard her father descending the stairs, two, three at a time. She heard everyone shouting at once. She heard her father screaming, her mother screaming and Aunt Lavinia's voice, suddenly deep and raspy, shouting her name and Asha's. She heard Asha screaming.

It was Asha she heard most clearly, "No! No! No! Pohpoh! Pohpoh, Pohpoh. I want Pohpoh. No! I want Pohpoh." Then she heard the buggy rolling swiftly through the yard. She lay in a puddle on the floor of the verandah, her nose against the damp wood floor, shutting out the sounds. She covered her eyes with both hands.

It seemed as though hours passed before her father dragged Asha, heaving with incessant dry sobs, up the stairs. He stood on the verandah in his Wetlandish whites, and not until the sound of the horse and buggy had completely died out did he move. He kicked the banister again and again, first with his right foot, then with his left. He hobbled into the house. The two children huddled on the verandah floor, unsure and terrified. He seemed oblivious to their presence. They watched as he swiped at the kitchen counter, sending pots and pans and cutlery crashing to the floor, clanging and spinning. Asha began a soundless, fitful crying. Pohpoh held her

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breath and covered her mouth. Her eyes missed nothing. Plates and cups and glasses shattered all over the kitchen floor. Her father tore through the house smashing ornaments. Asha and Pohpoh turned to face whichever direction he took, keeping him locked in their sight. He thundered into his bedroom, kicking and banging the walls. They heard the drawers of the armoire being yanked out. Pohpoh knew he was seeing emptiness. He came out with a tin, thundered into the kitchen, banged the container on the table. He rifled through photographs, pitching some on the floor. Those of his wife or Lavinia Thoroughly he crumpled into a ball, then spat on, all the while crying and making growling sounds. His children cried even more seeing him cry.

His task so blinded him that he did not notice Pohpoh tiptoe to her room. She walked straight to her Bible, which sat on the table where she and Asha did their homework. She shook the Bible and out fell a photograph. Her heart beat rapidly. It was the one of Aunt Lavinia and Mama that her father had taken at the beach not long before. She shoved it in her pocket and, holding her breath, made her way toward the verandah.

Her father's skin and hair were drenched in sweat. He staggered as though drunk and threw the crumpled photographs into the kitchen sink. He struck a match on the window sill and dropped it. It did not take long for the little flames to become one large one. The flame leapt up from the sink, burning blue and orange. Black smoke tumbled upwards and flecks of blackened ash sputtered throughout the kitchen.

The story of Chandin Ramchandin's wife and Reverend and Mrs. Ernest Thoroughly's daughter spread across the island with the swiftness of a brush fire and the quietness of ripples in a sugar-factory pond. The affair was not discussed during the evenings when villagers congregated in the shade of their favourite trees to take in the breeze, talk out their problems and hear a little gossip. More than half the labourers on the island had converted to Rev-

erend Thoroughly's church and no one wanted to be seen or heard partaking in idle chatter involving his name. But when one person met another, under their breath and with hands perched at their lips, people did indeed speak.

"You hear about—?" The sentence would remain unfinished, a flick of the head in the direction of the church being enough.

"What about the children?"

"By him, na!"

"Hmmm, he take up the bottle, I hear."

And that was more than enough for the talkers to feel pangs of guilt, for they felt as though they were discussing, not the Ramchandins or Lavinia, but rather their Reverend, their church and their God.

Chandin Ramchandin never set foot in the school house or the church again. The Thoroughlys, mortified by the actions of their once-treasured daughter and by Sarah, let go of their ties to him. He fenced off his house crudely with chicken wire and stayed indoors, waiting in a spot equidistant from the back door and the front door, expecting one or both of the women to return to try and nab the children.

He did not let them out of his sight. He stood guard as they showered in the outdoor bathroom. He waited for them not far from the latrine. For the first few weeks after the shattering of his world, he slept in his bed with a child on either side.

One night he turned, his back to Asha, and in a fitful, nightmarish sleep, mistook Pohpoh for Sarah. He put his arm around her and slowly began to touch her. Pohpoh opened her eyes. Frightened and confused by this strange, insistent probing, she barely breathed, pretending to be fast asleep. She tried to shrink away from under his hand. Suddenly, awakening fully, he sat up. Then he brought his body heavily on top of hers and slammed his hand over her mouth. She opened her eyes and stared back at him in terror. A sweat covered his face and neck, and dripped on her. Glaring and

breathing heavily like a mad dog, he pinned her hands to the bed and forced her legs apart.

