

in a sky-blue enamel bowl. She was finished by the time Chandin unlocked the front door.

She stood in the kitchen in full view, but he did not glance in her direction. He walked straight to his bedroom where he undressed, removed his shirt and changed from a pair of worn-out, stained khaki pants to worn-out, stained pajama pants. Mala anxiously brushed flies away from the plates of food. She expected a confrontation but trusted that after the first drop of her stew touched his tongue he would quietly finish his meal. In his pajama pants and a ragged merino vest, Chandin shuffled barefoot into the kitchen, still not looking at Mala.

He walked to the back verandah, looked around and came and stood in the doorway. His features were eclipsed by the evening glare.

"You wash clothes today?" he gruffly asked.

"No, Pappy. Today is Wednesday. I does wash clothes Tuesday and Friday."

"You sweep the yard? It didn't look to me like you sweep."

Becoming afraid, Mala whispered back, "No, I sweep yesterday. I will go and sweep now-now if you say so."

He looked at the plate of fish on the table. "I see you went and make market today," he said quietly. He shuffled into the drawing room and swiped a finger across a centre table.

"And I see you didn't dust today." His voice was low but Mala could tell that a hurricane was around the corner. Tears began to cloud her eyes.

"No, Pappy." The words were barely audible. His questioning was beginning to have its desired effect.

"So, if you didn't sweep, you didn't dust and you didn't wash, what make you late that you didn't get chicken?"

"Pappy, they didn't have chicken."

He walked over and stood by the table where the food waited. Mala watched flies settling on the dishes. She was trapped. Swat-

ting the flies might provoke violence from her father, yet ignoring them was also perilous.

"So how is it that this morning I see Miss Barlo leaving the market with a fowl in her hand. And I see Miss Gomez with one and Mr. Samlal carrying two? Tell me?"

She opened her mouth to utter something that had not yet even formed itself into an idea, when he suddenly grabbed the bowl of fish and in one fluent motion rammed it into her face. In terror she gasped, inhaling stew in her mouth and nostrils. She kept her eyes on Chandin, even though the stew burned. She had learned to watch and anticipate his actions against her so she could control their impact.

Chandin Ramchandin's body shook with rage. Mala puffed her chest out against him like a bullfrog in full defiance. He growled, anger stripping him momentarily of his faculty to speak. Clutching a handful of hair at the back of her head, he shoved the bowl into her face again, twisting it back and forth. Her nose began to bleed. She concentrated on the sensation of enamel against her face, as though taking notes on an experiment. With every clockwise twist he slammed his pelvis into her, banging her against the counter of the sink. She felt no pain. She tapped her tongue against the roof of her mouth checking the stew for seasoning. She tasted blood. To stem the panic brought on by the recognition of blood, she focused her eyes on the half-moon-shaped, chicken pox scar on her father's forehead. He let the bowl drop and leaned against Mala, resting his forehead on hers. The smell of his alcoholic body and breath agitated her more than the injuries he had just then inflicted. She slipped her tongue out of her mouth and licked the stew on her face. The taste of garlic and anise erased his smell. The stew was indeed well seasoned, perhaps the best she had ever cooked. She was pleased she had saved some back for Ambrose.

Chandin straightened himself and moved away from her.

"Idleness is the workings of the devil, you lying bitch. You want to have your own way—just like your mother. You is a liar just like

your mother. I will teach you. I will see to that. I tell you I want curry fowl. It don't matter to me where you get a fowl from but you will go and find one. Tonight self. You hear me? You ent sleeping until I eat curry fowl and this kitchen clean up good."

He ripped off his pajama shirt, which was spotted with bodi and tomato, bundled it up and flung it at her face. She caught it in time. Slyly pleased with herself, Mala hung her head low and stared at her bare feet. He shuffled out of the kitchen and into his room. He slammed the door so hard the dishes in the cupboard shook. She breathed a long sigh.

It was already dark outside except for the flashes of lightning that lit up the tropical night skies. Not that Mala needed light to find her way around the neighbourhood. In the first few months after her mother had left she had trekked through the streets many nights in despair, undetected. Ashamed that she had been forced out of her father's home to search for a chicken, Mala considered the possibilities. Her father clearly expected her to steal. How else would she find a chicken at night when no shop was open? Yet if she stole, her father would draw blood with his beating and berating—and would likely do the same if she returned empty handed. At the backyard gate Mala smelled a freshness. Something had recently died. It was not an offensive smell, perhaps a squirrel or cat. She followed her nose and waited for a flash of lightning to reveal what had met its death.

