

As the troupe arrived on the playground she waved to them, signalling that she had secured their headquarters for the day. Quiet fell over the band while they studied her and her companions. As if predetermined, they huddled together, a tight, impenetrable faction, secrets swishing from one mouth to the next.

"Over here! Come and play with us!" Pohpoh called optimistically. They looked up from their deliberations, almost in disbelief. Walter, the tallest, turned and stomped toward the threesome. His group hesitated then followed him to the centre of the playground. "Okay. But we want to play blindman's bluff," Walter said gruffly, already waving a red and white neckerchief.

"But who is to be the blind man?" Pohpoh asked, watching his every gesture.

Walter, large boned and intimidating, arranged the group, including Pohpoh, Asha and Boyie, in a circle. He began a chant that they joined in. With an outstretched finger he poked a chest with each word. When the chest was that of Pohpoh, Asha or Boyie he used his palm and pushed hard to unbalance them. Pohpoh winced with each blow but registered no antagonism on her face, a skill she had developed at home. The children bawled:

Ole lady walk, ole lady fall.
Hit she belly. "Lord!" she bawl.
Crick crack, all say oops!

At which they all enthusiastically pointed their fingers in the air and shouted loudly "Oops!" before resuming their chant:

Brick brack, break she back,
Le we go tief pom-er-ac.

The rhyme ended here, on one of Walter's group, not on whom they wanted it to fall. So they continued:

This 'n' that. Tat 'n' tit.

One two three: you are it!

And sure enough, the rhyme ended on Pohpoh, which seemed to satisfy them. She appeared pleased though she and Asha exchanged discreet glances of doubt. Walter refused to be the one to tie the neckerchief over Pohpoh's eyes. Boyie, watching sadly, scratched the soil with the tip of his shoe. Finally one of the girls accepted the task of blindfolding Pohpoh.

They spun her around and told her to count slowly up to fifty. Then she could begin to try to touch one of them. Pohpoh wanted to catch Walter, but she heard only unclear whispers, giggles, a scuffle, feet scampering in the dusty gravel, and then just the sound of an occasional cart rolling against the cobbled road in the distance, blackbirds twittering in the bay-rum trees, and the high-pitched drone of crickets, her own feet unsettling the gravel beneath her. She stood still listening for the ruffle of clothing. When she opened her mouth to breathe, she tasted the dry grittiness of lime dust risen from the trampled gravel.

Suddenly something poked her in her side. Pohpoh flung herself around with arms extended, grabbing at the air. She tried to open her eyes under the blindfold, but it was tied so tightly she could barely wink.

Whap! She was tapped hard on her head. By the time she had spun around, she again grabbed only hot and gritty air. She listened hard and heard the sound of water gurgling up and out of the standpipe tap. She called out to Asha. No reply. She called Boyie. There was just the sound of running water.

"Walter?" she whispered and picked her way, one tentative step at a time, toward the standpipe. When she got closer, she heard muffled whimpering. Asha. She quickly pried the blindfold off. Her little sister was sitting inside a pool of water under the standpipe, a bandanna tied so tightly over her mouth that her lips were

stretched apart and the front of the cloth was wet with spit. Her shoelaces were knotted together, and both her wrists were manacled with a handkerchief untidily hooked to the faucet. Pohpoh gasped, overcome by anger and fear. She looked around for Boyie but he was nowhere in sight. She untied the knots while Asha cried and begged to go home. The other children were near the roadway under a bay-rum tree huddled over a game of marbles in the dry earth. Pohpoh told Asha to wait for her at the standpipe. She puffed her chest and stormed over to the bay-rum tree.

Walter saw her coming, jumped up and stepped outside his group to pick up a stick. With an exaggerated gesture he drew a line between them and Pohpoh. Then he stood with his feet wide apart, his hands on his waist staring at her. The others formed a line alongside him and imitated his stance.

Pohpoh, wasp red, her arms folded defiantly, stood facing him. She hated him yet wished he did not think so badly of her. Out of nowhere words foamed up and took flight.

"You shouldn't do that. Why you do that?" Hardly had the words come out before her eyes filled up with tears that began to run down her cheeks. Angry at such a betrayal from her own eyes, she shouted, "All you too cruel. You stupid! Why you do that?"

Walter crossed over his side of the line.

"This is my side, you can't cross it!" Pohpoh said.

He stared at her in disbelief. He and his friends burst out cackling, hissing and jeering, as though it was the funniest joke they had ever heard. They laughed so hard they doubled over, hitting their thighs and holding their stomachs.

"Is you who draw the line? Or me? I draw the line. I go where I want. Who have stick in they hand? You or me? Go home. Go! Get away from we playground. Get away from us. Dunces. Nothing but a dunce!"

Heavy sweat popped out on Pohpoh's upper lip. She stared ahead but searched for Boyie out of the corners of her eyes. Another boy, hardly bigger than Pohpoh, spurred on by the jeering, quickly

added, "Ey, Pohpoh, is true what we hear about your mother? Where your mother, Pohpoh? You giving Boyie or you like girls?" Suddenly dizzy she shouted, "Boyie!" He was nowhere around.

"Boyie! Where is Boyie?"

"Boyie is a little coward," the boy with the stick said. "All we had to do was blow on him and he gone! The three of you cut from the same cloth. He must like boys himself."

Someone laughed. "No, boy, Boyie like dogs." The others howled wildly with disbelief at his bravery to dream up such a thing.

Walter, wielding the stick, spoke again. "Look, this is we park. This park is only for good, decent people. Get away from here and don't ever, ever—you hear me?—don't ever come back in this park." He walked right up to Pohpoh and faced her, inches between the two faces. "Ey. Look here, if we catch you near any girl we go cut ass!"

Pohpoh's breathing turned shallow and rapid. "You so full of big words. You ent worth one word, you little rat face!" Then she lunged and kneed Walter Bissey in his stomach. He doubled over and she smashed her arm down on his back. She swiftly turned and shouted out to Asha, "Run, Asha. Run that way. As fast as you can!" Pohpoh, able to run much faster than Asha, caught up to her and grabbed her arm. They bolted away, Asha leaving the ground as she was yanked along, almost like a kite being launched. They made a direct line toward the road, Pohpoh's speed increasing with each step, like flamingo feet pushing water back just before take-off.

Walter remained on the ground, doubled up, hugging his stomach and screaming in agony. The other children backed away for a moment and then one of them shouted, "Get them! Don't let them get away! Cut they ass!" But Pohpoh and Asha were already racing to their safest place, the cemetery a block over and across the road, where the other children never entered for fear of being attacked by people who made their homes under the roofs of crumbling tombs or, worse, of being whisked away by restless corpses to some remote place from which there was no return.

Under the shelter of a roomy stone mausoleum Pohpoh sat cross-legged and sulked. Asha was yanking out knotgrass, rabbit grass and stunted trees sprouting from cracks in the cold floor. She watched Pohpoh pout and mutter what sounded like curse words. She wanted to touch her sister's face and hug her tightly for getting into a fight because of her, and she also felt guilty that Pohpoh was ridiculed and had to endure all those stupid insults. She knew Pohpoh wanted Walter and his friends to like her.

Like the air throughout the cemetery, the spacious tomb smelled of burnt wick and candlewax. On a stone plinth under a plaque with much raised writing, a rusted milk can with cut ixoras and red ginger lilies, their tips turning brown in the heat, rested in a hardened pool of candlewax. Leaf cutter ants zigzagged their way to the flowers, each almost hidden by a little piece of leaf or flower waving like a flag above its body. Asha squatted down to watch them, fascinated by the perfectly cut pieces of plant. She reached down and lifted one. It dropped its umbrella and moved its legs rapidly. She picked up the leaf and tried to put it back in the ant's pincers. When it wouldn't close its pincers, Asha dropped the leaf and tried to get the ant to pinch her flesh. The pincers remained wide open. She put the ant back on its path and it scurried off at a distraught pace. Suddenly the entire line of ants ran off in different directions.