That is how it started. The following night he sent the two children to sleep in their own room, but they both came to know that he would call for one or the other to pass at least part of the night in his bed.

Soft-edged shadows danced on the wall: a dog with drooping ears but no sound to accompany its opening and closing mouth, a rabbit with long ears, a butterfly gracefully beating the wall with its wings as it ascended and then transformed into a giraffe's head on a long neck.

Late into the night, long after their housework and school studies were done, sleep was impossible. The flame in a kerosene lamp sitting on the floor jumped in the breeze passing through the window. Too exhausted to sit at the study table, yet too frightened and tense to sleep, Pohpoh and Asha lay together in the narrow bed against the wall. In the yard crickets chirped. From the other side of their bedroom door came the low voice of their father in the drawing room, mumbling tuneless phrases from church songs. Occasionally he muttered long and animated conversations with himself, sometimes crying or pleading or angrily cursing.

Asha lay huddled in Pohpoh's chest between arms that were magical and elegant, making creatures dance and transform gracefully. She hugged herself, her hands clenched into little fists. In the protective comfort of Pohpoh's warmth, Asha's eyes brightened, her eyebrows arched and a smile twitched and widened at each new animal. Pohpoh's mouth wore the strained shape of a smile for her little sister's eyes, but her forehead and her own eyes were dark and solemn, waiting for the inevitable ripping apart of the night. She heard every creak of the chair outside in the living room as her hands worked to calm and distract Asha. She hoped he would drop off to sleep right there in the drawing room, unable to budge with so much alcohol in his brain.

The chair in the drawing room groaned. The singing and chatter

stopped. The smile on Asha's face disappeared. She squeezed her eyes shut and turned her face into Pohpoh's chest. Her little hands grabbed Pohpoh's upper arms and she clenched her fists. The sting of pinched skin felt good to Pohpoh. She pulled Asha closer to her and squeezed her, trying to save her by obliterating her.

"Asha," he called out from the drawing room. "Asha." Asha's body trembled as if she were naked in an icy wind. Pohpoh clamped her hand over Asha's mouth.

"Stay!" Pohpoh snapped. "Don't move. I'll go. Shhh, he too drunk. He'll never know the difference. Go to sleep. You close your eyes and go to sleep, Asha baby. Nothing will happen to you, I promise."

Pohpoh unwrapped herself from Asha and went. As if it were nothing at all.



THE GARDENER'S NAME was John Hector. Sister called him John. The staff referred to him as Hector, some of the residents and I called him Mr. Hector, and to the others he was "son." Mr. Hector was still curious about me. When I passed him, stooped shirtless on his haunches weeding a bed (almost too lean for a man of his fatherly age), he would put down his tools. His eyes would tickle my flesh as they followed me, the sort of tickle that jabs rather than titillates. His curiosity, though, did not have the same sneering intent that I felt from the nurses and Toby, the yardboy. Before the incident I am about to relate, which has, contrary to first impressions, more to do with Miss Ramchandin than with him or me, he had not spoken more than a polite sentence or two to me.

"Tyler!" Before I turned to see who had called, he was getting right to the point. "The old lady interested in gardening? I know

she had big yard before it burn down. I hear it was full of all kinds of bush, plenty for teas for bad feeling and pain and thing. She had pretty-pretty plants, I hear. They say the yard also had some plants that was ugly like snake-face and dangerous like snake-bite, but plenty-plenty bush. It look like she used to take care of it—useful, pretty, bad, whatever. How she doing?" He held a stem of a yellow gerbera picked from the bed he was tending.

"Thank you for asking, Mr. Hector. She is well, all things considered."

"You know, since I growing up I hearing 'bout she. When I was a young fellow my Pappy used to threaten that if I didn't behave myself he would take me and drop me in she yard and leave me there. And now look at this, na! Is she who get drop and left in my yard!"

I quickly marched over to him, leaving Miss Ramchandin to amble in her world, hoping more than ever that it occupied her well enough to block out his conversation. I planted myself between him and her view of him, intending to block her view of the broken plant.

