

verandah floor. Kneeling over him, fretting, she chanted, "Shhh, don't worry Ambrose, shhh, shhh, shhh."

Her face was uncomfortably close to his. She tenderly kissed his forehead. His temples throbbed. He closed his eyes in terror only to be presented with the image of what he had just seen down below.

"You want water?" Her voice was soft and caring. She got up and disappeared through the kitchen door. When she was out of his sight he jumped up and bolted down the back stairs. Before he reached the bottom Mala was on the verandah again. So distraught was she to see him running off and leaving her again that her cries froze in her chest. Her face appeared fully composed yet tears ran down her cheeks as she watched Otoh navigate her yard.

He headed for the front fence, passing the wall of dead cereus blossoms that covered the room he had been in minutes before. His strides widened so he was able to leap over shrubs. By the time he reached the road he had lost his thongs. Both feet and his face were scratched with slashes from twigs, sharp grasses and fine thorns.

When he reached the other side of Mala's tilted fence, Otoh felt overwhelmed. He shivered in the heat, entirely unsure of the reality of anything he had just witnessed. The farther he got from the house and yard the weaker his legs became. He felt faint, as though the frenetic spell on which he had been riding were falling away. He slowed down, swerving from side to side before unravelling in a heap in the middle of the narrow road. Within seconds people began to gather around him.

"But ent he is Ambrose son?"

"He name Otoh."

"I thought he name Ambrosia."

"Doh be stupid. That is a girl's name."

"But that is Ambrose son self. Look how he looking. He looking like Ambrose self. You can't see a trace of he mother in he. But what he doing dress up so and lying in the hot sun in the middle of the road?"

"I see everything. The boy fall. He was running and he fall down. I see he fall myself."

"He must be get heart attack and fall down?"

"A young boy so? Don't be stupid. Young people doh get heart attack. But look how white he gone, na. Take off the 'kerchief from round he neck."

"I see he running out Miss Mala yard, peiting down the road like if he just see ghost."

"Miss Mala yard? You sure? But this boy crazy like he father or what?"

"What he was doing there, pray? Take off he jacket. What he doing wearing black jacket in the daytime for?"

"Ey, what wrong with all you? Stop talking so and call police."

"He don't need police, he need doctor."

"Somebody call doctor."

"He is a slight fella, eh!"

"Talap, run and get the doctor, na."

"Somebody go with Talap and get doctor. Fast-fast. The boy trembling in this hot sun. Look how he shaking. Take off he shirt. Talap, you gone yet?"

"My daughter like this boy, too bad, yes. But I don't want her with no weak man. Go and tell Mavis lover-boy fall down and hit he self. Mavis. Where Mavis? Talap, go and call Mavis. Tell she . . ."

"Talap, forget Mavis, boy. Go and call doctor."

"Ah tell all you, call police. Doctor too, but police too."

"Jojo, shut up your mouth about police, na, man. Why you need police for a fella who running and trip he self?"

"I agree with Jojo. I say call police too. And leave he shirt on, that boy trembling with cold."

But they did not have to call the constable. He was inside the house opposite, visiting a woman friend while her husband was out for the day, when he heard the commotion. Peeping from behind the edge of a heavy curtain he recognized the call of duty. Much to the woman's annoyance he dropped her and scurried out the

back of the house. He leapt over the backyard wall and made an ungraceful trek down the ditch at the back of the house and onto the road, confident that his arrival would be unnoticed. Everyone's attention was on the boy on the ground.

Otoh opened his eyes. A halo of heads and countless eyes peered down at him. At the centre of the halo was a sliver of cold, sharp silver sky.

"A body, it have a body in she house . . ." he managed to say before he again fainted. He couldn't stand another smell, and surrounding him was a collection of bodies that had melded into a choking odour. He closed his eyes and allowed himself to slip away.

"What is that he say?"

"He say he see a body."

"Lord, oh, Lord! Look here, we have real trouble in the town now, yes."

"What is that?"

"Police, call police, he say it have some body in Miss Mala yard."

"Somebody gone in Miss Mala yard."

"Eh-heh! So how he know that? What he was doing up there, inside the woman yard?"

"Well, he must be was in she yard trying to catch thief, na."

"He say it had a thief in Mala yard."

"He say thief gone in she yard."

"It doh have nothing to thief in that house. The thief must be gone to murder she!"

The constable forced a clearing in the crowd and peeped down at Otoh. He arrived just in time to hear, "What is that? Some thief gone to murder Mala?"

"Mala? Mala Ramchandin?" he said to no one in particular.

"Yes, he say he see somebody trying to murder she," he heard the nearest one say.

The constable took off toward the police station. It was not often that any of the force got a chance to show off their training in

physical endurance and, conscious that he was in full view of the townspeople, he made good use of the opportunity.

Hearing the town suddenly astir, women, children and men started pouring out from their houses. Every dog for miles, aroused by the unusual din, commenced barking. There were two streams of people: those leaving the spot where Otoh lay to race through town crying, "Murder in the Ramchandin yard," and those rushing toward the scene, almost trampling one another in their haste.

Ambrose E. Mohanty sat low in his wheelchair on the verandah waiting for Otoh to return. Hearing the din in the streets Elsie came onto the verandah.

She saw Pilai, the old grocer, edging under the strain of lumbago toward the scene.

"Ey, Pilai. Pilai! Mornin' Pilai. How your madam?"

"She good. She good, yes. She real good. Thanks, Mrs. Mohanty. So you hear news?"

"No, I ent hear nothing. What happening that everybody running so?"

Pilai knew of Ambrose's and Mala's interest in each other in their youth. He had even played a small role in getting them together or so he liked to think. Realizing this moment held great importance he stopped and faced Elsie, for he could not see Ambrose. He took off his hat, held it reverently to his chest and spoke with appropriate solemnity.

"Some fellas gone in the Ramchandin house and they thief everything and murder the old woman dead-dead! Yes, somebody say they catch one of them already. He lying in the road near she house. It still have about five of them loose. I going to pay my respects." And he nodded and walked slowly onward. After a few steps he picked up speed again.

"Oh God!" said Elsie, "Oh God, I hope they didn't kill Otoh too. Oh God, Ambrose, I feeling weak. My son dead. Is you who send

my only child to his death. Oh God, they kill my only child." And as she slipped down to the ground in an unsightly crumple of panic and uncontrollable wailing for her son's supposed death, Ambrose rose like heat out of his wheelchair.

"He has seen her. He has. I just know that he has. That son of mine. Otoh has seen her!" Ambrose E. Mohanty was standing upright for the first time in decades.

Elsie, still on the floor, did not notice when her husband, attired in his moth-eaten, camphor-smelling, wrinkled black suit, stood behind his wheelchair and pushed it down the stairs. He held the railing and lumbered after it, his elegance belying the pain caused by such an ordinary act. At the bottom Ambrose sat in the wheelchair to catch his breath. Re-energized, he rose, moved behind the chair and with decorum pushed it out of the yard and onto the roadway.

How Paradise has expanded! he thought. It had never occurred to Ambrose that, while he slept, the rest of the town was busy. Paradise, he noticed with bewilderment, had grown from a village with a house here, plots of raw land there and then another house way over there, to a town with houses crammed against each other and hardly any wild land in sight. To get to Mala's house he relied on habit and a homing instinct.

Eventually he arrived at a corner, a vaguely familiar spot, in the middle of which sat his discombobulated son. Most of the crowd that had surrounded Otoh had surged away when it became evident he was no longer in any danger. The real story was unfolding up the hill at Mala's house.