"Oh-oh! Look what I do. I make the bachacs go crazy!" she whispered, afraid to disturb Pohpoh's slump.

Without looking at her, Pohpoh answered, "Don't worry. Is nothing. Just wait one minute. You'll see. They'll get back in their line and carry on."

"Poh? How they know where to go?" Asha jumped at the opportunity to engage her sister. Pohpoh got up from her corner and squatted with Asha.

"They have their way. Look at this." She interrupted the ants' path by rubbing her finger hard across it. The first couple of ants stopped at the interruption and then carried along, followed by the others. "Now watch this." Pohpoh took a tiny piece of blackboard chalk from

her pocket. She cut across their path and encircled one of the ants in a line drawn thickly, chalk powder flying. The ants outside the circle marched up to the chalk line and one after the other backed off, refusing to cross. The ant trapped in the circle ran around the inside of the chalk edge, frantically changing course, standing on its hind legs and then crouching on the ground in panic. Outside the circle several ants dropped their leaves and scurried back in the direction they came. Within seconds a new path bypassing the circle had been created, and the ants outside it hesitantly resumed their trek, more cautiously than before. The ant in the circle stood completely still. Pohpoh and Asha watched in silence.

"Why you do that?" Asha finally asked.

"Because," Pohpoh snapped. Then after several long seconds she said, "I hate Boyie. Why he didn't stay with us? I hate Walter. I hate everybody." Wiping tears from her eyes she jumped over the railing of the tomb and stomped off. "I wish Papa was dead," she mumbled softly. "I hate him. I hate him. I wish he was dead."

The cemetery was quiet except for the creaking sounds of tall, old samaan trees weighed down by hundreds of flowering bromeliads. It was too hot for the birds, and they rested in the branches. In the distance came the dull *tock tock* sound of two metal spades hitting stone and shovelling out dirt and gravel for a new grave. The two gravediggers, Pohpoh and Asha were the only ones in the cemetery. Pohpoh, her head hung low, listlessly hopped on and off the cemetery's narrow path. Asha followed at a distance, sometimes running so as not to lose sight of her. On either side of the cobbled path were more tombs, and in the air was the inescapable odour of burnt wax. Pohpoh, with Asha following, left the winding path and exited the cemetery.





ASHA RAMCHANDIN, ASHA Ramchandin, Asha Ramchandin. In quiet moments after a long day caring for your sister, when I would rather lie in my bed in the nurses' quarter and have my mind lie fallow, your name repeats itself mantra-like in my head. At night I fall asleep clinging to the hope that you are happy and well, and you would soon know that it is now safe to return to Paradise.

I often call out Randolph John Hector's name, too. And Sarah Ramchandin's. And Lavinia Thoroughly's. Where are you all?

Today Asha, watching your sister sit in her one-room bungalow stroking a cat she calls "Pohpoh" sometimes and "Asha" other times, I do feel despair. I wonder at how many of us, feeling unsafe and unprotected, either end up running far away from everything we know and love, or staying and simply going mad. I have decided today that neither option is more or less noble than the other. They are merely different ways of coping, and we each must cope as best we can. You see, Asha, I must rationalize your leaving and her staying—and, as many see it—going mad. Otherwise, I must admit to feelings of anger that you left your sister behind. While I don't begrudge your leaving, I wonder if you ever tried to encourage her to go with you. Asha, from the way she calls your name, it is clear that she, more importantly than I, also does not begrudge you.



AT RECESS POHPOH mostly kept to herself, though Boyie still often hovered nearby. She watched the other children as if from the

other side of a fence. The boys climbed the hills behind the school looking for snake skins, thriving on the thrill that they might stumble on a snake itself. One day when they turned up neither snake nor skin, they collected handfuls of battimamselles, daddy-long-legs, tree frogs, millipedes and snails that got flushed up in the rains. Pohpoh watched the group huddle in a circle, their heads locked together like a mass of papaya seeds.

"I bet you I know what they're going to do," Boyie whispered, noticing she was curious. "You see, the other day we learned about the reflexes of plants. Teacher said plants respond to gentleness. He told us too that plants could show signs of trauma. Watch this. I bet they are going to do an experiment based on that idea. Want to bet me?"

Pohpoh sneered at him but quietly worried he might be right.

Candlelight flickered across their concentrating faces. Walter Bissey held an inch of candle first about one foot away, then gradually drew it closer to a praying mantis gripped in a pair of lab tweezers. The insect tensed and rubbed its front legs up and down. The boys grew more fascinated. Their bodies seemed to tingle with excitement.

"Ey! Ah tell you, go close na, boy!"

"Slow down, slow down. Doh go so fast, na!"

As the flame got nearer the mantis' body began to arch. The insect twisted its head, its front legs a blur. The instant the flame touched a back leg, the mantis' movements stopped abruptly. It became as rigid as if it had disappeared.

Pohpoh bit her lower lip. She stood perfectly still.

The mantis' chitinous body smoldered where the flame had touched it, crackling and hissing as ruby sparks spat and sputtered. The abdomen took the longest to disintegrate but the boys were resolute. One held the truncated torso with the tweezers as another torched more persistently. When, eventually, the head fell off like the tip of a spent match, one boy reached into his jar and pulled out a grasshopper.

Pohpoh leered at them angrily but she was unable to move. She

was invisible to all of them, including the tall boy named Walter. At school the next day Pohpoh insisted that Boyie accompany her. They followed the crude-smelling, silver trails that led to a colony of periwinkle snails, alive and ripe and vulnerable to the torture squad's delights. One clean blow with a heavy boot or the blunt end of a guava rod could shatter the snails into a gooey green, yellow and pink jigsaw. From Aunt Lavinia, Pohpoh believed such an act would bring down a torrent of bad luck on the boys who committed it, and she believed good fortune would be visited on a protector of the snails. She and Boyie began fervently collecting the periwinkles in the heavy cotton bag she had crudely stitched especially for this purpose. Once the bag was bulging and the thread that held it stretched beyond its capacity, they carried the snails down to the backyard fence. There she turned the bag out over the stone wall and delivered the creatures from the reach of the school yard's bullies.

Nudging Pohpoh away from the wall, Boyie looked expectantly at her.

"Pohpoh Ramchandin," he began to chant as if it were a mantra, "Pohpoh Ramchandin Pohpoh Ramchandin Pohpoh Ramchandin." He guided her to the back wall of the small school building, which seemed to quiver with the shadows of a tamarind tree. Shrieks and screams of after-school wildness floating through half-open wooden jalousies stoked his pubescent desire. Joking and teasing, he leaned his pudgy body into hers, pinning her like a butterfly to the cool jagged wall up which daddy-longlegs crawled. He rubbed his hand up and down the front of her white school blouse. A small club was growing in his pant leg, she noticed, and was starting to press into her thigh.

Pohpoh threw her head back and giggled, more high pitched than usual. She ducked down, spun around and swiftly manoeuvred out of Boyie's clumsy embrace. He waited, unsure yet grinning, for firm refusal or further encouragement. She ran back to him, grabbed his hand, tugging him along with her.

SHANTI MOOTO O
"Leh we go to your house. Your bedroom," she said.

Biting the corner of his lip, he tried to yank her to a halt, protesting that they would be alone, that his mother wouldn't be home until much later.