"Serious though," he continued, "plenty people used to go and harass the lady, but, you know, is strange, I was never one, myself, to torment anybody. Children used to go and pelt she and pelt she mango and come back frighten-frighten but still excited that they break a window or sling-shot a bird. You know how children could be, na. It was the thing to do, and though I didn't take part in it I didn't question it either. Hmmm. I never question them. Somehow you don't question things until you come face to face with the person and suddenly—suddenly you realize that behind all them stories it have a flesh-and-blood, breathing, feeling person who capable of hurting, yes! Well, ask her, na. Ask her if she want to garden. I thinking about starting a plot for the old people to have something to do. Some people say that gardening good for old people. I am proof of that!" he laughed.

I hesitated, still blocking his approach. Seeing that my focus was his cut gerbera, Mr Hector clutched it possessively.

"Is for she. I pick it to give to she. What? You want it?"

"No, no, Mr. Hector. It's just that, well, I don't really know how to explain, but Miss Ramchandin might not react well to it. I think it is a very generous thing, that you want to give it to her. It's very touching, actually. No one here has really been kind to her."

His eyes roamed my face. I felt as though he was looking for an angularity to my jaw line and cheekbone, inspecting my moustache and other facial hair to help confirm a notion. The muscles of my cheeks became devilishly ticklish. I was afraid my eyes would begin to flicker on their own, as they were given to doing whenever I became shy.

"You see," I said, "I am beginning to understand some things about her and I think that she does not like things in nature to be hurt. To her, the flower and the plant would be both suffering because they were separated from each other. You know what I mean? It would be as if its arm had been cut off or something. I think it would upset her greatly and set her back."

He thought a while. "That make some sense, if you look at it in a particular way. Well, you want it? Take it, na. It pick already. No sense it go to waste."

It was an awkward moment, for no sooner had he offered it than he became uncomfortable. His eyes, whose aqueous tranquillity I was noticing for the first time, now glanced across the yard.

"I don't mean nothing by that, you know! I mean, don't take it the wrong way. I married and thing. I not funny, you know. Is just that the thing picked already—" He was so nervous that the flower fell out of his hand and we both reached to pick it up. I got to it first, he jumped back and I handed it to him. The loose, thin flesh on his arms and on his belly had previously hinted to me of his greater age, yet suddenly, instead of age I saw the sun-darkened skin and rugged muscles of a man accustomed to hard labour.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Hector. I understand. It's a very beautiful gerbera but, you know, if I take it I will have the same problem. It will be in my possession as I walk the grounds and Miss

Ramchandin might well be upset. I would really love to have it, but it would be better if you gave it to one of the other nurses or residents."

"Yes, yes! Good idea." He turned away so fast I felt a shrinking inside.

"About the gardening idea," I called out quickly. "I will suggest it. I think it will be a very good idea, myself." He turned and, without stopping, continued to walk backwards. "But give me a little time. She has hardly said any words and it's a struggle to know what she wants."

"You real sensitive to her, eh!" Again he became shy, calling out, "I will keep a place for her. When she ready, it will be there for her."

He could easily have been my father's age—I barely knew my father—and his past kindnesses had struck me as fatherly. But suddenly, Mr. Hector seemed ageless.

I walked the few paces back to Miss Ramchandin. She had come to a complete standstill, waiting for me. I had then yet another feeling toward Mr. Hector. I felt breathless from the excitement of his attentions, but at the same time more than a little nauseous from his discomfort and polite disdain. Discomfort or disdain, they amounted to the same: he recoiled from me and it was his recoiling that stung, made me feel as though my back were exposed, or more pointedly, as though I had been caught with my trousers off, awaiting a whipping with a guava cane. I felt that the entire staff, including Sister and the residents and Toby, had seen our push-and-pull with the gerbera, had seen him walk away, leaving me standing there, humiliated. I took a quick glance at the flower bed he had been tending. He was stooped again, his back to me. I felt dizzy and sick. Why did I want to come face to face with him in some dark room, some dark night? Why did I want to put my arms around him and be in turn embraced by him, engulfing and protecting me? Why did I so desperately want to offer myself up to him and make promises that would cause him to swoon with desire?