One would think Otoh would have been shocked to see his father out in the world, not in but accompanying his wheelchair, standing tall before him. But Otoh was too stunned to be shocked by anything. He also now understood his father so well that he fully expected Ambrose E. Mohanty to spring back to life the minute he heard that his son had made a meaningful connection with Mala. Nor was Otoh at all surprised at how swiftly the news of his adventures had travelled to Government Alley.

Otoh had never before looked up at his father. The new angle revealed an aged face with a fleshy, sagging chin and tangled nose hairs. He was quite tall and startlingly unfamiliar, standing up. Ambrose attempted to stoop down beside Otoh, but instead tumbled to the ground. This view of his father was more familiar and gave Otoh much-needed comfort.

"Ooh! A little stiff!" Ambrose giggled nonchalantly.

Otoh put a hand on his father's thigh. They remained quiet until the last of the onlookers had rushed up the hill. Only then did Ambrose lean closer.

"Does she remember me? Did she ask about me?"

"She remember you very well, Pappy. I think she waiting for you."

Ambrose made grand gestures to raise himself from the ground. "Well then, let's go. Here, let me help you up, my gallant son." When he realized he wasn't able to get himself up, he giggled with jovial embarrassment. Otoh smiled wearily and put a firm arm on his father's elbow to keep him on the ground.

"Pappy, it have something I have to tell you."

"Oh, my son, are you all right? Tell me, she didn't try to use a cleaver on you, did she? Did she wield a cleaver at you?"

"A cleaver? God! No!"

"Oh. Good. That's good. Then tell me how you are. I should have asked after you sooner. How negligent of me. Tell me. Tell away. You know you can tell me anything. How can I be of assistance to you?"

"No. No. Wait, just listen a minute . . ." Otoh told his father almost everything that had occurred and all that he had seen that morning, omitting only the parts about the gramophone and dancing. When he told about the sickening odours and the room beneath the house, Ambrose remained studiously composed. He wrapped his fingers around one of his son's hands. He sighed and in apparent desperation breathed out, "Dearest, dearest!" several times. Otoh had the sense that his father was awakening to much more than he had, in all his years of sleeping, ever dreamed about.

"Son, did you tell anyone about all of this?" Ambrose whispered

even though there was no one nearby. Otoh said that he remembered running out of the yard but had no recollection of falling in the road. He vaguely remembered opening his eyes, perhaps even trying to say something, but had no memory of speaking.

"Why does everyone then think that a band of murderers have been in her yard and that she was murdered?" Ambrose gestured toward the people running by. "What did you say to them? You must have said something that became exaggerated. Did you perhaps use the word *marauder*? Have you no memory? Try, son, try to remember what you might have said."

Otoh, fearing he might have exposed more than he intended, shook his head. "Pappy, I really didn't mean to cause she no harm. I just wanted you and she to be able to meet again."

"Well, how else can one look at this rather unfortunate turn of events? Clearly you did not cause trouble. It seems that trouble was lurking like a diseased phantom, waiting to be revealed, and you had the misfortune to have come upon it. Ultimately, I suppose, one is led to fulfill every iota of one's *raison d'être*. And you have just so done. It was your duty, my unfortunate son, to be the man who unleashed the business of an ugly, lurking phantom."

Ambrose looked directly at his son. Seeing on Otoh's face a look that Ambrose mistook for despair but was actually befuddlement at his father's ramblings, he smiled sheepishly.

"Our relationship to each other, yours to me and mine to her, serves only to make the waters that we travel interestingly murky," said Ambrose. "Cheer up. There is no point trying to undo what can't be undone."

Otoh glanced at Ambrose. His father's eyes were downcast. Even though he tried to be optimistic and philosophical about the situation, the old man was in fact pained.

"You know, my son, to all appearances, current circumstances are rather dire. But our thinking exhibits both the ignorance and shortsightedness of mere mortals. Mala and I will meet again, as you wish." He grinned and looked straight at Otoh. "Endings are

but beginnings that have taken to standing on their heads. Come. Let us, you and I, go to her house now."

"Pappy, I hear you. But I want to know what really happened. You sound like you know. Who is Mala, Pappy? What happened between you and her?"

"Oh dear. Where should one begin? Even beginnings have their own beginnings. What a daunting task."

He paused, took a deep breath and turned to Otoh.

"Shall we just trek on up to the house? Since she has not been murdered off, as all these folk in this town might have relished, we might ask her ourselves. Come on, son, get up, get up. Come along, now. You're dilly-dallying. One might be inclined to believe, from the example of your tardiness, that it is you who has slept life away."

As Otoh and his father, pushing the wheelchair up the road, approached the house, they could see uniformed policemen whacking at the brambles in the front of the house with scythes and machetes. A path wide enough for a car had already been cleared. There was a good view of the dilapidated house.

Ambrose halted. He stared at the house. He covered his open mouth with his hand and tears began to fall. They reached the crowded front gate, which had been completely mowed down by the police, but were restrained by a young officer with a baton. Otoh was puzzled that his father allowed the police to hold him back.

"Pappy, tell the officer you know she. Tell him."

Ambrose thought for a long moment.

"Pappy, why you don't tell the man, na? We have to go up there and take care of she."

Ambrose shook his head. "I have never been very good at this sort of thing, have I?"

Otoh did not smile back. He felt an unusual anger and loathing rise in him. There would be no *on the one hand . . . but on the other* now.

"No, son. What has been done has been done. I believe that it would be in our best interest to stay here and wait."

Otoh stared at his father in disbelief. Then he tore decisively through the little crowd, intending to make a break for the yard. The crowd parted. The officer attempted to intercept him but Otoh pushed ahead. The officer reluctantly whacked him on the head with the baton but only hard enough to stun him. Ambrose remained where he was and covered his face with his hands. Shaking his head he whispered, "I should not have risen today. I suddenly feel so sleepy."

As soon as Otoh bolted out of her yard, Mala had sensed that trouble would follow. She wrung her hands in desperation and sadness, wondering if what she thought was a visit from her beloved Ambrose was simply a memory, as vivid as her daydreams about Pohpoh's adventures.

She looked with longing at the bottles of pepper sauce that surrounded her. The pain of a teaspoon of the fiery sauce on her tongue would surely dull the despair that threatened to swallow her up. It all seemed so real. She sniffed her hands for a trace of clove oil, cardamon and bayleaf—scents she associated with Ambrose. There was an unfamiliar smell but not what she remembered. She decided that if trouble was indeed on its way her first duty was to save and care for Pohpoh. Hardly anyone, in her estimation, ever cared for Pohpoh. Now that she was grown up, she herself would take care of little Pohpoh. She made her way down the back stairs and toward the mudra tree and her rocking chair. She sat there and waited.

Before long she heard the police siren. When the siren fell silent at the front of her yard, she leaned back in the rocker and closed her eyes.

Now where was she, she wondered, before Ambrose—it was Ambrose, wasn't it?—entered her yard. Ah yes! Pohpoh had just exited the strangers' house successfully and was out in the yard.

Over the last few years Mala had grown fond of this particular Pohpoh. She had rather disliked her many years before when they were one and the same. But these days she wished that she and that Pohpoh could have been two separate people, that they could have been best friends, or even that she could have been the mother of Pohpoh or at least her older sister. She would certainly have lifted her up in her arms, held her, hugged her and protected her as well as Pohpoh had protected Asha.

Yes, Pohpoh was out in the yard behind a grapefruit tree. The stars in Pohpoh's sky had receded. Isn't that so? Isn't that where she left Pohpoh? she wondered. Yes. The stars were much less bright than when Pohpoh had first climbed through the neighbour's window. And there was a wisp of pink cloud, a little wisp, like a scribble, visible as the first light broke. It streaked across a corner of the sky. And, that's right, there were roosters. In the distance a rooster here and there, the earliest risers among them, gave the morning's first hesitant crowings.