The garden was suddenly illuminated. On the bare earth lay a young pigeon. She knelt by it, sniffing. She poked it. Although the body had stiffened Mala could tell from its smell that the bird had died that day. She hid behind a thick majagua bush and began to cluck and clack. Her clucking heightened as though she were a bird being pursued and then, as though caught, she squawked and spat. Shaking the branches of the majagua she made a convincing imitation of a chicken struggling to free itself, and failing.

In the darkness of the yard she plucked the pigeon, slit the bird's belly and removed its entrails. She cut off its head with a machete.

She snipped the soft breasts apart, separated the flesh and flung the bones over the fence. Then she cut up the rest of the small bird. By the time she was finished the mound of bird parts was not dissimilar to young chicken meat.

Chandin was more than halfway through a bottle of whiskey when he heard the sizzle and smelled the aroma of masala, garlic and onions frying in oil. He was too drunk to notice the foulness of a dish prepared with meat that was almost rotten. He tasted curry spices and that was enough to appease him, and besides, the spoonfuls of hot pepper sauce he doused the food with scorched his taste buds and eliminated the finer details of taste. He suffered nothing more than a slight stomach gripe and went to bed earlier than usual, believing the aches were the result of having eaten too much, too hot and too late: an entire chicken, two plates of rice floating in dhal and a quarter jar of pepper sauce. As she cleaned up the table and the kitchen, Mala heard him moaning in his bed. He called out to her twice but she pretended not to hear. By the time she was finished in the kitchen she heard snoring.

Mala turned out all the lights. While she had been washing all the cookware and cleaning up, the town had been sucked up into darkness. She leaned on the back porch banister and smelled the moistness of the earth. A million fireflies flickered on and off. Amidst the chirping of invisible crickets and frogs was her father's snoring. As long as the guttural sounds were audible she would be able to relax.

She thought of Ambrose, wondering if he too snored, of what he must look like while sleeping, of his lips. She tiptoed to her bedroom and quietly pulled the box from under her bed. The words *Cadence* and *The Shivering Northern Wetlands* and *Music Makers, Appointed by H. R. H. Rupert II* were stencilled on the side of the box. She whispered them to herself, savouring the sound of their exquisite foreignness. The box felt heavier than before. She toted it out to the verandah and lifted out the awkwardly balanced gramophone. She and Asha had once watched Aunt Lavinia crank up her

gramophone. She tried to remember just how she made it work. She found the volume control knob and turned it down. She lifted the arm with the needle and placed it in the grooves of a disk. Even with the volume turned off Mala could hear the faint scratchiness, the suggestion of a Dixieland jazz band. She pressed her ear to the horn and smiled, filling once again with the feeling she had had watching her mother and Aunt Lavinia dance, her feet wanting to break out from under her and tap across the verandah, up and down the back stairs, from one end of the town to the next. She tapped a bare toe. She imagined herself in a flower-print dress, newly washed and pressed, twirling in the arms of her coattailed, top-hatted Ambrose, laughing and stepping from star to star all the way across the Lantanacamaran sky, and then back again before the first hint of dawn.

From then on, Mala schemed to get her father out of the house early. Usually still drunk from the night before, he barely noticed that she had washed and dressed herself before he had finished his cocoa and salt biscuits. One morning Ambrose had complimented her on her hair pinned back, and after that she fastened the long hair into a high bun especially for his pleasure.

Since Ambrose returned from the Shivering Northern Wetlands and started paying her frequent visits, she began washing and pressing her clothes the instant her father fell asleep. Looking forward to his visits gave her the strength to endure her father's night-time attacks. She wanted to look as elegant and as rich as she could for Ambrose, her gallant suitor, who dressed himself like a Wetlandish lord. She thought privately of him, indeed, as her black Wetlandish lord, and of herself as the lady who would one day be rescued by him and revealed to all the world as a princess stolen by commoners at birth.

And almost every single day—except for one day a fortnight when he was unable, and, to his credit, unwilling, to avoid his filial

obligation of one kind or another to his mother—Ambrose rose with the sun to wait interminable minutes around the corner until he saw Chandin Ramchandin leave the house. Then he would visit Mala, his arms laden with some syrupy fruit he had picked especially for her or with bulbs and roots of wild plants, the pocket of his black slacks bulging with jars of the brilliantly coloured and weirdly shaped fungi he had found the day before in the forest or out on the banks of the swamp.