"Of course, you bachac you," she said half-affectionately. He turned to face the corner of the building, toward a statue of the school's founder, Reverend Ernest Thoroughly. He grazed a shoulder along the length of stubbly brown wall as he limped away from her, his eyes cast on the damp stone littered with pink, wet-weather earthworms.

Pohpoh caught up with Boyie before he rounded the corner. She trapped him against the wall, grabbed his wrist and pushed his now reluctant fist inside her opened white school blouse. The fist disintegrated, weakened by its brush against a small upright nipple under the cotton petticoat. Fingers extended, explored and moulded themselves around the little hump. His other hand groped behind her, discovering with pleasure other mounds. Aroused beyond control he shoved his open mouth, tongue first like a can opener, toward her mouth. The words Pohpoh Ramchandin danced in his mind. Pohpoh Ramchandin thumped a firm palm against his chest. "Not here," she said. "Leh we go to your house, ah tell yuh—I really want to do it with yuh."

Pohpoh and Boyie headed out to his mud house on the outer edge of the Paradise Estate cane fields. They ran in the shallow, fertile gullies between crests of recently planted cane. On the other side of the cane field they came out at the village cricket pitch. Crossing the flat open area, Boyie tried to hold Pohpoh's hand. She squeezed and released it dismissively, plopping her exercise book and dictionary in his arms. She skipped ahead of him past the roughly hewn bleachers and improvised pavilion and down through a row of poui trees.

He followed her over rickety boards that lay across a ravine of foul-smelling water. They beat through curtains of mosquitoes and black flies to the back of the whitewashed ajoupa where he and his

mother lived. Inside the yard of lepayed clay she deferred to his lead. Boyie dilly-dallied by the fruit trees and insisted on showing her his brood of rabbits penned up in a decrepit hutch under the sapodilla tree. He nervously explained how he had constructed the hutch himself. Pohpoh tugged at his shirt sleeve, insisting they go inside straight to his room.

Standing before the heavy cotton curtain that cordoned off his room, he held a trembling hand up, signalling to her to wait while he checked just to make sure that, even though it was much too early, his mother had not already returned home. In the centre of the sparsely furnished room Boyie stood motionless, listening to the sounds of the evening, expecting any minute to hear his mother calling to him from the yard.

The already dim interior was made darker by the fading evening light. Pohpoh waited, watching him impatiently. Slowly parting the curtains she slipped into the sliver of space that he called his room. He followed reluctantly, brushing his body deliberately against the curtain to separate it again. Pohpoh turned and yanked the two sides tightly together. On this side of the flimsy partition, amber-coloured evening light streamed through a square window recently cut out of the mud wall. An overturned crate fit snugly against the wall between the curtain and Boyie's bed. Neatly pressed and folded school shirts rested on the crate in a sternly perfect pile. At the foot of his low and narrow bed was another crate, also overturned and raised with stilts. Dog-eared, tattered books and a jam jar full of pencils were arranged on it. Two more jars sat like trophies. One contained the remains of a single green and black locust with a chalky white underbelly, the other a monarch butterfly. Pohpoh picked up the jar with the butterfly and turned it around, tracing the fat, unbroken black lines of its wings. "Well, is better, I suppose, than leaving it to rotten out there," she said dismissively.

Boyie, unsure of himself, sat on the edge of the bed facing the homework crate-table and busied himself twirling a compass. Pohpoh stood behind him, not at all caring for any sense of his body but

intent on keeping him attuned to what had now become *her* goal. She inched forward and quietly stopped just behind him. He could feel her body blocking the breeze through the window. Pohpoh braced herself and slid her fingers through his greasy hair. She walked the tips of her fingers up and down his damp, hot neck, flitting one in and around an oily ear.

"Did you know, uh, you see Stanley and Deo?" he muttered. "Did you see them copying from each other? In class today? Teacher could have caught them, yuh know. What would happen if they were caught." To deny the sounds of her undressing, he rearranged the tattered books stolen from the school library. At the edges of his vision, just above the rim of the table, he saw bare skin and the soft, yellowed cotton of her bloomers. He turned, mesmerized by the deep cinnamon swirl of her navel. Slowly he adjusted his eyes to rest first on one pinkish-brown breast, then on the other. Pohpoh Ramchandin Pohpoh Ramchandin Pohpoh Ramchandin. He stood up and faced her. She held his hand and pulled him to the bed while he glanced at the drawn curtain. His eyes flitted to the orange sky through the window as though he expected to see someone peering in. He was stricken with panic, yet aroused.

Pohpoh lay down. The mattress was lumpy, thorny. Coconut husk fibres protruded through the rough cotton top sheet. The cot had the musky smell of sweet-talking schoolboys and coconut. Still clothed in his school uniform and shoes, Boyie climbed on, guided by her, hovering and trembling and frightened and bumbling over her near-naked body. He stayed elevated on his knees and elbows. When his fear succumbed to the urgent lowering of his pelvis, she grabbed his waist and firmly pushed him back up into the air. She held him there until he understood that this was where he should remain. He brought his mouth awkwardly down to peck, flit, pry at hers, tongue first again. She stopped him, turning her face sharply away and pushed his head down toward her breasts. She locked his head with both her hands so that his mouth was placed where she intended it, on a breast. She lifted her nose toward the ceiling to

escape the schoolboy sweat trapped in his thick, oily hair. Without looking at him she whispered, "Suck them."

He instinctively grabbed her waist with his hands and did as he was told. His eyes, wide as dinner plates, remained planted sideways on the closed curtain. He was terrified of being caught, yet half hoped his mother would return.

Suddenly he felt her entire body writhing and her hand clutching at his head. The curtain now forgotten, he dropped off of one knee and angled his crotch between her widening thighs. He fidgeted and fumbled to undo the belt of his pants, dropping his other leg and letting his full weight fitfully thump against Pohpoh. She pressed up against the hard shaft that seemed to have found its niche even through his smelly khaki shorts and her wet panty that she knew very well would not come off. She used this hardness to arrive at her intended destination before he could even unbuckle his belt.

Instantly, her body dissolved into an entirely different mode.

"I have to go, it getting late," she blurted out, pushing him off to the side of the bed. She pulled her clothing from the floor and began to dress. Boyie lay on his stomach, not breathless but airless, his deflated face propped in his hand. Confused and hurting, he studied Pohpoh as she fumbled, turning her petticoat inside out and yanking it over her head.

And without notice Pohpoh Ramchandin was gone, as though it were nothing at all.

Clutching her school satchel like armour against her chest, Pohpoh hustled home. She wanted to beat her father's arrival from the rum shop where he often spent his afternoons. Sometimes Pohpoh imagined that if she could gather up enough speed, she would be able to take off, flying above all the walls and gardens, above the topmost branches of the tallest trees around and even farther—a frigate bird soaring with other frigates until her town below was swallowed up, consumed in an unidentifiable fleck of island adrift like a speck of dust in a vast turquoise seascape.

She unlatched the high, latticed gate to her father's house. She didn't want to think about the smell of someone else's saliva on her breast, or that scrubbing off such evidence meant preparing her body for him. Inside the unlit, musty wood cubicle in the backyard, she filled an enamel basin with water. She decided it would be best to scrub herself with a concentrated solution of borax and rub her body with an unction of eucalyptus oil, camphorated oil and turpentine, and then to complain of a stomach ache and sore muscles.