At my side Miss Ramchandin cooed like a young bird and took no notice of me. I was a roller coaster of emotions and thoughts, reasoning one minute that if he returned my caresses, he would be as bad, as depraved, as perverse as I, that a man of his age and respect would be complicit, an accomplice—Mr. Hector, whom the staff quite liked, would be just like me—and then reasoning the next that if I did not so loathe my unusual femininity, his rejection of me would not be so devastating. Trying to change him or his reaction might well bring only grief. I decided there and then that I would change my own feelings about myself. I would, I must, cast him out of my thoughts and stand tall.

In moments of despair, thoughts of Cigarette Smoking Nana always reassured me. I remembered the sly smiles, comforting complicity and camaraderie that she and I had shared. But thoughts of Nana were a temporary bandage. I didn't know how to cast Mr. Hector and the incident from my mind. Nana had accepted me and my girlish ways but she was the only person who had ever truly done so. Thoughts of her suddenly lost their power. Try as I might, I was unable to stand tall. I wondered for the umpteenth time if Nana would have been able to accept and love the adult Tyler, who was neither properly man nor woman but some in-between, unnamed thing.

Just then Miss Ramchandin started mumbling. Jumbled, mumbled words came from her mouth. Her voice was low, hardly louder than a whisper, and hoarse. Slowly I made out individual words and then sentences. She was reciting over and over, a ditty that children sing and play games to:

Ole lady walk, ole lady fall.

Hit she belly. "Lord!" she bawl.

Crick crack, all say oops!

Brick brack, break she back,

Le we go tief pom-er-ac.

I decided to do battle against the sinking feeling, and joined in softly. She grew excited, watched my face and laughed wildly, the way children do. I walked lighter and clapped my hands to her chant. I felt like an explorer charting her life in murky, unmapped waters. I was not sure what I was discovering beyond her voice but I felt it would not be long before I would have the privilege, and honour, of entering her world. Across the way another resident was on the path brushing himself frantically. Mr. Phu was often sure that red ants were crawling on him or in his food and was known to dash his plate of food to the floor believing that it was riddled with vermin.

Suddenly Mr. Hector was coming toward us, speaking loudly. He was carrying a full gerbera plant, flowers, leaves and roots protruding from a large ball of soil in one hand, a spade in the other. He focused on Miss Ramchandin.

"Follow me. She will be the first one to put down a plant. Come. Bring her."

The turnaround was faster than I could have dreamed. I grinned. An idea came to me and I excitedly told him to wait right there, not to leave her for a single moment. I ran to her room only yards away and fetched the cereus plant sprouting in the milk can. Then I followed the sinewy, sun-darkened gardener and Miss Ramchandin, who continued singing the ditty.

At the flower bed Mr. Hector held the succulent cereus up to the sky and examined it curiously. "Why you want to plant this? But it is ugly!" I explained its promise while Miss Ramchandin stood nearby uninterested, distracted by her own mumbling and singing. Mr. Hector shrugged, dug two holes and inserted the plants. He paused, rested his arm on the handle of the spade and began to talk.

"Look. You know every time I see you, my heart does break. I does watch you and, sudden-so, it does feel like something heavy sit on my chest. Is like I recognize you but is a sad feeling. I realize now what it is."

He grabbed the spade and took a few erratic digs at the soft earth. He stopped again. He squinted at the purple hills on the far side of the valley, and his aqueous eyes grew sad.

"I had a brother. He was older than me. Is about—what?—forty years now? More than that since I last see him. He was a young boy. Eleven or twelve, something so. Mammy send him away. Is he you remind me of. Randolph was his name. Randolph Joseph Hector. Randy, we call him. I did love him too bad! And so many years pass and I don't even know if he made it through life."

"Why did your mammy send him away?" My voice was heavy. I wanted to hear the reason and at the same time hoped he would not have the brazenness to say it.

"He was kind of funny. He was like you. The fellas in the village used to threaten to beat he up. People used to heckle he and mock his walk and the way he used to do his hands when he was talking."

That he was brave enough to say it suddenly lifted a veil between us. Unexpectedly, I felt relief it was voiced and out in the open. I had never before known such a feeling of ordinariness.