A man's voice called out. "Miss Ramchandin. Miss Ramchandin. You there, Miss Ramchandin?"

She did not answer. She thought harder of Pohpoh. She ignored the sounds of her fence being torn down.

"Mala will take care of you, Pohpoh. No one will ever touch you again like that. I will never let anyone put their terrible hands on you again. I, Mala Ramchandin, will set you, Pohpoh Ramchandin, free, free, free, like a bird!"

The grapefruit tree trembled. Cold dewdrops flew like a sudden rain shower. Pohpoh was startled. An old man, the night watchman, whipped around the shrub brandishing a broomstick and attempting to shout. Shaken by the appearance of a stranger in the yard, his voice was thick with the fear trapped inside his chest.

"Who is that? Who is that?" he asked gruffly then took off,

nervously beating the air in front of him with the stick. Finally able to shout, he screamed at the top of his voice, "Tief, tief, tief in the yard!" and headed toward the house.

Through her dreaming Mala could hear that her yard was crawling with police. Like Otoh, they were unable to spot her in the camouflage of the mudra tree. They had surrounded the house where they would concentrate their search for murderers and a corpse. She rocked a little and thought of Pohpoh's dilemma.

Pohpoh decided to make a dash for the hole in the fence. As she was about to spring out from behind the grapefruit tree, the dogs in the area started a frantic barking. Her first instinct was to stand frozen, to will herself to disappear into thin air.

Lights in the house went on, room after room. Pohpoh grasped her chest. With the speed of a terrified hare she darted to the opening in the fence. Less graceful than her entrance, she scrambled to get through. As she somersaulted into the ditch she noticed lights in every house in the neighbourhood. She tumbled down, slipping and sliding on the mossy bottom. She peeped out from the ditch, preparing to sprint to her house across the road.

The light in her father's room was on. The front door opened and he came out shirtless and paunchy in his pajama pants. He stood on the top front step trying to make sense of the commotion with his alcohol-saturated mind. Running down the street were two neighbours in pajamas and brightly coloured rubber thongs, wielding sticks in their hands.

Pohpoh dropped low in the ditch. She listened but her head reverberated with her own breathing, which was shallow and rapid like a cornered animal's. She began to feel what she was normally oblivious to: her face and neck, wet with sweat and tears, bruises on her legs, skin that felt as though it had been torn off her back in thick chunks. Her lower stomach ached.

Fear was breaking her, was unprying her memory. She was

reminded of what she usually ignored or commanded herself to forget: her legs being ripped apart, something entering her from down there, entering and then scooping her insides out. Her body remembered.

Mala remembered.

She heard the voices of the police. She reconfigured what they said to match her story of how she saved Pohpoh that day.

Pohpoh, remembering her father's invasion, put her hand over her mouth and nose to stifle her panic and the nauseating smell of fear that rumbled from her insides. Pressed against the bush, she bit the inside of her lip and willed herself to think.

Mala bit the inside of her lip and willed herself to think. She squeezed her eyes tightly and ignored the people trampling, destroying her yard. She put all her efforts into protecting Pohpoh.

Pohpoh squeezed her eyes tightly, inducing a red and silver fireworks explosion inside her eyeballs. She scolded herself sternly, insisting that she would never ever give up or get caught or allow herself to panic. She never had before and now would not become the first time. It had always been this way for her: just as she was about to succumb, an irrational strength would surface, taking control, propelling her toward feelings of invincibility. Yet this time there was a difference. Pohpoh felt, for once, that she was not alone.

With a determined bolt she raced back in the direction of Mala's house. Mala's yard appeared, strangely, to come toward her as she moved toward it. As though emerging from a stupor she realized that this was the yard she knew best.

With all the activity and excitement in the road, the neighbourhood dogs were still barking and neighbours were still shouting out to each other.

"They get caught?"

"They ain't find the killers yet?"

"They find the body?"

"Is true the old lady dead?"

"They should let go the dogs loose in the yard, quick quick."

"But what them police waiting for, pray tell?"

When Pohpoh arrived at Mala's fence she knew she had reached a refuge. She grabbed one of the rotting fence posts and scaled it with magical speed. Instead of landing in the stinging nettles she was caught by a soothing mess of aloe vera. This yard was different from the others. The plants were not arranged in any order and no path seemed to exist. She made her way through papashy and toolsie, the sharp medicinal smell clinging to her clothing. Pink morning light was too weak to illuminate the trees and plants in the chaotic garden but Pohpoh didn't care. She knew the yard better than any in her neighbourhood.

The policemen in the yard thrashed at the shrubs and bramble trees. In her dreaming Mala whispered as though to Pohpoh, "Oh my God! They going to mash up my plants. And they talk so loudly and roughly."

"God, this place have plenty bush."

"Look at this cactus, na. The blossoms on this thing so big! I wonder if it will catch if I break off a piece and take it home?"

"Shit. What dis is? It have a smell back here, foul-foul. Yuh smell it?"

"Fuh true. But what dat could be, boy? She does pee-pee in the yard or what?"

"Oh God. It smell like something rotting, something dead."

"Well, to make a smell like that it have to be something big like a cow, yes."

One voice broke out in a song. "Ole lady walk a mile an a half an she taylaylay." The men laughed and he sang it again.

"Ey! All yuh. Look over here. It look like somebody was in dis yard, yes."

"It could be children from down the road come up to harass she. I could remember years aback when I was a child comin round here to tief dongs and plum, oui. It was de best dongs, from dat same tree."

"Yuh know why it did taste so good?"

Again there was laughter. "Good manure, well-fertilized soil."

"Ey, all yuh, shut up yuh mouth and get serious, man. Ah tell yuh somebody was in dis yard not long ago. It wasn't a band of fellas. Only one person was in the yard. De aloes patch in de back mash-up-mash-up. It oozing fresh. It have fresh footprints here by the steps. One set small-small. That must be she footprints. And one bigger. And look at the footprints in a circle here and over here and over here. It look like . . . it look like . . . like, hmmm, dancing? Take a look, na."

"Is best to bring in de dogs, I say."

"Dem dogs ent go want to come an sniff in dis yard, na. De children always saying how back here does smell bad-bad in truth, oui!"

The prickly orange flowers of the shandolay scratched at Pohpoh, and as her lower legs rubbed against shado-beni, their bruised leaves gave off the smell she loved in raw, seasoned meat. Closer to the house, concealed in the foliage of broad banana fronds, she waited. The peekoplats in the mudra were silent, hopping nervously, afraid to call attention to themselves and their ward beneath. The chickens in the pomerac tree had become restless and clucked with worry. Call-and-answer cock-a-doodle-does across the village were fast paced and urgent, like warnings.

The chief constable had arrived. The men became more serious when they saw him coming down the recently cut path. The farther into the yard he penetrated the more disturbed his face became. He took a white handkerchief from his breast pocket and covered his nose. In his other hand he gripped a baton, thumping it anxiously

against his thigh. He passed barely glancing at the wall of cereus cactus.

"Rotting. Death. Old death," he whispered. It did not take him long to spot Mala in the rocking chair under the mudra tree. His men watched him and wondered what had attracted him to the huge tree. Then they too saw her.

Mala heard him approach. She kept her eyes closed, rocked with more agitation, determined to continue her dreaming. She imagined she was inside the house, looking down at Pohpoh from a bedroom window.