The staff and residents of Paradise Alms House were growing less afraid of Miss Ramchandin. Some were even beginning to doubt the rumours, which in the presence of her quiescence and pleasantness, began to seem ridiculous. There was talk that I had "performed miracles" with Miss Ramchandin. When I resisted such praise, knowing the change in Miss Ramchandin was only a result of humane treatment, I would be cut off with protestations that I was far too modest—for a man. Initially I felt flattered at being finally included in conversations and being missed if I didn't show at meal times. Now, whether I had parted my hair this side or that, or wore a new scarf at night, I was no longer pretentiously fawned over. The change was delightful if not daunting. Then Sister asked if I would take over the care of Mr. Phu, a resident who had no rest and allowed his caretakers no rest because he was sure his room had been taken over by an army of red ants. She thought I might be able to wrestle that idea from him and calm him down. Although Sister asked and did not demand it of me, I could not refuse the transfer. Her asking was a sign of growing respect.

That night I mentioned to Miss Ramchandin that I would not be spending as much time with her in the future. She didn't respond. I

returned to my room but kept one ear open all night waiting, expecting, wondering. As the hours passed and there was no com-
motion I became more and more despondent. I imagined that she
too felt it was time for me to move on, that she looked forward to
a fresh face. I thought of the dress stuffed behind the dresser and
felt my chest cave in with grief. I slept in the early hours of the morn-
ing only because being awake, alive even, had become too painful.

Delivering her breakfast was still my chore, and the next morn-
ing yielded another sign of how amicable everyone suddenly felt
toward Miss Ramchandin. During the first weeks of her stay, I used
to go into the kitchen and prepare her a meal without animal or
fish products. Every morning I would have to listen to the cook
rant and rave that I was making more work for her, that I was spoil-
ing the old woman, giving her preferential treatment.

This morning, I followed a trail of scrambled eggs into the
kitchen, intending to make Miss Ramchandin her breakfast as
usual. All the trays were lined up, each one looking just like the
others with a mess of mashed eggs and a slice of buttered bread, a
cup of cocoa and an unpeeled banana. I opened a cupboard and
reached for the loaf of bread and bread knife when the cook silently
handed me a tray: a mess of mashed avocados, a slice of bread,
cocoa and a banana. I should have seen the offering as the cook's
and Miss Ramchandin's accomplishment but instead my heart sank.
I felt cheated. My spirits seemed perilously low, dragging on the
floor several paces behind me like a reluctant shadow.

I approached Miss Ramchandin's bungalow with a dry mouth.
My legs had become leaden and I wanted nothing more than to go
back up to my room and fall deeply asleep. I knocked as usual, and
as usual did not wait for an answer. When I entered I almost
dropped the tray. The centre of the room had been made bare.
Three dresses, a slip, two nightgowns, panties, four pairs of socks,
a pair of shoes, a night potty, brush and soap were neatly lined up
along the edges of the room. A roll of toilet paper had been dis-
sected, sheet by sheet, each sheet pinned to the wall. The dresser

lay flat on its face in front of the window. The bed frame, balanced
on its side, sat on the dresser. It was straddled by the eating table
atop which lay the mattress, which itself lay under four drawers,
neatly arranged side by side. Two chairs faced each other with their
feet symmetrically placed in the drawers. Straddling the two chairs
was the stool and in, or rather on the stool sat Miss Ramchandin.
She was close enough to the ceiling to pluck old spider web threads
from the wood boards. I was grinning but she carried right on
plucking. She made a low buzzing sound, like a neon light about to
expire, punctuated by a single interjection, as if to the ceiling:
"Where Asha?"

I stayed by the door, leaving it open and feasting my eyes. To
make certain she had seen me appreciating her grand statement, I
gasped loudly. A crowd gathered. Sister came running. She gasped
too, after which her only words, spat out and laced with frustra-
tion, were "Well! At least there are only imaginary ants to clean up
in Mr. Phu's room!"

And I got to keep my full-time job caring for Miss Ramchandin.

To everyone else, Miss Ramchandin appeared to have a limited
vocabulary or at least to have become too simple-minded to do
more than imitate. However, I knew for a fact she was able to speak
and had volumes of tales and thoughts in her head. She rambled
under her breath all day and all night, as long as she and I were alone.
Seconds before someone else approached, as though she were
trained to hear the stealthiest footfall, she would become flatly
silent. I came to realize that no response was required yet I knew it
was no accident that she chose to chatter only in my presence. For a
while I considered this to be merely an honour. Then I began to
recognize in her mutterings elements of the legendary rumours. I
had Mr. Hector run me the errand of acquiring a notebook, and I
started to jot down everything she said, no matter how erratic her
train of thought appeared to be. When she saw me awaiting her next
word and writing it down as soon as she uttered it, she drew nearer. I

soon got the impression that she actually began to whisper in my direction, that I had become her witness. She spoke rapidly and with great urgency, in a low monotone, repeating herself sometimes for hours without end. There was little doubt that I was being given a dictation, albeit without punctuation marks or subject breaks. I scribbled and when she took to repeating parts, I caught my breath and rested my cramped fingers. It became apparent that the question "Where Asha?"—usually asked without emotion or nuance—was not idle rambling. There was a purpose to it and to all the chatter, and finally a purpose to my listening and to sifting, cutting and sewing the lot.

One day a nurse arrived to announce that Miss Ramchandin had two visitors. I put my book and pen away quickly. The visitors, the nurse said, were the same ones Sister had turned away earlier—a Mr. Ambrose Mohanty and son, the ones who had left the cereus clippings. Miss Ramchandin's eyes flickered. I had already run across the name Ambrose among her ramblings.

Accustomed to reading, as if by Braille, her twitches and gasps, it was fortunate that I sensed to spruce her up first, for her visitors were dressed to the hilt. The old gentleman was a spectacle. From a distance he seemed to totter and shake and had to be supported by the younger man. Miss Ramchandin walked slowly alongside me. As we approached the visitors waiting in the garden she became mildly agitated. She did not look toward them but glanced from side to side, picked her fingernails, looked up at the sky and dawdled. I encouraged her with little nudges. Her nervousness could have been infectious were I not made curious by the visitors' unusual attire. The old man wore a black top hat, a formal white shirt with a bow tie, and heavy black coattails and trousers, unusual at any time in Lantanacamarā but especially odd in the heat and humidity of the season. He held a polished cane yet he shook so much that the cane was of no practical use. The young man at his side was tall and slim. At one glance he had the angularity and sprightliness of a girl reluctantly on

the verge of becoming a woman, and at the next the innocent feyness of a young boy who would never quite grow into the glove of manhood. He too wore a hat, and though it was a straw fedora, it also drew attention, for in spite of the heat, head-coverings in Lantanacamarā were reserved for funerals, church and state functions.

Positioning himself behind his father, the younger man put both hands on the old man's shoulders. It could have been either a gesture of restraint or protectiveness. The old man trembled. He covered his mouth with one hand, as though holding back his emotions, and shuffled forward. Miss Ramchandin focused on a wispy cloud on the far horizon, off to the side, but she too began to shuffle.

"Pappy, is she," the young man said. "You all right, Pappy?"

The old man, still with his mouth covered, started sobbing. His shuffle quickened toward us.

"Oh, my-my, Mala Ramchandin, Mala Ramchandin, Mala Ramchandin. It is you, indeed, it is you. Oh, my-my. My Mala Ramchandin." His voice was low and seemed riddled with remorse.

Miss Ramchandin skirted around them and headed for the nearest park bench. I said hello awkwardly and continued to keep pace with her. The two men turned and followed. She sat down, calmed suddenly and looked across the valley, swinging her legs. Her face would have appeared expressionless to them, as though she were unaware of their presence.

The old man walked up to her and his son moved discreetly around to the back of the bench. I found myself stealing glances at his unusually soft and hairless skin. He caught me staring and held out his hand.

"I am Otoh Mohanty. Otoh. This is my father. He has known her for a long time," he explained. "They were friends."