"Randy couldn't open his mouth in front of Pappy, na. His voice was soft-soft, just like yours, and the way he used to talk, quiet and sing-song sing-song used to make Pappy crazy. You know I can't remember Randy face too good, but I still carry his voice with me. I could hear it plain-plain, like if I had just talk with he this morning. Pappy used to beat him bad-bad, just for talking so. That is why Mama pack him up one day. She leave me by the neighbour while she went away with him. Same day she come back but she come back alone. When I ask where he was, she say, 'Where yuh father can't reach him,' and she tell me not to bring up his name again. I remember Pappy asking where Randy was and Mammy saying she take him to live in a church mission down south, and Pappy never ask for him again. I miss him too bad, but if I talk about him Mammy used to cry, so I stop and as time pass it was like he didn't ever exist. Is like you bring Randy back to me, boy."

Mr. Hector massaged his cheeks with a dirt-covered hand. When he looked directly at my face, his eyes were even wetter and darker.

"I watching you and I want to ask you so many questions but I don't even know what it is I want to know. I want to know something but I don't know what."

My attraction to Mr. Hector, the gardener, subsided like a flame that fell down and died out. I still wanted to gather him up and hug him but only to comfort. He too was tamed, and I felt from and toward him the caring of a brother.

The significance of the previous episode was not to dwell on issues about myself or to relate the bond forming between Mr. Hector and me. He and I had been carrying on as if we alone were privy to our conversation. Yet Miss Ramchandin, in her quiet, invisible way, had heard most of what was said.

After our conversation Mr. Hector departed and I stood quietly for several moments. For how long I can't say but when I looked up and saw Miss Ramchandin approaching, I realized she had wandered off. I thought I had been constantly aware of her in the periphery of my vision. My inattentiveness—irresponsibility Sister would surely have called it—startled me.

She carried something bundled under her arm. Clearly she was hiding it and would not show it until we were back in her room with the door closed. She walked ahead of me excitedly. I turned to wave to my new friend but he just kept tilling the soil. She began to sing in a whisper:

Ole lady walk, ole lady fall.
Hit she belly. "Lord!" she bawl.
Crick crack, all say oops!
Brick brack, break she back,
Le we go tief pom-er-ac.
Ole lady walk, ole lady fall.
Hit she belly. "Lord!" she bawl.

A bird flew overhead. She laughed and waved. "Poh poh poh-poh," she called softly and then carried on.

Crick crack, all say oops!
Brick brack, break she back,
Le we go tief pom-er-ac.

Once the door was shut she spun around to face me, her bundle now hidden behind her back. I was so buoyed by my conversation with Mr. Hector I did not want to be distracted. But Miss Ramchandin knew how to catch one's attention. I heard something but was unsure what it was, and then I realized she was whispering.

"What? Did you say something, Miss Ramchandin?"

"Asha? You know Asha?" she whispered. Her voice was cracked but she had spoken.

"Yes, yes. I know Asha. I mean I know of her. I heard of her. But I don't know her." She was mentioned in the rumours. No more was said of her than that she was the other Ramchandin child, of no consequence because she had disappeared long, long ago.

"Where Asha?"

"I don't know. I don't know. Do you know?" What a shame, I thought, that her first real communication was to be thwarted by me.

Her question had nothing to do with what happened next. She whipped the bundle from behind her and revealed a nurse's white uniform and a pair of nylon stockings the colour of black tea. She offered me the dress. My first thought was that we would surely get into trouble. Clearly she had taken them from the clothesline in the yard while Mr. Hector and I were talking.

"Miss Ramchandin," I whispered, "what are you doing with that uniform?" She clutched it to her chest. "That belongs to one of the nurses. What do you want that for? I better go and take them back."

She slowly bundled the dress into a ball again and put it behind her back with a look of disappointment and defiance. I dreaded a conflict with her.

"Do you want that uniform?"

She said nothing but now I knew there was more in her head than bird and cricket and frog imitations and childhood chants.

"Well, do you want to wear it?" I asked, using a tone of gentle defiance to match hers. There was no harm in a little indulgence as long as we could get the uniform back on the clothesline before morning.

"You." She looked at the ground.

"Me? Me what?"

"You. You want to wear it." She produced it from behind her back again, shook it out and held it toward me. "You want to wear it."

I stared speechlessly at the calf-length dress and the stockings. I could only guess that she had heard my conversation with Mr. Hector. I felt she had been watching me and seeing the same things that everyone else saw. But she had stolen a dress for me. No one had ever done anything like that before. She knows what I am, was all I could think. She knows my nature.