Crouching down and peeping out from behind the ixora bush, Pohpoh saw what she first thought was a giraffe, then a bird flapping its wings. She realized it was Mala, her eyes prominent like an owl's. Mala waved urgently and pointed beneath her to a wall of cereus plants outside a boarded-up window on the lower level. Pohpoh nodded in perfect understanding and headed for the cereus. Mala disappeared.

"Miss Ramchandin? Good day, Miss Ramchandin." The chief constable waited but there was no response. He raised his voice.

"Uh, Miss Ramchandin, good day. Can you hear me? Hello."

He called one of his men and ordered him to check her wrist for a pulse. Determining that she was alive, he told two of the men to lift her by the arm and take her up to the verandah.

The men were surprised when she brushed away their hands, rose up and walked toward the house by herself. Even as she walked she stayed close to Pohpoh. To her, Pohpoh came first.

Nearing the house Pohpoh noticed that the white cereus flowers were tinged with colour, as though they had been washed in a laundry that contained red clothing. Each blossom was larger than two hands side by side, and in the dawning of the day they were closing themselves against the onslaught of light. Their intrusive perfume

waned. As Pohpoh approached the house the sweetness turned bitter and sharply foul.

Standing on the verandah the chief constable stared out at the mudra. He slowly shoved the baton back into his belt and walked over to the jars of dazzlingly coloured pepper sauce. He shoved a bottle with the toe of his heavy boot.

"Excuse me, Constable, sir," one of his men said. "There is no sign of foul play in the yard. A lot of foulness, sir, but no foul play."

The chief constable ignored the humour. "Call the men out of the yard. That boy, Mohanty, he saw something, yes, but it was no murder—at least not a recent one."

"Sir?"

"Just follow my orders. Call the men out of the yard."

"Yes, Constable. At once."

The chief constable squatted next to Mala, who sat on the top stair of the verandah.

"Miss Ramchandin, we are worried about your safety and would like to take a quick look through the house."

"You never had any business with my safety before." Although her voice was gritty, she spoke with such force that the chief constable drew back involuntarily. "Why now for? You taking advantage of a ol' lady, that is what you doing. Besides, yuh think I stupid or what? I know you can't search people house without search papers."

"Miss Ramchandin, well, we ent actually searching your house." He chose his words carefully. "We got a complaint that some fellas running around and making trouble in the neighbourhood. They hiding somewhere. And we checking every house in the area. Every house."

"At dis time of mornin yuh wakin up people. All yuh have no shame." Mala felt herself drifting back to Pohpoh.

"It's well past afternoon now, Miss Ramchandin. We are going to look through the house." He ordered one of his men to wait with Miss Ramchandin, adding in a whisper, "Don't let her out of your sight."

The chief constable entered the kitchen and shone his large flashlight slowly around the room. He came upon a mound of snail shells rising knee-high from the floor and poked that too with the toe of his boot. He aimed his light at a strangely shaped doorway. It was an opening in a wall constructed of dust-covered furniture. He sent a reluctant officer through the opening and called other men to dismantle the structure.

When Mala heard the wall being pulled apart, she bit her lower lip and stared out across the yard, losing herself in the shapes of the mudra tree. *Save Pohpoh*, she chanted. *Save Pohpoh*.

In the midst of the cereus Pohpoh trembled and waited. She was fearful she would be spotted by angry townspeople before Mala reached her. Moments later the slats of wood over the window downstairs were quietly removed one by one. As soon as the space was big enough Pohpoh nimbly hoisted herself up to the ledge. Mala grabbed and pulled her in. The stuffiness and smell of the room astonished her. She coughed momentarily but quickly adapted. Mala replaced the slats swiftly and the room became as black as blindness. Without a word she wrapped a musty dressing gown around Pohpoh, her bony fingers squeezing Pohpoh's shoulders once. A chorus of flapping wings surrounded Pohpoh, moths reluctantly prying themselves from the long-unused gown. Their stir created the only movement of air in the room.

When the furniture wall was dismantled, the police trekked into the old drawing room. A carpet of dust rose in billowing clouds. As they checked the two unlocked rooms that had served as bedrooms, the house filled with a chorus of sniffing, coughing, sneezing and nose blowing.

They arrived at the third door to discover it not only shut but locked. The chief constable told an officer to bring in Miss Ramchandin. Once again Mala refused to be touched. She knew what the policeman wanted and, without fuss, followed briskly on

his heels. She regarded the door defiantly, then whipped a key from her pocket. When she pushed the door wide open the smell assaulted them. She was quite pleased that they all, including the usually composed chief constable, retched.

"Sir. That smell—" One of the men whispered.

"What smell?" Mala blurted out. "If you have no search papers, doh bother to insult me. No respect."

The chief constable, holding his handkerchief to his nose, pointed sharply toward the stairs. When he signalled that she was to accompany them he saw her look off to her side and nod, as though in agreement with some imaginary person.

Mala prodded at Pohpoh to move farther into the room. With one hand pressed on her back for assurance, Mala held up a bundle of weeds to Pohpoh's nose. "Jenghie, shandolay, baby bonnet and shado-beni," she said. "Press to yuh nose. It will help with the bad-feeling. Even you safe down there, as long as you stay close-close to me."

The men cautiously descended using a single flashlight for guidance. Suddenly an officer shrieked and spun around, jabbing the air with his elbow. They all jumped back snapping, "What was dat? What happen?"

The chief constable, who had positioned himself behind Mala, lurched backward, himself startled by the man's cry.

"Get control of yourself, man," he snapped angrily. "If a moth going to frighten you and make you make a fool of yourself so, it doh have no room in this force for yuh."

At the foot of the stairs they arrived at another door. The officer in front looked back to the chief constable. The chief constable nodded. The officer tried the door. It was locked.

"What it have in dis room?" the chief constable asked Mala. No answer. "Miss Ramchandin, you could save us some trouble if you would just tell us if anybody in that room."

Mala defiantly folded her arms across her chest. She closed her eyes and pursed her lips. Finally she said loudly, "Eh-heh, it have somebody in there. But is okay. He does live there. Is my father."

There was a moment of silence. Then a young officer spoke. "Eh. Yuh father. What yuh mean yuh father? Which father?"

"I only have one father." Mala was piqued. She mumbled a few sentences, almost inaudible to the men nearest her and totally incomprehensible.

"Mr. Ramchandin?" the chief constable asked. "But he disappear long, long time back, not so?"

"Exactly," Mala replied. "He does just lie there, not sick or nothing, just old and wear out, an I still looking after him all these years now. Is a daughter's duty, Constable."

"I think you better open up de room for us. Please."

She dealt with his insistence with an insistence of her own. She rocked from side to side and started to hum an old Dixieland tune. Then Mala raised a hand and pointed to the ledge. One of the men reached up, gathering a handful of dust before finding the key. She grabbed the key out of his hand and unlocked the door.

The officer gave the doorknob a twist and a hard shove. An emission of nasty gasses belched out at them. They twisted as though the odour had physically assaulted them. The front man turned around and, shoving aside the others, bolted up the stairs.

The chief constable shone his flashlight about the room. A swarm of bewildered moths flapped about. There was a tall cupboard against one wall and a rusted-out sewing machine. In the centre of the room was a high, wrought-iron bed.

Pohpoh saw a high, wrought-iron bed. Under sheets that glowed dark red from the lamplight lay a motionless stick figure. Skin, which looked grey one minute, red the next, stretched across the hairless cranium, clung to the forehead and cheekbones, defined the contour of a mouth cavity and fell off the precipice of a jaw-

bone. From parted black gums a thin purplish tongue flickered as though attempting to lick its lips every few seconds.