His hand was tender yet his grip so secure and present I was compelled to look directly into his eyes. I can think of no other way to express myself—even superlatives would be useless: simply stated, he was breathtakingly beautiful. He saw me gasp. My hand went limp with embarrassment and shyness. He held it a moment

longer and smiled. I had to clear my throat to introduce myself.

Mr. Mohanty hesitantly sat down beside Miss Ramchandin, his palms pressed together and tucked between his legs. He stared at her, shaking his head. Deep emotion contorted his face as he allowed his tears to fall freely.

"Is he all right?" I whispered.

Otoh Mohanty shrugged his shoulders.

"He hasn't seen her in many years. How is she? Is *she* all right? Does she know we are here?"

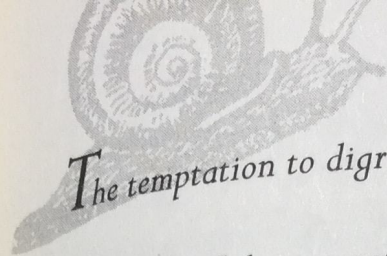
"Yes, she knows. See how she is swinging her legs? You might not be able to tell, but I can. She is happy."

Miss Ramchandin's face may have seemed expressionless but to me it was clearer and calmer than I had ever before seen it. I could not help my curiosity. "How well did she know your father?"

Otoh gave me a look that said that he would explain later.

The real question desperately wanting to slip off the tip of my tongue was, "Does he know her sister, Asha?" Confident that I would see these men again, I refrained from asking for fear of toppling the moment.

The two gentlemen did become weekly visitors. I looked forward to their arrival as much as Miss Ramchandin did. Admittedly, my anticipation was in no small part due to my growing fondness for the most alluring Otoh Mohanty. Over the course of their visits Otoh explained just how well Miss Ramchandin and his father knew each other. From both him and his father I was able to fill in gaps and make sense of things she mumbled. One day, for example, she would go on and on about some gramophone or other, the next day about spiders, then about peekoplats or snails. As much as I had learned not to discount her mental fitness, I must admit there were times when I believed her words were fanciful imaginings. I wrote everything down though, just in case. You can therefore imagine my giddiness when Mr. Mohanty and the uncommonly lovely Otoh related tales in which the very same gramophone, spider, bird or snail were featured.



The temptation to digress from my mission and to relate every scintillating detail of the romantic blossoming of my knowledge of Otoh Mohanty is overwhelming. And every detail, at least in my estimation, because this was the first experience I had that actually occurred outside the realm of my fertile imagination, seems nothing less than scintillating. I must remind myself, however, that Mala Ramchandin's story is my prime purpose here.



Asha, if you are reading this, all I will say is that, thanks to your sister, my own life has finally—and not too late I might add—begun to bloom.



Enough said. Now, I will exercise restraint. You will hear little more of me as I apply myself to the story of Mala Ramchandin, fashioning a single garment out of myriad parts . . .

IN THE KITCHEN of a house in Government Alley, Otoh Mohanty was being closely watched by his father, Mr. Ambrose E. Mohanty, who slouched in a bentwood wheelchair. Otoh Mohanty pried three paper-dry fillets of heavily salted cod from a barrel and wrapped them in sheets of brown paper. Before washing the salty grit from his hands he nestled his face in them and inhaled the concentrated scent. Mrs. Elsie Mohanty sat at the kitchen table, shelling a basket of pigeon peas. Her motions conveyed her displeasure at the task. She grudgingly noted her husband's every gesture as he directed their son. Finally, under her breath but making sure to be heard, she grumbled, "I suppose you will take the peas I shelling too. It is too many years now that every month without fail, I sit in this kitchen and watch you pack up food, my family food, to send to that woman. I going to go to my grave and be reborn before you wake up to think of anything else but that old lady. If I had known the spell that Bird put on you, I would've study my head good before I say I do to you, yes!"

"And our son, our great joy, would never have been born," said Ambrose Mohanty. "Mrs. Elsie Mohanty, wife of mine, Mala is mad. She is as mad as a brainless bird. Crazy. Do you understand what I am saying? From whence would she obtain the essentials of life, dearest? We are entrusted with her care. You might simply consider charity toward such a creature as insurance toward positive

retribution. Truthfully, she has no mind for me, or anybody else in this town, as a matter of fact. There is no need, I assure you, for you to confuddle your tender brain." He turned to his son. "Now the rice. Don't forget the rice. And take a pack of matches, son."

"Pappy, I ever forget the rice yet?"

Elsie shook her head with frustration. "Well, I never! Entrusted! By whom, pray? You say she mad and you sending matches for she? For what? For she to burn down house and town?" Once upon a time Elsie had been enraptured by the silken petals that fell from Ambrose's Wetlandish-affected lips. Now she wished that he would either shut up or talk simply and plainly with her again.

On the first Saturday of every month Otoh heard the same conversation between his parents. It was indeed the only one they really ever had. When he was a child the two hurled insults and accusations at each other, like people playing a game of ping-pong—each, however, with a different ball. Their tone had become duller and their pitch lower over the years, and the vociferousness of Elsie's complaints lessened as she realized that they were absolutely in vain. Besides the occasional, under-the-breath mumblings calculated to reach Ambrose's ears, she confined herself to drawn-out, carefully arched sighs.

The first package of dried goods had been sent just before Otoh was born. From the beginning every delivery was accompanied by varying degrees of wrath from Ambrose's new wife. She had in her enough compassion and sense of civic duty to appreciate the idea of sending food to a helpless bird, but she could hardly bear Ambrose's insistence on preparing the food himself. He performed the task with such attentiveness that Elsie's heart wept and her spirits became blistered. In the days before their marriage, rumours had spread that the bird up the hill had gone crazy but even if that was so, the fire of Elsie's jealousy could not be easily extinguished. It was, in fact, jealousy that had driven her to marry this man.

Ambrose E. Mohanty returned from study abroad to become

the most eligible young man in Paradise, a foreign-educated fop with the airs and speech of a Shivering Northern Wetlandsman lord. It seemed a waste to the townspeople that such a catch would be so preoccupied with a woman whose father had obviously mistaken her for his wife, and whose mother had obviously mistaken another woman for her husband. It would have been a matter of pride to reform the eligible bachelor but Elsie herself had little to do with the transformation. It was only after Mala Ramchandin shoved Ambrose out of her life that he noticed one Miss Elsie Smart, who, looked at from a particular angle, with her hair pinned up in a high bun, quite resembled his beautiful Mala in the days before she turned into an untamable creature. He turned to the eager Elsie for solace.

From the first days of their marriage all altercations between Elsie and her inert, non-confrontational husband concerned her jealousy—and his fixation on The Bird's well-being. Their antagonisms took place mostly in the hardening of their eyes and hearts, becoming audible only around food delivery days. It was in those early days of marriage that Ambrose mastered the art of side-stepping his wife's fits of rage against what she called his mental infidelity. He never missed a month's delivery.

Hardened hearts having little to do with conception, the couple had a child. Elsie gave birth to a girl. Her arrival in the midst of one of his (*her*, then) parents' regular tirades profoundly affected all three. Ambrose never raised his voice again. He developed a propensity for month-long slumbers from which he miraculously awakened only long enough to replenish Mala Ramchandin's supplies. Elsie refused to sleep or to even blink her eyes in case she missed the longed-for occasion when Ambrose might awaken and desire her and a family life at last.