I reached for the dress. My body felt as if it were metamorphosing. It was as though I had suddenly become plump and less rigid. My behind felt fleshy and rounded. I had thighs, a small mound of belly, rounded full breasts and a cavernous tunnel singing between my legs. I felt more weak than excited but I was certainly excited by the possibilities trembling inside me. I hugged the dress.

"Thank you. Thank you so much, Miss Ramchandin. Yes, I will wear it. I will put it on here so you can see it. Before you go to sleep. Let's eat and get ready for bed and then I will slip it on. All right?"

By the light of one lamp, with the window and door closed, Miss Ramchandin waited patiently for me to keep my promise. I had returned to my room and retrieved a scarf, a little powder and the remains of a rouge cake that had been left in my dresser drawer by the previous occupant. Back with Miss Ramchandin I drew the room divider and stepped behind it. I unbuttoned my shirt and felt an odd shame that my mammary glands were flat. I dropped my

pants. My man's member mocked me yet was a delight to do battle with when pulling the stockings up against my thighs. I had no corset to hold them up, but it was enough to see the swirl of hairs on my calves and thighs trapped under the nylon. There was something delicious about such confinement. I held up the dress and slowly stepped into it, savouring every action, noting every feeling. I powdered my nose, daubed rouge on my cheeks and carefully smeared a dollop across my lips. I looked down at my stockinged feet and the dress, pressed it with my flat palms against my body and worried that I might look disappointingly ridiculous to my benefactress. I took a deep breath.

"Ready?" I called out in a loud whisper.

When I stepped out from behind the curtain, I saw that Miss Ramchandin had made herself busy. She was piling furniture in front of the window. She glanced at me, made no remark and kept right on building the tower. I walked over to her and stood where I was bound to be in her vision. At first I felt horribly silly, like a man who had put on women's clothing for sheer sport and had forgotten to remove the outfit after the allotted period of fun. I felt flat-footed and clumsy. Not a man and not ever able to be a woman, suspended nameless in the limbo state between existence and nonexistence. She had already set a straight-back chair on the table in front of the window. On top of that she placed a stool and was now preparing to stand on her bed and place an empty drawer on the pinnacle.

Just as I was hoping the tower would come crashing down and extinguish me forever, a revelation came. The reason Miss Ramchandin paid me no attention was that, to her mind, the outfit was not something to either congratulate or scorn—it simply was. She was not one to manacle nature, and I sensed that she was permitting mine its freedom.

I took the drawer from her, climbed up on her bed and placed it at her tower's peak. I would have to pull it all down before Sister's inspection, but right then every instinct in me wanted to take all the furniture in her room and help her build the biggest and tallest

C E R E U S C O M M O N N I G H T

tower she needed. (Sister was appalled, sure that Miss Ramchandin was building a deadly trap for the nurses. She made me take it down, naturally, but it became part of my schedule. Every night Miss Ramchandin would build and every morning I would deconstruct.)

I did not even consider leaving her room dressed as I was. I was endowed with a sense of propriety, depended on it, for that matter, for the most basic level of survival. I changed back into my trousers and white shirt, and rubbed my cheeks and lips clean. I stuffed the dress and stockings behind her dresser, deciding to keep if not to wear it again, at least for the memory of some power it seemed to have imparted. It had been a day and an evening to treasure. I had never felt so extremely ordinary, and I quite loved it.

Once Miss Ramchandin was in bed, I sat next to her and smoothed her hair back, reluctant to leave. My hand on her scalp released the sweet scent of yellow potatoes. She sighed pleasantly, with an air of accomplishment. Her breath had the delicate perfume of fresh young carrots. She began to make mellow cricket sounds. When I approached the door to leave, she paused long enough to ask, as if to the ceiling, "Where Asha?" She did not wait for an answer and immediately resumed her faint, perfect imitation of the cricket's one note song.



As they grew older, Pohpoh and Asha would sometimes slip away from their father's house for several hours, fully expecting to face his wrath on their return. The momentary escape, however, was worth any sting afterwards.