The constable saw Mala look to the side again, as though talking to someone.

"Father, Pohpoh," she whispered. "Remember him? Doh go near him. Even now, he still like to try and touch too much." Mala sucked her teeth, making a drawn-out sound. "Behave yuhself," she said to the bed, "or else yuh ent go get no light fuh two-three days." Turning to the invisible figure at her side, she said, "Stay here by me, child, and everything will be awright. Doh frighten. I ent go leave yuh here with dis wretch and all these other ones who disturbing the peace so. Just stay close by me. Doh frighten."

From the figure's throat came a faint noise muffled in cobwebs. Pohpoh leaned back. The figure expelled another mangled groan, this time with more force.

"Come, child, come," it said.

Pohpoh darted toward the bed and slid underneath, bursting through a wall of thick cobweb fibers. She peeled the sticky cords like plastic wrapping off her eyelids, away from her nose and lips. She trembled.

The constable approached the figure on the bed uneasily. "Mr. Ramchandin," he muttered. Hearing himself he gave a good cough, then expelled his words with the authority expected of a chief constable. "It must be old man Ramchandin, in truth!" He walked around the bed to inspect the level of decomposition, then commanded an officer to remove the white sheet that partially covered the corpse.

When he hesitated the constable bellowed, "Your days numbered, man. Get de hell out a here."

Another policeman came forward and grasped the crumpled sheet with the thumb and index finger of one hand and pulled it

back tentatively. He had the sensation that the corner of the sheet trembled between his fingers. As he pulled it back farther it began to unravel. Suddenly entire patches of the white sheet broke away and turned into a rising haze of reluctant moths. The terrified officer pitched the sheet out of his hand. It hovered, then broke apart in a flurry of activity. Thousands of tiny white moths had so tightly packed themselves side by side that the tiny hooks on the edges of their wings had locked together, linking them to form a heavy sheet that was slowly devouring the corpse underneath.

The policemen and the constable grabbed Mala by the arm and rushed out of the room to avoid being smothered by the cloud of moths. One officer tried to close the door behind them, but Mala broke back into the room. As she bent to look beneath the bed, they heard her call out, "Come, Pohpoh. Come, quickly. Run!" Mala extended a hand and pulled her from under the bed. Pohpoh nestled her face between two dried-out breasts.

"You smart, child. You real smart. Dey ent go come back here. Come." Pohpoh's body shook like leaves in a wind.

To Mala's mind and ears alone, the figure in the bed grunted again. The bed creaked as though the body had managed to shift itself. The occupant made another effort to speak. Mala swiftly pushed Pohpoh out of the room.

"I does watch you. I does always watch you. Whenever you go out. At night, you know. I see everything, *everything* you does do, *every* house you does enter. But tonight your plans get a little mess up, eh? Things bad at home, child? I understand. I understand everything. *Everything*. Today is the last day that anybody will ever be able to reach you. Oh, you so cold."

Mala hugged the taut, stiff child.

"I old but I not stupid. I don't have to go far to see everything. I does see how your father does watch you. His eyes just like my father own. You resourceful. I wasn't resourceful. You do for yourself better than me!"

The chief constable, fearing that Mala was becoming totally mad, approached her stealthily. He flung his arms around her upper body and one of his men grabbed her legs. They were surprised that she did not resist as they hauled her up the stairs.

"Run, run, fast, Pohpoh, run," Mala mumbled.

Pohpoh nimbly passed the officers on the stairs and reached the drawing room first. At the top of the stairs the officers put Mala down and watched her tip her head in the direction of the verandah.

"The verandah," she whispered. "You could take off from the verandah." Mala, followed by the curious officers, hobbled out onto the verandah.

In the drawing room the chief constable made arrangements for the inspection of the body downstairs. "From the way it decomposing I would guess the old man was trapped down there alive for a long time before he died. Or was murdered. Make arrangements for Dr. Datt to inspect the body and for Inspector Moroze to check out the scene."

"Constable, a body in that condition? They could do autopsy on a body in that condition?"

The chief constable glared.

"All right, all right," said the officer, "but I can tell you right now that Dr. Datt gone away for the weekend. He take Mrs. Datt and the children for seaside holidays. I could try and get in touch with Dr. Ottley but he wouldn't be able to make this place today."

The chief constable pondered the situation. "Well, that body ent going no place. One more day wouldn't hurt it."

He looked over at Mala. She was on the verandah gripping the banister railing and gibbering excitedly.

"See how that child could run? Look how she running, boy!" The officers mocked her. One of them shouted out, pointing to nothing in particular. "Look! She gone over the fence. Behind the tree . . . where she? Lord! She is lightning in truth—"

"They coming after you, run, run!" Mala shouted to the child

who, in her imagination, had already escaped the yard's confines. Her mind filled with sounds of voices and footsteps following Pohpoh. "Yes, Pohpoh, you take off and fly, child, fly!"

One of the police thoroughly enjoying egging Mala on, grinned and said to the chief constable, who was finally somewhat bemused, "Wha de ass! She flying or what! Constable, she leap over dat fence—even the dogs can't do that, sir!"

At the top of the hill Pohpoh bent her body forward and, as though doing a breast stroke, began to part the air with her arms. Each stroke took her higher until she no longer touched the ground. She soon found herself above even the tallest trees. High enough, calmed, she glided, dipping to the left, angling to the right. She made a wide circle trying to make out familiar gardens, to pinpoint the cricket pitch and the yard with the rabbits' hutch. Before long her village was swallowed up in an unfamiliar coagulation of green, brown and yellow. She did three more breast strokes and soared higher before gliding again, basking in the cloudless sky. She practised making perfect, broad circles, like a frigate bird splayed out against the sky in an elegant V. Down below, her island was soon lost among others, all as shapeless as specks of dust adrift on a vast turquoise sea.

The crowd gathered outside saw the officers wrestle with the wriggling old lady. One grappled with her arms and the other with her feet. The onlookers fell silent as a member of the force opened the back door of the police car. They watched as she was deposited in the care of an armed officer. Word spread fast that she was a murderer and had killed a man. From one officer, who was eager to reveal what he knew, it was determined that old lady Mala Ramchandin was being taken in for questioning about the death of her father. On hearing the gossip Ambrose sat down in the road, buried his face in his knees and cried.

Even before the crowd had dispersed Otoh, still smarting and

stunned from the baton blow, saw a band of men with bird cages, four each, approaching the back fence. Following them were three men with saws.

As the bird catchers passed he heard them talk. "In a pinch ten birds could live for about two, three days in one cage."

"You know how much one peekoplat fetching these days?"

"Divide up, a third each, a mudra that size would make each one of us a rich man. I myself putting in a bid for the lower third of the base."

Otoh squatted down next to his father.

"Pappy, if they decide that she kill him, what would happen to she?"

Ambrose shook his head in disbelief. "Impossible. Impossible."

"Tomorrow they going to inspect the scene."

Still his father said nothing.

"Pappy, say something! Why you don't say something? Why you don't do something? You just going to let them take she so?"

Then out of the blue he asked his father, "You have any matches on you?"

That night, after the rasping sawing of timber had stopped, Ambrose stood on his darkened verandah and leaned on the banister railing. In the darkness he watched men carrying piles of the heavy timber from Hill Side to Government Alley. They struggled several paces with one load, rested in the middle of the road, ran back for another, and so they inched their treasure along. There was more to come from the house on Hill Side.