By the time Ambrosia was five, her parents were embroiled in their marital problems to the exclusion of all else, including their child. They hardly noticed that their daughter was transforming herself into their son. Ambrose slept right through the month,

undisturbed until the first Saturday of the next, and Elsie, hungry for a male in the house, went along with his (her) strong belief that he (she) was really and truly meant to be a boy. Elsie fully expected that he (she) would outgrow the foolishness soon enough. But the child walked and ran and dressed and talked and tumbled and all but relieved himself so much like an authentic boy that Elsie soon apparently forgot she had ever given birth to a girl. And the father, in his few waking episodes, seemed not to remember that he had once fathered one.

The transformation was flawless. Hours of mind-dulling exercise streamlined Ambrosia into an angular, hard-bodied creature and tampered with the flow of whatever hormonal juices defined him. So flawless was the transformation that even the nurse and doctor who attended the birth, on seeing him later, marvelled at their carelessness in having declared him a girl.

Ambrosia's obviously vivid imagination gave him both the ability to imagine many sides of a dilemma (and if it weren't already a dilemma, of turning it into one) and the vexing inability to make up his mind. Ever since the days of early high school, where he excelled in thinking but not in doing, this trait of weighing "on the one hand" with "but on the other" earned him a name change. He began, though through no choice of his own, to be called Otoh-boto, shortened in time to Otoh, a nickname to which he still answered.

One rainy Saturday morning, Otoh lay shirtless on his back in his ground floor bedroom. A woman lay at his side. The woman was attempting to arouse him by drawing circles and figure eights with the tips of her fingers on his delightfully hairless chest. He was silently perplexed, examining the sensation as her hand made sly and furtive contact with the nipples atop his muscled breasts. The sensation of his body being played with was far more arresting and pleasurable to him than was the woman. In spite of himself Otoh was suddenly so overcome with yearning that he turned to face her

and began a sensuous caress along the bare leg strewn provocatively across his half-naked body. She slid her hand around to the small of his back, nestling into the gully of his spine. She played in the gully, riding up the sides and dipping back down. Then she slipped her hand inside the waist band of his trousers. He was suddenly beside himself with desire. He was just about to extend his caress higher up, toward the back of her thigh, just about to start unzipping his trousers, readier than ever before to risk the wrath of Paradise, when he was launched out of bed by a dreadful commotion. Ambrose Mohanty, still groggy from the previous month's sleep, carelessly hurried past his wife's grumbling and went thumping on his backside down the flight of slippery back stairs. The sack of rice he carried in one arm and the bag of onions in the other broke apart before hitting the bottom stair. Rice was strewn about as though a wedding had just occurred. The ambulance men's path proved quite treacherous.

As Ambrose was locked into the emergency vehicle he made Otoh swear on his disassembled pelvis to immediately prepare and deliver a new package. This was the first time Otoh was dispatched with his father's package to Mala Ramchandin. Ambrose's slow-mending pelvis provided him with his most unarguable excuse to lie all day and all night in his bed. And Otoh, intrigued by his father's devotion to a woman whom he had not seen in more than thirty years, accepted his inherited task.

Back in the kitchen in Government Alley Ambrose told Otoh to wheel him out to the front porch. Out of his wife's sight and hearing, he took Otoh's hand and pulled him down.

"If fortune sees fit to grant you the pleasure of an audience with her," he whispered in Otoh's ear, "may I impose upon you, my treasured son, the honour of conveying to her wishes for an incomparably good day from one Mr. Ambrose Mohanty, otherwise known to her as Boyie."

"Pappy, I take food up there so many times that I lose count now

and to this day I never yet see she. I only know she up there because the food does disappear before I reach back down to the roadway."

His father, refusing to give up, kissed Otoh's cheek. "If is all I can ask and hope for."

"Month after month you does ask me this same thing—if, if, if—but she never yet let me see she face. Nobody see she in years, Pappy, nobody. What does keep you thinking and hoping so, month after month, that I going to glimpse she? Is a long time now even the children in town give up waiting to see she plant snail shells in she front yard."

"If, son, simply if."

"Otoh!" Elsie called from the kitchen.

Otoh knew what to expect. Unknown to Ambrose, Elsie had lately taken to adding one more package as *her* civic contribution. She slapped a pound of cold salted butter against his chest.

"She don't have no fat to cook with. That lunatic! How she will cook? Look, make sure and leave the things where she could see them, you hear? Is no point our good food going to waste. Lord! What I doing, tell me, na, child, in my old age looking after a old woman you father used to be romancing up? Tell me this, na."

"For better or for worse you said, Ma, and things could be plenty worse."

"But listen to you, na, child. Children really don't understand the needs of they parents, na. For your information we gone past the stage of 'plenty worse' long time now. Things already plenty worse. That woman zap your father of all his passion, and what I end up with is a month-long corpse and a once-a-month man. The man ent got no passion. He like a chipped marble come to rest in a soup bowl. A marble that can't pitch. In his mind and heart he just like all them other men. Even when you see him there, sleeping alone in that chair, he unfaithful-unfaithful. He does only wake up to think about her. Your father foolish, Otoh. If even she was to see him, she wouldn't know him from Adam. The man is a chipped marble, in truth, yes."

"The thing is, Mammy, I can't make sense of what you does stay in this house for when you could have a life somewhere else."

"Hmph! What you know about marriage to be advising me so?"

He embraced her. Smelling the familiar mustiness of her hair he was overcome with soft-heartedness. He pressed her against his body and kissed the top of her head. She held on to him, cherishing the touch and smell of another human.

"Well? What it is you waiting for? You don't have enough to carry?"

"But, Mammy, is you who call me back to give me the fat to take. This thing will melt in the heat before I make it up the hill."

Everyone in the village seemed to have finally forgotten about Mala. The generation of children who harassed her by calling names and pelting her with mango seeds had grown up. Their children preferred to chase each other within the confines of their own yards, playing games of cops and robbers, cowboys and Indians. They occasionally noted the ever-widening, ever-lengthening rows of bleached white snail shells planted along the inside of her fence. But they expressed no curiosity about this or about her rare, unpredictable appearances out of the impenetrable sea of brambles and stinging nettles that barred a view of her house. When they had to pass by, the children walked on the other side of the street, glancing through her fence—not to see her but to make sure she did not see them.

According to their parents, she possessed the ability to leap her fence, track an offending child into its hiding place and tear out its mind. No one had experienced such a fate but the children feared it as if it were proven fact. Their parents used her legend to their advantage, as though she were a whipping cane. Should she suddenly appear while the children were walking along the road they would fall silent, conceal themselves behind the twelve-foot-high poinsettia shrubs, pray feverishly and make noble promises. They watched as the tall, upright, wire-thin woman with matted hair the colour of forgotten silver emerged from the bramble patches,

carrying a silver bucket of snail shells. They saw her gather up her ankle-length dress, stoop and place the unusually white shells in a neat line, now three rows deep, pressing them hard into the earth and adjusting the ones dislodged by the rain. Without her eyes ever crossing the fence, she would turn and disappear again into the brambles. The children ran off, each willing to swear on the Bible that she or he had seen the woman, and their sightings became the substance of frenetic dreamings at night.



THERE WAS NO need to kill a thing to relieve it of a drop of its own blood. A pin prick would do. Mala's hands trembled yet she was swift with the pin. A tear-size bead of maroon, velvet blood fell on the yellow saucer. Before the pigeon could feel and respond she pressed it against her chest and swiftly rubbed the spot on its belly. The bird shivered with surprise, giving off a strong, sharp smell. She pursed her lips and touched the top of its head. Very softly, from the back of her throat came a cooing sound. When its heart-beat returned to normal she loosened her hand. The pigeon looked solemnly at her. Mala looked back with no judgement. The bird hopped off her hand and fluttered to the floor. She leaned back quietly, holding the saucer. The outside edge of blood had begun to dry. The enamel pot on the wood stove in the kitchen began a slow rattle, and a smelly cloud billowed through the porch. She returned to her kitchen with the saucer.