At the end of each visit they would cart the gramophone out from under the bed to the verandah, where they were afforded privacy by the backyard trees. He would put on one of the two records and the black lord and his poor brown princess would delicately hold the tips of each other's fingers and dance. Mala, at first cautious about moving her body freely, lost her shyness when her lord, with quiet, gentlemanly concern, acknowledged her fears and would neither touch nor gaze at her body in any way that made her uncomfortable. From the slightest touch of her fingertips he could feel her drawing the music into her soul and see it filling her from her feet to the dark hair gathered on her beautiful head. Quieting his desire, Ambrose would drop his eyes and stare at his own dancing feet and imagine the taste and texture and smell of her lips and tongue.

Ambrose quickly settled back into his homeland. He lived principally to visit Mala, the twinkling star of Lantanacamara as he had come to think of her. Dancing with her was the climax of his visits, which he simultaneously looked forward to and didn't want to arrive because it signalled the end. He plodded through evenings and at the first sign of darkness took to bed, long before the last rooster had settled itself down for the night. To induce sleep he lay with a fresh, young leaf of a black sage bush tucked under his tongue. And he waited.

How long these visits would remain hidden from Chandin worried them both, but did not deter them. Mala prayed for the day when Ambrose's dreams of his own enterprise would become a

reality, yielding just enough money that they could elope to another town in Lantanacamara.

One morning Ambrose waited by the corner as usual, watching for Chandin to leave. Ambrose carried an empty aquarium in which he threw a branch of ripe, red gru-gru berries plucked from the palm tree under which he hid.

Even before Chandin had made it up the hill, Ambrose had entered the yard with his gifts. He placed the glass box under the house in a dark corner, an unlikely place for Chandin to come across. He grabbed the gru-gru branch and bolted up the back stairs. Mala was waiting for him on the porch.

Before entering the kitchen he invited her to take their old school days route and visit his mother, who had been asking to see the woman about whom her son could not stop talking. Mala found it curious that Ambrose would consider walking in public with the sullied daughter of Chandin Ramchandin. She could see he was not the same shy, easily led boy who had usually cringed in the face of disapproval. She would have loved to trek the old route with him but she feared being caught. Many people considered it an entertainment to watch Chandin become wildly angry, and they would vie to be the first to break such news to him.

"I have to be here when Pappy come home and I don't really know when he coming," Mala said halfheartedly. "He getting more and more crotchety, always have something he want me doing for him. I don't really think I could get to go away for too long a time." She wanted Ambrose to figure it out for himself. She had become so adept at not revealing her emotions that it was almost impossible for anyone else to detect her sadness and pleading. But Ambrose was learning.

"If your father might return soon shouldn't I leave right away?"

"Well, I don't know when he plan to come back but I shouldn't leave the house."

Ambrose felt as though he were being told a story in code. He

entered the kitchen and put the berries on the table. They glowed between them as brilliantly as their still unspoken love for each other.

"You eat breakfast?" she asked.

"Mammy cooked me roti and salt fish which I ate, but I saved room in the hope that you would spoil me once more with your heavenly talents."

"Oh no, I make salt fish too."

"It is one of my favourites. I could eat it several times a day. And I am sure that yours will be different from Mammy's, and perhaps even better."

Mala set down a plate of fat bake and salted cod she had prepared for him the night before.

"Mmmm, this is unparalleled," he said, and so often that she stopped fretting that he had already had salted cod that morning.

Ambrose was in the presence of his most favourite and indulgent audience. (While his mother doted on his every move, she hardly understood a sentence he spoke.) Not long after he finished eating, words and phrases began to slide languorously from his lips. He was trying to express how he felt about her.

"A word is not the substance itself," Ambrose stated simply enough but soon slid into a morass. "A world freed of nomenclature, syntax and lexical form is experienced . . . named senses are enhanced . . . sensors in your joints open up like eager blossoms, their little receptors waving wildly, anxious to engage. Your entire being, the physical, and most of all the spiritual, is a vibrant network of synesthesia . . . throughout your body miles of blood, water, serums, toxins, effluvia and nutrients ebb and wane in tune to the moon . . . the tiniest random fraction of your being is connected to your sensorium, and your sensorium experienced as integral only when you recognize yourself as a conduit, a vibrant little cog in the functioning of the universe . . ."