Otoh was nowhere in sight. Elsie Mohanty, feeling tired for the first time in decades, had finally dozed off. Ambrose had not the slightest need of sleep. He stared blankly toward the house on Hill Side, grimly contemplating his life-long inability to act decisively. He stared morosely, wondering what was to become of the woman whom he had loved since he was a little boy, wondering if there

was something that he could do, something that would spring to mind if only he meditated long enough, something that he dared to do. He could think of nothing, really.

Suddenly, emanating from exactly where he estimated Mala's house to be, a flare of brilliant red and yellow light shot into the sky. Within seconds the hissing and spitting of a fire could be heard. Flames leapt up and licked the heavens. Ambrose's heart raced. He stood on tiptoe, as though doing so would help him to see better. For the second time in twenty-four hours, excited neighbours filed into the street. The fire truck arrived but the firefighters' efforts to get to Hill Side were hampered by the piles of mudra blocking the street. As they worked to clear a passage, a brilliant display of embers spit up into the sky as old, dry timber went up in flames. The intoxicating fragrance of burning mudra wafted through the air. The fiery sky swarmed with crazed bats and moths. *Fwoop. Fwoop.*

Otoh appeared. Behind his back he clutched clippings from a cereus plant. He stood beside his father and, buoyed by the scent in the air, they watched the luminous sky until dawn. In the early hours of morning the flames and the scent subsided.

For almost a week, however, until a day or so after the presiding judge had reached his decision, the house and the trees and shrubs and every bit of live and dead matter that had thrived on the Hill Side property remained floating through the town in an irritating dust, suspended in a thick, black cloud above the town and blocking out the light of the sun.

THERE WAS A time when Ambrose E. Mohanty was not in the least interested in sleep. He used to laugh and say that he would sleep well enough and long enough when he was dead. These were the days when he and Mala hoped and dreamed together, the days well before he had married Elsie.

Ambrose had spent several years studying in the Shivering Northern Wetlands. He returned a natty, foreign-accented bachelor full of dreams. Mala heard that he was returning. She went to buy salt fish and ground provisions from Pilai's Dry Goods and Pilai dropped the news on her. He waited until they were alone in the store.

"Ey, Pohpoh-beti, how you doing? What you come for today?"

"I am good, thanks, Mr. Pilai. I come for cassava, yam, green fig and plantain."

"I have plenty. Take a basket." And then he came closer to her. "So, Pohpoh, you hear news, girl?" he said in an excited whisper.

"Mr. Pilai, please, you keep forgetting, please don't call me Pohpoh. I am no longer a child. What news, Mr. Pilai?"

"You know I don't mean you no harm. I know you since you a child, and I call you that name so long now that it does be hard to remember. *Mala* does sound so strange. So, you mean you ent hear news? Well, I breaking news again!"

Mala liked Mr. Pilai well enough. She kept her eyes on the

ground provisions as she picked through his tray of eddoes and cassava. He followed her closely.

"Ambrose . . ." Pilai was pleased to see the twitch in her body. His news would indeed be of certain import to her. He was all the more excited to be its bearer. "Ambrose, you remember Ambrose? Boyie, na. He coming home tonight."

Mala gasped and instantly regretted it. If he gossiped to her certainly he must do so to others, and she had no wish to be the subject of gossip. She had learned early the emotional bruising that came from whispered jeers and ice-cold stares. But still, the news that Ambrose, the closest friend she ever had, was returning to town was too thrilling to be elegantly contained.

"Ambrose Moha . . . ?"

"Yes, yes, yes, him self," said Pilai. "What other Ambrose I would tell you about? His mammy was in here not ten minutes before you come. You just miss she. She buy up all me good cassava. Look." He rummaged through the tray showing her that the ones left were a little bruised. "She take all me good provisions. She say to make big cook-up for him. Is like Christmas in Paradise Estate."

Mala allowed herself some curiosity. "His mammy must be real happy. Holidays? Holidays he come for, Mr. Pilai?"

"No, girl. He finish study. He get degree and thing. He back in truth. Coming home tonight, to sweet Lantanacamara by steamer. When we own fellas gone away to a place like the Shivering Northern Wetlands, they does hardly come back, you know. They does stay up there and marry foreign and forget about we. But Ambrose is a real Lantanacamara man. And Pohpoh-beti, how about you? You happy?" He asked the question with such real concern that Mala could not correct him again.

"I'm happy for his mammy. She must be cooking and cleaning all day for him."

Pilai gauged her response to his news not so much from anything Mala said, for she hardly spoke, but from the sudden shift in her purchasing manner. She got busier, buying flour, baking pow-

der, eggs and dry chocolate. She even bought an ounce of the new colourful icing beads that he had got in only that week.

Even as she bought the baking ingredients, Mala wondered if Ambrose was returning alone or if he had found himself an exciting and educated foreign wife. Would he have children, would he even remember Mala? When they were in school together they had been inseparable, and he was the only one of the male species—besides Chandin Ramchandin, her father—who had ever touched her body, kissed her mouth. But they were children then and she had let him, not because she felt any love for him but because she wanted the ticklish feeling and moments of escape the act gave her. On her way home she thought only of Ambrose, of how he was before he left. Everyone in the town had been excited that he had won the one and only scholarship given out by the Bible Mission to go to the Shivering Northern Wetlands and study theology. He had been worried to be away for such a long time, afraid that anything could happen to his mother without his knowing. And now he was coming home to a healthy mother, older certainly, but well and happy. She wondered if in the Shivering Northern Wetlands he had ever seen her mother. Or Asha, who had run away from home when she was in her late teens, a deed Mala understood even though she cried for months when she realized Asha would be true to the penned word left for her on her bed. She would never return home again. She wondered daily what had become of her, if she had perhaps gone to the Wetlands in search of their mother. If, that is, the Shivering Northern Wetlands were where Mama and Aunt Lavinia had gone. She herself could hardly remember what any of them looked like, except in the photograph she had saved from a fire once. Asha was not in that photograph and sadly, there were none of her to be found. Mala wished that Ambrose would arrive on her doorstep with news of all three.

She went home and baked. Her father came late that evening. He had already been drinking and paid no attention to the smell of fresh roasted bread and angel cake. He was intoxicated enough not

to notice the house was tidied up and cleaner than he'd ever seen it. With the kitchen floor and wood furniture all polished, the place looked and smelled like the early hours of Christmas morning. He was oblivious to it all.

That night Mala complied with Chandin Ramchandin's expectation that she lie down with him. She let him more easily than ordinarily lay his coarse hands on her belly, for she was in possession of a joy and hope that allowed her to block the whole thing out. She thought of Ambrose sitting with his mother in their house at the edge of the cane fields. She had heard that he sent money home regularly and that his mother had added two rooms with doors that could be locked. One for her and one for him. Mala wondered what Ambrose thought of the additions. She imagined him coming to say hello just as he had come to say good-bye years ago. She imagined herself in the kitchen when he knocked at the door. She changed the image and put herself in the garden. He would come around the back of the house to catch her tilling the soil around the rose bushes—or better yet, plucking wax-shiny yellow fruit from the passion fruit vine or collecting a basket of frangipani. Once, when they were in high school, he came to visit her. Realizing that her tyrannical father was home, he left a note of his visit in the form of a stolen stalk of frangipani shoved into the earth by the back fence, inside the yard. Her heart leapt with joy when she remembered the frangipani was in unusually full bloom these days. It must have been an omen.

When she was sure her father had succumbed completely to the sleep of his cheap alcohol, she removed his thick hand from her belly and slipped out of the bed. Mala ran to the window and looked out. Even in the dark night she could see the brightness of the frangipani blossoms by the fence. Her anxiousness to see Ambrose surprised her.