The backyard was overrun with periwinkle snails, glossy mucous trails crisscrossing the milky brown clay as they crawled from one juicy plant to the next. At the rear of the house near the drain was a patch where they went to die. The cemetery was littered with upturned shells, each one empty except for any

raw, fishy remnants of its inhabitant mixed with lumps of garden soil.

Every few days, a smell of decay permeated the house. It was the smell of time itself passing but lest she was overcome by it, Mala brewed an odour of her own design. She collected and boiled six empty shells at a time. After an hour, the shells lost their pink and yellow. The house would fill with the aroma of a long-simmering ocean into which worm-rich, root-matted earthiness was constantly being poured and stirred. The aroma obliterated, reclaimed and gave the impression of reversing decay. Mala needed only a pinch of salt to start the waves of steam, and a pin prick of fresh blood to sharpen the snails' scent and make it almost tangible. The odour hung, rejuvenating the air for days. It wove itself through Mala's hair and penetrated her pores.

Wobbling unevenly on the back porch in her bentwood rocking chair, Mala closed her eyes and lifted her face to the breeze. The trees in the yard purred and rippled. Iridescent purple and grey pigeons danced in the water trough where they nested. They hopped on and off, from the trough to the rusted eave that overhung the verandah, and back again. Mala opened her eyes. She couldn't see the birds but she noticed that a grapefruit tree and several pepper plants had sprouted in the dirt and rust of the roof. The roof already squeaked and sagged under their weight. The edge would break away any day. She told herself that she must remember not to be under it when it fell.

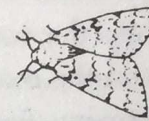
She looked at her yard. Fruit trees and hot pepper trees had sprung wherever birds and insects dropped their seeds. A patch of bright orange, sweet-smelling roses and a profusion of night-blooming cereus plants were the only ornamentals in the yard. The roots of the cereus, like desperate grasping fingers, had bored through the damp wood of the back wall of the house. It was no longer the wall that supported the succulent but rather the other way around. The yard was a jumble of different greens: the bright

yellow of the lime trees, the silver of the eucalyptus, the dark blue of the mango.

Under the bodice of her dress, inside her petticoat, was a handkerchief bundle. The knotted 'kerchief was limp with sweat. Inside was a crumpled sepia tint photograph, also sticky and damp. She carefully opened the photograph, carefully studied every detail as though seeing it for the first time. The wide expanse of sea behind the two women. The white crests on the small waves that lapped the beach. The cloudless sky. The pelican soaring overhead. She stared at the women. The shorter one partially obscured the dress of the one standing close behind. They wore ankle-length skirts and long-sleeved white blouses. The woman at the back was larger. Her skin was white and her hair, which appeared to be white also, was neatly tied atop her head. She smiled broadly but her eyes were cast downward as though looking at the woman in front of her. Her hands were not visible. On her feet were heavy black shoes laced past the hem of her skirt. The woman in front was shorter by a good head. Her hair, a curly mass of the darkest tint possible in such a photograph, was tied in a single braid that hung in front of her, reaching well down the middle of her long skirt. Her skin was barely a shade lighter than her hair. Her hands were clasped in front at waist level. She stared at the camera, perhaps at the photographer. Her pupils were the most commanding detail of the picture. They were as dark as her hair and seemed to stand out from the whites of her large eyes. Whatever other detail one might notice, her eyes pulled the viewer like a magnet. Mala looked at the women's shoes, at the closeness of their feet. She rubbed the spot where their shoes met, the ball of her index finger tenderly covering them. She raised the photograph to her nose. She smelled only her own sweat and the earthiness of her fingers. She carefully refolded it and replaced it in the handkerchief.

Rocking harder in the chair, she shoved the bundle back inside her petticoat. A cooling breeze passed and coconut tree branches dipped and scratched against the galvanized roof. The pigeons took

off in a frenzied flutter, flying outward in a tight, parallel formation. When the breeze and the scratching subsided, they swerved sharply one after the other and returned to the gutter.



IT WAS BARELY midmorning yet already the sun offered no mercy. The air above the paved road quivered in the heat. Otoh fanned himself with the package of cod and butter as he scuffed up the road. Few people dared brave such heat but Otoh had pledged to carry out his father's mission.

In all his deliveries to the house on Hill Side, not once had Otoh seen the woman who so obsessed his father. As he neared her house he became anxious, wanting desperately to see her yet hoping she would not show herself. He had grown up hearing all the rumours, even the ridiculous one that claimed she turned into a ball of fire and whipped across the sky at night. His skin tingled as he approached the gravel path leading up to her chicken-wire fence. The path was strewn with discarded oil drums, old machine parts, tires and other debris. He set the parcels in a cool spot near the fence, then walked away slowly, his head to the side to catch any movement.

"All right, Mala Ramchandin, show yourself," he shouted. "If you don't come and fetch my parcels fast, my mother's butter will surely be nothing but a useless sludge." He hid behind the deteriorating tractor parts, propped up on his elbows with his face in the cup of one hand. He peered through a chink in a large piece of garbage. Otoh had decided that this was the day he would get a glimpse of Mala Ramchandin.

The sun pelted down and the package of butter began to shrink. Pebbles under his elbow bored into his skin but Otoh was determined. An hour passed. Finally an ache in his back forced him

to readjust his cramping knees. The movement took no more than a few seconds but when he looked back, the parcel was gone. Otoh jumped up. Not even a bush shook. She had obviously been observing him all the while. He barely moved, afraid now that he might find her standing behind him, ready to scold him for his prying ways.

Eventually Otoh gathered up the courage to scramble up and bolt from the property. Back on the road, he sat on a shaded curb trembling with fear and excitement. For a moment he was deliriously happy and anxious to tell his father that Mala had made her presence known to him. It was almost as good as seeing her! But why had Mala "introduced" herself to him in this way? Why to him and no one else? Why today and not before or later? He stood up, shook his limbs loose and calmed his breathing.

He walked slowly home. He wished he could take his shirt off but there were some risks he preferred to avoid. Several ideas pawed at him, each one contradicting the other. On the one hand was his desire to make a more substantial bond with Mala before reporting to his father. On the other was a passionate desire that raced across his mind like a shooting star, imploring him to imagine how much happiness and hope he could give his father if he were to break this auspicious news today. Imagine Ambrose being able to stay awake for days and his mother to sleep at last—or to rage decisively! These last thoughts, however, brought a sobering fear, a sudden resistance to the tremendous change in the order of his family's affairs that a sighting of Mala might cause.

He decided to hold off giving his father the news. True to his nature, however, Otoh began to deliberate not the decision itself but the origin of the decision, and the authenticity of its birth. A memory soon fixed itself on his retina.

He was no more than eleven years old, dressed in a long-sleeved white shirt, blue-and-black striped schoolboy's tie and long, white trousers. Spotting the silver-haired recluse in her yard, he and some school friends had darted behind a shrub across the street

from the Ramchandin house. They watched the woman, whom they knew from sources as reliable as their Sunday school teachers to be madder than a naked chicken at midnight and wilder than a leatherback in laying season. She stooped by her fence and dipped her long, twig-like fingers into a rusted, enamel bucket. She retrieved snail shells, white as chalk and as large as cricket balls, and wedged them, one by one, into the earth along her fence. The following day he walked again on the far side of the road, curious about the neatly placed decoration that lined her fence. Otoh waited the month for his father to awaken. Then he blurted out what he had seen, the strange ritual of the woman to whom his father delivered food.