One morning Asha awoke so early that even roosters seemed

barely awake. Street sweepers were pulling their wide brooms down the road and the swish of their brooms filtered through the tail end of her dreams. She waited quietly and patiently to embark on the outing Pohpoh had promised. When Asha could lie still no longer, she tiptoed across the room and sat on her sister's bed, hoping to nudge her out of her sleep. Pohpoh, forever on guard, suddenly stiffened and awakened fully. Seeing Asha in front of her grinning nervously, she relaxed slightly.

Shafts of dusty light broke through the branches of the pomerac tree outside the open window. Pohpoh stared at the glittery dust particles that rose and fell in waves around Asha's head, partially silhouetting it in a halo of shimmering light. She slid closer to the wall to let the little girl slip under her coverlet. The bed sheets and Pohpoh's pillow held the odour of stale camphor, eucalyptus and turpentine. They clung to each other, inhaling the pleasantly sour blend of their rubbing oil and each other's talcum-sweet scent of sleep, night sweat and stale breath.

They crept out into the drawing room, every moment aware of their father's guttural breathing. The air in the closed-up room was thick with the smell of spilled full-proof babash. When Pohpoh unlatched the window above the enamel sink, yellow light sliced through the opening, hauling in a cold, fresh morning draught. Asha rubbed her bony shoulders for warmth. Pohpoh was oblivious to the cold. One ear continued to monitor her father's sleep. Asha watched her sister prepare breakfast. She stared at Pohpoh's skin, her hair, eyelashes, cheeks and nose, entranced by their change from silhouette dark to brass to gold as she glided in and out of the shaft of dancing light.

"You look like Mama," she whispered reverently.

Pohpoh stared at Asha. Pohpoh had tried to speak with Asha about the day her mother and Aunt Lavinia had left. Asha not only had been unable to remember the day, but her eyes would glaze over and her body would slump with sleepiness and fatigue,

making her look, eerily, as though an old woman were about to emerge from her. The only memory Asha seemed to have of her mother came from a photograph hidden in their armoire.

"But you can't even remember what she look like. You said you don't remember her," said Pohpoh.

Asha, hurt, raised her voice, "I do! I do. She look like you." Pohpoh rushed over and hugged her into silence. Suddenly feeling like her mother, like a mother to Asha, she looked into her sister's eyes.

"I believe you, I do," she said earnestly. When Asha seemed comforted, Pohpoh returned to her work.

She quietly tapped a solid nest of cocoa patties with a stone pestle too large for her hand, then melted the patties with molasses and water and ragged slivers of cinnamon bark over high, green flames. The thick liquid bubbled, each bubble bursting and puffing perfumed steam into the room. They ate thick slices of sweet egg bread and drank the cocoa quickly and quietly. The snoring continued. Should he awaken, there was enough cocoa for him too, but the plans for the day would have instantly ended.

Pohpoh brushed and braided her own thick, straight kohl-black hair, then did the same to Asha's. She took more care with her sister's hair than her own, handling and nudging Asha's head this way and that, imitating their mother's manner. Asha winced as her wavy hair was untangled bit by bit until it spread like an undulating fan across her upper back. Down the middle Pohpoh etched a perfectly straight part with the pointed tip of a little wooden comb.

"It have to be real neat and tidy today," she said firmly, "because today you and I going to be leaders, right?"

Asha nodded and then remembered to be perfectly still.

"Yuh hair pretty, Ashie, but I really glad mine not like yours."

"Like how?"

"Curly. Curly-curly and unruly. Yuh hair like Mama's."

Asha tried to turn to look at Pohpoh.

"My hair like Mama's? Is true, Pohpoh?" she whispered.

"Uhuh, curly just like Mama's, like the waves in the sea, crashing

and all." She divided the springy handful into three parts, working her hands like lightning. "I could even see little fish and seaweed and seeds from other countries floating in yuh hair."

"And starfish?"

"Uhuh."

"And seagulls?"

"Yep."

"And shells?"

"Yeh."

"And—" but before she could continue Pohpoh tickled her under her arms and said, "and and and." They cupped their mouths and giggled without sound. After tying one braid with a length of red cord behind the ear, Pohpoh began to rein in the wildness on the other side.

"I have bad hair, Poh?"

"No. Is just that if mine was like yours and I had to comb it out every day I wouldn't find time fuh school or to make cocoa-tea for you. It would be plenty work. It pretty, yes, but it take work to see yuh face. An yuh face pretty."