Next morning Mala was much less certain that the foreign-educated Ambrose would visit her. She busied herself around the kitchen, watching her father as he got ready to leave for the day.

Living had become a matter of habit for Chandin Ramchandin. He began his day as usual walking from house to house calling out, "Madam! Madam! Boss! You need help today?" He had learned to avoid some houses. Their inhabitants would come out wielding a broom, shouting to him to get away, that they did not want the likes of him around their children. While many shunned him there were those who took pity, for he was once the much respected teacher of the Gospel, and such a man would take to the bottle and to his own child, they reasoned, only if he suffered some madness. And, they further reasoned, what man would not suffer a rage akin to insanity if his own wife, with a devilish mind of her own, left her husband and children. Whether they disliked him or tolerated his existence, to everyone Chandin was Sir. He was often paid a good-will shilling and pennies to weed a yard, sweep their drains, pick coconuts, kill a chicken or goat, or sharpen knives. When Chandin had enough coins he would quit work and head for the rum shop where he stayed until hunger gnawed at his belly.

Her father had hardly left the house for the day and Mala had only begun to straighten his smelly bed when she heard the soft voice, like cool, clear honey, cooing her name from the back porch. She straightened her hair, adjusted her dress and tried to calm her breathing.

"Pohpoh?"

She could find no voice to answer. She walked out to the back porch grinning.

"I hear you were coming back home, in truth, yes!" She could feel the blush on her face.

"Ah. How quickly news travels in a small town. I was hoping to surprise you."

"Well, I already knew. I was just wondering when I would see you. Yesterday I was in Pilai store, you remember Mr. Pilai? It was he who tell me that you was coming home. So Mammy must be too happy, eh? Pilai tell me your mammy was making big cook-up?"

He had put on a little weight but he never looked so fine. The

fedora he removed with the fluency of a gentleman lent him an air of grandness. Ambrose E. Mohanty stood like a man, filling the porch with an elegant scent of cloves, cardamom and bay leaves. For the first time in her life Mala felt like a woman, a feeling both thrilling and frightening. She lifted her shoulders upright and her small breasts quietly announced themselves.

"Mammy is well, Pohpoh. And you? How are you? How have you been?"

"I good, yes," she said, suddenly afraid to know how he was, to know if he had married, if he were really back to stay. He had turned into an extraordinarily handsome man. Ambrose was more dapper than even the Wetlandish Reverends and white plantation owners who had not visited their home countries in many years. Except for his skin colour he looked like a man in a foreign magazine, and with a little twist of her imagination she could picture him fair skinned.

"Come in, na. Pappy isn't home. He left for the day already." Mala avoided his eyes.

"I know. I was outside for a good while, waiting for him to leave." Ambrose picked up a parcel he had set on the verandah floor and followed her into the kitchen.

"Pappy didn't changed much, na. You remember him?" How little could she tell him, she wondered, and still expect him to catch her meaning? She could never bring herself to graphically reveal her situation yet she desperately hoped that he, of all people, might understand the things she couldn't say. She wasn't really sure why she trusted he might understand. Several years had passed since she had last seen Ambrose, since he had last seen her. But in those years he had clearly outgrown the chubby, greasy Boyie she used to collect snails with in the schoolyard. Her father was still a menace and tyrant. Everyone knew that. She wondered if Ambrose had ever figured out that her father pretended she was the wife who had many years ago run out on him.

"So you come back to stay or you leaving again?" She busied her-

self getting out a plate and knife, the fresh bread and some butter and guava jelly. She couldn't bear to look at him. She wondered if the package he carried was for her.

"I have no plans to leave. I finished my studies and I am now back to stay." He lowered the parcel onto the kitchen table. "This is for you. Forgive my forwardness, Pohpoh, but I brought this novelty back home with me and I thought that it might be of some interest to you. May I offer it to you?"

"Well, that is kind of you. But I don't know what it is. You don't have to bring no gifts for me, you know. What is in the box, Mr. Mohanty?"

He had never heard her say his last name before and was amused by her formality. "Pohpoh, you must call me Ambrose. I am the same person you have known since we were children. Please accept my present."

He pushed the box toward her and encouraged her to look inside. She reluctantly opened the box. Inside was a portable gramophone with two seventy-eight r.p.m. disks stashed on the turntable. Mala covered her mouth in surprise and embarrassment.

"But I hardly know you. Is not right for a woman to take presents so expensive from a man. I am sorry but I can't accept this, Mr. Ambrose."

"Not *Mr.* Ambrose. Ambrose alone is fine. You do know me. And I only brought it back for you because I hold you in the highest esteem and wanted to pay my respects to you in the spirit that—" He broke off abruptly. It stunned Mala to realize he was about to cry.

"I expected you to be wearing a priest's collar," she quickly said.

His mood shifted. He dropped the topic of the gramophone and slid into an eloquence that he clearly delighted in displaying.

"After a year of schooling in theology," Ambrose began, "I found that certain concepts had the effect of turning me into a rather irascible fellow. Quite the antithesis of a theologian, don't you think?" He chuckled, looking to her for a response. Mala remained silent.

"I left the seminary and went to a little-known university where I completed—quite successfully, might I add—a degree in entomology. I am an entomologist, a bloody entomologist, Pohpoh!" He laughed heartily. She stared at him blankly, not sure what he meant.

"Look. At the heart of theology there is a premise—they will try to tell you otherwise, but if one listens carefully there is a premise that we humans are the primary sun around which the entire universe revolves. Unstated but certainly implied is the assumption that humans are by far superior to the rest of all of nature, and that's why we are the inheritors of the earth. Arrogant, isn't it? What's more, not all humans are part of this sun. Some of us are considered to be much lesser than others—especially if we are not Wetlandish or European or full-blooded white."

She found his words and meanings too obscure for her to follow and Mala became interested in the musicality of his voice. His words were like cut-glass pendants tinkling on a string. He paused and waited for a response but she was far too lost.

"Ambrose, I never knew you to talk quite so much."

"Well, I feel as if I want to talk with you about everything and to talk and talk and talk forever and ever. With you, that is. Everything I learned while I was over there I wanted to discuss and share with you. How are you, Pohpoh? Tell me, how are you?"

"I am good, yes." Mala wasn't sure if she was hearing him correctly. "But I don't understand what you are talking about. What about the Reverend? What he say about you not finishing your studies? You must have to pay back the mission a lot of money, eh?"

"Ah, dear. Where should I begin?"

"You begin already. Just carry on. But go slow and explain so I can understand you."

"Look, it's not that I intended to turn my back on God. I just don't think that those instructors and eminent theologians are equal to their theories of theology. When I was asked about my special areas of interests I told them that I dearly wanted to map the importance of the insects and bugs mentioned in the Bible to the

spiritual well-being of humankind and the earth on which we all, man and nature, co-exist. All of God's universe."

Mala began to giggle. He looked at her quizzically.

"I thought I wasn't understanding you but now it look like I am."

"Yes? Yes? Ah, Pohpoh. I knew you would! They thought I was loco but when they realized I was serious they let me begin a study of my own. Yet every step of the way they intervened, insisting that I posit the insects and the bugs and all creatures not of the human species as *lesser*, as *dumb*, and to relegate them to being God's *tools*, servants, or as doom that He would send down upon mankind as punishment, or that He would visit upon us as reward for our deeds. Well, I wrote a letter to the Reverend and he agreed that I could use the scholarship to study entomology as long as I promised to return and work as a good Christian in the ministry of agriculture."

"You goin to work in the cane fields, Ambrose?"