A smile of recognition crossed Ambrose's face.

"Now isn't that interesting!" He said no more but slowly nodded his head and grinned. He seemed to slip into a distant reverie.

"Tell me, Pappy, why she was doing that?" Otoh shook him. "She trying to grow snails or what?"

"Snails, eh! She and I, she and I—we used to have this little ritual when we were students together. We were about your age." He drifted off.

"Pappy, I want to know—"

"We fancied ourselves protector of snails and all things unable to defend themselves from the bullies of the world. The school grounds were littered with snails in the rainy season. Is your schoolyard still crawling with the helpless creatures, Otoh? They would be crawling up the walls of buildings, shinnying up tree trunks, dragging themselves across the concrete paths and lawns, exposed and thoroughly tempting to a group of heartless boys who liked to stomp on them and watch them shatter and splatter. Bissey. Walter Bissey—he's now a judge—was at school with us. He was such a bully as a boy, catching and torturing and killing anything that crawled. Do you know Bissey?"

"I don't know any Bissey. What about Mala Ramchandin and the snails?"

"Mala and I used to be the first ones out of the classroom at recess and lunch time. We would race through the schoolyard with a bag and collect all the snails before Bissey and his gang could get to them. Then we would take them and release them safely over the fence. Mala had this idea that snails were good luck. She wasn't one to harm an ant. Protecting those snails was our mission. So she's still looking after the little creatures, eh?"

"So you used to save the snails, too, eh, Pappy?"

"Well, the truth is that she was the one who initiated the whole thing and I went along until it became something I looked forward to. There was an urgency to the whole business, you know."

This was the only time his father ever mentioned details of his connection to Mala Ramchandin.

Otoh realized he had never possessed a clear idea of who Mala Ramchandin was, except that she had collected snails with his father as a child. Yet he went against his mother's wishes and delivered food to her for his father, who came alive only for that single purpose.

The old bird's snail-planting rituals must be an extension of her childhood kindness, Otoh mused. One thought led to another. He wondered about the gentleness and compliance his father exhibited during the snail-protecting activities, and tried to think how his father manifested such traits in the present—besides delivering food to a helpless bird. His sleeping seemed to be a passive smouldering, a withdrawal from Otoh and Elsie, a rebellion.

Not for the first time Otoh found himself desperately wanting to know what caused that rebellion. It was as though his father was cowering under a veil of sleep. A torrent of frustration swept over him. He stopped at a standpipe that gushed sun-heated water into a basin. He bent close to the spout and splashed the hot water on his brow, then put his mouth to the faucet and drank. Where on earth had his father been? Otoh wondered. Not with him or his mother, and not with Mala Ramchandin. He had neglected every-

thing. In the middle of a brilliant day Otoh's world spun and grew dark. He sat on the rim of the basin and hung his head.

That night Otoh could not sleep. He stared restlessly out his window into the thick, still blackness onto which he projected a full-colour image of the Hill Side property, the fence and the rubbish-strewn yard. Before he had time to assess his actions he rose and went into the backyard, yanking one of his mother's dresses off the clothes line. Back in his room he removed his clothing and stepped into the dress. In the mirror of his armoire he watched himself pull on the blue-and-white-flowered garment, half expecting to resemble his mother, but there was no resemblance. Without knowing why, he wanted to share his secret with Mala Ramchandin, even at the risk of being caught walking the streets dressed like a woman.

Wearing a dress made Otoh carry himself gracefully. He left the house. The hem of the skirt swung from side to side with each pointed step. Every house along the route to Hill Side was in darkness, and the only sounds were electric fans and frogs hidden in the bushes on either side of the road. He glanced from balcony to balcony.

When he reached Mala's backyard fence, he gathered the skirt of his dress in one hand and tied the cloth in a knot high up his thigh. The house was in total darkness as usual. Otoh began to think things that had never crossed his mind before: Perhaps after her light bulbs were spent she had never had them replaced. Surely her electricity source would have been cut. He had never taken pitch oil or gasoline or coals, and unless someone else was delivering these to her, what on earth had she been using for fuel, for cooking? How did she cook the salt fish?

With an uncharacteristic brazenness he clasped his hand around a fence post. As he readied himself to leap over, the post trembled in his hand and came away. Otoh shrieked. A snake glided slowly past. He jumped up and, clutching the loosened knot at his thigh, bolted away from the fence. When he reached the road, he glanced back and saw what appeared to be a person waving to him. The harder he looked the more confused he became.

Heading home, Otoh was still so shaken by the idea that he might have seen her and that she might have seen him—and in a dress—and by the post that came alive in his hand, that anything moving—leaves on trees, flying moths, a swooping bat, buzzing mosquitoes, a noisy breeze, a dog in its yard—made his heart leap. He raced home with much less grace than he had set out.



PPOINT NUMBER ONE: The Paradise Alms House is not en route to anywhere. To get here one must leave the main road, cut through a cane field and carry on up a lane that ends at the top of a small hill. The home with its excellent view of the cane fields is in the shallow valley below. There is nothing beyond.

Point number two: At their age, residents in a home such as this, in this kind of heat, tend to take naps after lunch. So when Otoh Mohanty arrived without his father one hot afternoon, mumbling that since he was in the area he thought he might just stop and say hello, I blushed even as I apologized that he wouldn't be able to see Miss Ramchandin just then because she was sleeping.

"Oh, that's too bad. Well, I could come back later. That's what I should do then, eh?" It would be foolish to deny that I read uncertainty in his response. As though he had never before strung two words together, he continued, "But, uh, well, you know—uh, hmm." Finally he confirmed my hopes about whom he had come to visit. "I mean, look. I am already here. You know what I mean? You, you busy? You have a little time? I mean, you could show me around the grounds if you could spare the time. They are nice grounds. Since I am already here, na."

I had not received a visitor since taking the job. My heart fluttered and the soles of my feet tingled wildly. I gave him a tour of

the grounds and Mr. Hector's gardens. Lost in conversation we wandered outside the property and ended up on a trace in the cane field. From then on Otoh became a regular visitor. Sometimes he came twice in a week, always during my off-hours. We would meet away from curious eyes on the periphery of the grounds. Propriety restrains me from detailing just how alluring cane can be when a falsetto trill long trapped in your heart is bursting forth. Although Mala Ramchandin was by no means our sole topic of conversation, I will dwell mainly on those discussions concerning her.

On one visit, after a long walk we came to rest in shade among the exposed roots of a wild mango tree. Otoh tended to be self-reflective and philosophical, even mildly morose at such times.

"You ever feel like something come and tie your mind from you?" he said. "You ever feel like you have no control over yourself? You know that feeling?"

"Often," I teased, "ever since meeting you. You have cleverly invaded my mind, Otoh Mohanty, and occupied all the territory there." He was kind enough to respond to my flattery with a wary half-smile. But I had the feeling that what he was thinking had to do with Miss Ramchandin. After all, if it weren't for Otoh, Miss Ramchandin might still be thriving in her own home on Hill Side, and this fact tormented him. I reminded him often that if it weren't for his intervention, as unfortunate as it may have seemed in the moment, she and I, *and* he and I, would likely not have met.

He tried then, as he had several times before, to explain why, following a compulsion stronger than a riptide, he had entered her yard. Even though I felt that I understood his need to come face to face with her, Otoh seemed never completely satisfied with how he expressed himself on the topic. Some fragments seemed to elude and frustrate him.

"Everybody used to fraid Miss Ramchandin—"

"They still do," I interjected.

"—but I was the only one who used to go up into her yard, not to torment the lady, but to take food for her, and I wanted her to