Asha was pleased. "Yuh'd just get muscles from my hair."

"I already have muscles."

"I mean more, Poh."

Asha's scalp stung from all the brushing. As she got dressed she was distracted by the stinging and pain, finding them alternately irritating and exhilarating. Her hairline pricked and itched, and she made exaggerated frowns and raised her eyebrows as high as she could in an effort to pull the hair out of the grip of the cords.

Boyie was nearby, waiting on the corner at Government Alley. He waved. Asha waved back but Pohpoh walked past without looking at him.

"Why you come here?" she said. "I tell you to wait in the park for us. You shouldn't come here."

Boyie grinned at her rebuke. He jumped in line and followed

behind the two girls. "Where are we going? What are we going to do? Tell me, na?" he asked.

Their goal, Pohpoh told them as she ran ahead, was to be the first children to arrive at El Dorado Park and to take charge of the day. She had other, secret motives. First, she wanted to pass as much of the day as possible away from her father's house. And she wanted to confront Walter Bissey, a bossy boy from school. He was the most popular boy there, and had recently become territorial in the park, harassing and shooing away Pohpoh, Asha and Boyie whenever they arrived. He led his friends in sneering at her and her sister. Today, she intended to prove to him that she and Asha were not stupid and dirty but were strong and could fend for themselves. But most of all she wanted Walter, not Boyie, to like her.

Rather than taking the cobbled street in front of their house—where people often stared at Pohpoh and Asha and shook their heads in pity—Pohpoh led Boyie and Asha to the paved drains behind the backyards. The drains were already becoming swift-running creeks of soapy suds as the neighbourhood's breakfast dishes were washed. Pohpoh nimbly manoeuvred the splashiest sections and sudden torrents. Boyie, full of admiration for Pohpoh's leadership and agility, tried to keep up. Asha followed in his tracks exactly. The backyards smelled of decaying guavas, uncleaned chicken coops and outdoor latrines. Finally they picked their way through an opening between two houses that delivered them to El Dorado Square, a block away from the playground.

Outside the southeast corner of the square, Pohpoh wedged her face between the ornate wrought-iron railing. Inside was the regular band of stray dogs. Several of them congregated near the bandstand sniffing each other. When Boyie came up beside her she winced, feeling he might be sniffing her too. Two wrought-iron benches were occupied by homeless men sprawled in deep sleep. From the highest platform of the bandstand a wiry old man swung aggressively back and forth on his heels, preaching to the sleeping figures. The three children watched him in fascination.

"... the time is at hand. *The time is at hand!* He that is unjust, let him be unjust still; and he who is filthy, let him be filthy still. Blessed are they that do His commandments that they may enter in through the gates into the city."

Across the road was the playground, in a corner of which were a row of swings, two slides and a climbing frame. Farther along, a few bay-rum trees sparsely lined the playground's edges, leaving the centre bare. Even during the rains, the earth here was cracked and scorched, a pebbly scar from the constant friction of children tearing across it.

Pohpoh planned to take control today and decide what games would be played. Anxiously, conspicuously, they waited in the centre of the playground near a standpipe surrounded by a puddle of water. The early morning sun was hot and within minutes their scalps, faces and necks were covered in a fine mist of sweat. Asha squelched her desire to play on the swings and slide, fearing this distraction would cost them the chance to be leaders. Instead she lifted her hand, pointing a finger high in the air, rocked on her heels and shouted, "The time is at hand! Repent. The time is at hand!" Boyie imitated her imitation. Pohpoh laughed, sitting on the ledge of the standpipe base, but she told Asha, "Girl! You brave yes! What if the man see yuh? Yuh better calm down yuhself."

There was still no sign of other children. Pohpoh got up and impatiently paced. Boyie picked up a large, flame-coloured seed from a mora tree nearby and tossed it to Pohpoh. Suddenly Pohpoh turned away from Boyie and grabbed Asha out of the water around the standpipe.

"Listen!" she said.

They came, seven of them, a band of uncontained wildness led by Walter Bissey. They pranced up the street, announcing themselves with the rapid *thuck thuck thuck* of a guava stick dragged hard against the iron railings that kept them out of people's yards. Three boys and four girls, all in Pohpoh's and Boyie's class. Pohpoh felt a sudden need to relieve herself.