"I got him to agree that I would work in the area of tourism. Bringing people to God via the ministry of His marvellous nature. He told me that if I weren't so bright, and if Mammy weren't such a good and God-fearing woman he would take the scholarship away and give it to someone else. But he knew that ever since I was a child I had a heart for entomology. So I don't owe them any money. But I do owe you tremendous gratitude. It was you who introduced me to the world of insects, you know that, eh, Pohpoh?"

"So what kind of work it is you going to do?"

"Commerce. Some sort of enterprise of my own. Finding a position would be quite impossible, I tell you. It would be quickly discerned by any employer that I am incurably notional. I would be fired before the completion of my first day. The charges would fill a ledger: daydreaming, insolence, stubbornness, quixotism and so the list would go."

Mala couldn't quite follow him but somehow, to his delight, he made her chuckle. She glanced at the gramophone still sitting in the box. Its arm was brass coloured with ornate etchings. It was very pretty.

"So if I want to hold a job I must employ myself," Ambrose said happily. "I have so many ideas but I will bore you with only my most compelling."

"What is that?"

"I was thinking of harvesting spider silk. Do you remember how those imbeciles at school used to try to crush a strand of spider silk? They would smash at it with a rock but it never split apart. There have been attempts already to harvest the silk but with little results. I think I might have stumbled upon a way, Pohpoh."

There was such affection in the way Ambrose said Pohpoh that Mala was unable to tell him that she could no longer bear the name. Pohpoh was what her father had lovingly called her since she was a baby, long before the crisis in the family. But when Chandin Ramchandin started touching her in ways that terrified and hurt her, she hated the way he whispered, "Pohpoh, my little Pohpoh, you must never leave me, eh?" She decided not to ask Ambrose to call her Mala just yet. The request might cause too many questions to hang like a curtain, separating them. She would wait for a time when she was sure nothing could wedge a distance between them.

"I am thinking also," he continued dreamily, "of purchasing a pirogue, a small boat, to take foreign visitors who come in search of nature's tropical wonders up the river and out to the vast swamplands on the eastern coast. The swamp is the home of magnificent birds, so colourful and varied in size, with fantastic appendages that make them appear to have escaped the pages of a fairy tale. The swamp is also home to countless species of fantastical crabs and lizards and crocodile. Those foreign naturalists would give their arm and a leg to see what lives in that swamp. I am certain, too, that there we could also find a copious supply of web-spinning spiders. What do you say?"

It was all too strange for Mala, especially his use of the word we.

"You like the bread?" was all that she could say.

"And you, Pohpoh, could serve them tea and hot bread at the end of the river trip. What do you say? I had no idea that you baked

so competently. But of course I am not surprised. It is rather an excellent taste. I could eat such bread very happily for every meal for the rest of my life."

The surprise of such a revealing pronouncement quieted them both. They parted awkwardly, Ambrose pretending to forget the gramophone on the table and Mala pretending to not notice that it remained. He made his way out the back door.

Without removing the gift from the box she looked at it, touching the fat brass arm. She clutched the records to her chest, imagining that Ambrose knew these musical pieces well, had especially chosen them for her. She returned the disks and closed the box. With less difficulty than Ambrose, she lifted it and walked into her bedroom. She shoved the box under her bed, out of her father's sight.



IT WAS MARKET day. As he left the house that morning Chandin Ramchandin had, as usual, stated what he wanted for his evening meal. "Curry a brown fowl," he said but it was understood the meal must also include rice, split pea dhal, curried channa or aloo and one sadha roti. Chandin left six shillings on the kitchen table for Mala to go to market with. It was enough to buy the chicken but with all her baking for Ambrose she would also have to get flour for the roti. Before Ambrose left, Mala was distressed that she would have to shorten his visit so that she could make the trip to Pilai's Dry Goods and the market. She needed time to kill, gut and pluck the fowl before cooking it. There would be no lingering today.

Fortunately, Ambrose had left her just enough time to complete her work and cooking before Chandin returned. But so preoccupied was Mala with her intriguing beau, she entirely forgot what

day it was. Before leaving for the market she fixed on her head a wide-brimmed hat with large red flowers and purple birds. She looked at herself in the mirror, pretending she was in the market and, unbeknownst to her, Ambrose too was in the market watching her. She turned and twisted her face, puckered her mouth and raised her eyebrows, mimicking the well-to-do women who sometimes made the market trip. She imitated them asking the vendors with benevolent arrogance for a fat young fowl, a bundle of cinnamon, a pineapple. She saw herself in the mirror as she imagined Ambrose might, the way he might watch and admire her.

Swinging her woven straw basket, humming and admiring the flowering shrubs and trees in neighbouring yards, Mala was ecstatic as she strolled down the five long blocks to the market. Cooking for her father was a chore she performed without much thought or caring. But now cooking had become a delightful production. She would cook more than enough food so that tomorrow she would be able to show off and offer her talents to Ambrose.

When she got to Pilai's store, to her horror, it was closed. Then she remembered the day was Wednesday. Her disbelief quickly turned to fear. On Wednesdays Pilai opened his shop for only two hours in the early morning. By nine o'clock he would close and make his once-a-week trip to the docks for provisions that came in by steamer from another island. Everyone in Paradise knew his schedule. She looked down at her feet and noted her shadow was short. It was well past ten o'clock. She was no longer very confident that she would get a chicken, let alone a brown one so late in the day.

The fowl, pork and beef vendors' tables had already been cleared. The fowl vendor was hosing off blood, feathers and snippets of entrails from the table and scales, and feathers and excrement from the stack of empty cages behind his stall. A couple of fish stalls were still running. Through a swarm of lazy flies she saw meagre piles of discoloured shrimp and some whole fish that had lost their gloss of freshness. All the king fish, red fish and cavalli were finished, the vendor said, but he had a shark and would give it

to her cheap. Shark was always far cheaper than the other fish. Mala knew it was said that only people whose souls were dark would eat the flesh of an animal that was known to eat the flesh of man.

Mala considered the shark. The vendor slit its belly with a flamboyant gesture and yanked out the guts. He stretched apart the slit intestine. She looked, and seeing nothing resembling human body parts or unusual colours, she agreed to take it. She sought solace in the fact that fish was cheaper than meat. She would spend her father's money carefully and take change home.

Spice and vegetable vendors were plentiful still. Mala bought tomatoes, onions, garlic, star anise seeds, sweet potatoes, eddoes, cassava, yam and scotch bonnet peppers. To compensate for her carelessness she bought a bundle of her father's favourite vegetable, string bean bodi. She still had a shilling and some pennies.

Chandin Ramchandin would not get his curry but Mala would cook up the tastiest stewed fish and provisions he had ever had. She would fry the bodi with onions and tomatoes, the way he liked best. He would not miss the curry. And the next day she would be able to give a plateful of the anise- and pepper-flavoured fish to Ambrose. It was indeed for Ambrose that she was cooking. It would be fine with him to be served shark. Ambrose was not one to be afraid to indulge in all kinds of pleasures. And Chandin Ramchandin would likely not ask what kind of fish he was eating. If he did she would simply say it was carite. He would never know the difference.

But when her father arrived home that afternoon, he expected the neighbourhood to be permeated with the bitter aromas of freshly roasted and ground curry paste. He was shocked to be greeted by the quieter aroma of fish tamed in burnt sugar and anise, the smells of a creole stew. Mala heard him drag open the front gate. She swiftly set the table for one. In a white enamel bowl she spooned out a large serving of the brilliant, tomato-coloured fish, decorated tastefully with the yellow scotch bonnet pepper floating in gravy. There was still enough left for herself and Ambrose. She put a portion of the bodi in a saucer and some rice