Unable to directly tell Mala just then how aroused he became in her presence, Ambrose moved on to an intoxicating sermon on the

potential uses of fine fabric spun by spiders. He asked Mala to imagine women's stockings and hair nets woven from the spiders' delicate threads. Hidden behind his words was his desire to know the delicacy of her skin, to sip from her lips. Yet he was also alerted to her need not to be smothered. The urgency of this need was so apparent that, without understanding its origins, he complied and hoped that with time she would come to trust him.

As he sat in the kitchen Mala too looked at him, at the shape of his lean chest underneath his shirt, his slender fingers, his velvet lips that were rendered much pronounced because of their stunning redness against skin as dark as the pods of the mudra tree. She fixated on his hair, which he no longer soaked in coconut oil, and wanted to bury her fingers in its tight coarseness. She scrutinized the stubby, sea-green area where he shaved. She imagined how the patch might feel and the scratchy noise the ball of her thumb rubbing up and down it might make. She gave his sweat an imagined odour and longed to feel the heat of his underarm against her face. The only man's sweat she knew was her father's, which made her nauseous, and so she was delighted that she could invent a smell for Ambrose that melted her with passion and momentarily overpowered her father's awful hold over her. Her desire for Ambrose made her body arch, reaching out, engulfing, drawing him deep inside her, yet she resisted converting these thoughts to actions.

Yet thorns of fear and treachery would prick her after Ambrose left the house. The fear that her father would discover that her head, heart and body were betraying him, if only because he could smell this new desire on her skin, rendered her inactive in Ambrose's presence. She would pace the upstairs of the house, tormented and confused by odd feelings of having betrayed her father. After all, she thought, her father had suffered immeasurably when her mother left them. Mala would chastise herself, pointing out that even she could not imagine the hurt he must have felt, or the embarrassment he endured. There were times when thoughts of Ambrose made her hate herself for being so cruel and thoughtless

to her wounded father. But even at those times, her tenderness aroused, she wanted to be lifted up and taken away by Ambrose.

Ambrose took her outside and showed her the aquarium. They combed the underneath of her father's house for web-spinning spiders. Mala watched nervously when Ambrose gripped a strand of sticky fibre from a web attached to a mudra pole beneath the house. She followed as he walked slowly across the backyard, the unbroken fibre lengthening with each step he took. She admired his straight back and imitated his posture. Confident that the backyard was so overgrown that they were well hidden from view, she revelled in the magnificence of his attire. He walked as far as the back fence and still the filament remained unbroken.

"Imagine!" he whispered, "imagine a finely woven curtain miles high in the sky, hung between the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. A curtain that would not deny light, yet could contain and halt a hurricane!" She was so in awe of his inventiveness that she wanted him to whisper those words inside her mouth. She kept her eyes on the crook of his finger. He delighted in telling Mala the methods and principles of spider silk harvesting, and as he spoke he watched her, drinking in her beauty and suppressing his astonishing desire.

They stocked the aquarium with over forty spiders. Mala had little trouble catching the flies that clung lethargically to the nectar-stained petals of passion fruit flowers in her backyard. She put them in a bag, and then shook them into the aquarium.

Back upstairs, though thrilled with the first steps in their research adventure, Mala kept her distance, standing near the kitchen sink. Ambrose, red and puffed up with excitement, sat at the kitchen table. They sipped a cooling, good-luck tea that she had brewed from the leaves of the pigeonpea plant and ti marie, and snacked on the pale yellow meat of the gru-gru berry.

Ambrose produced a leather-bound notebook in which he entered the details of his fledgling business. Both agreed upon a

name for the research business: STC-STs. *Softer Than Cotton—Stronger Than Steel*. On the inside front cover of the notebook he penned the name in letters with sprawling tails and elaborate feathers, and then in bold clean letters he set down his own name, *Ambrose E. Mohanty*, next to which he wrote *Principal*. And under this line he wrote *Pohpoh Ramchandin—Second Principal and Ultimate Inspiration*. He read it aloud and they laughed. Mala watched how he had scripted the word *Pohpoh*. His penmanship was crisp and artful. She could not bring herself to contradict him.

Ambrose leaned back in the caned chair and stretched his legs. Under the table she could see his sheer white stockings. With hands clasped behind his head, he related to Mala how he came to be fascinated by the properties and potentials of spider fibre. It happened as a result of the first winter he spent in the Shivering Northern Wetlands. He had never experienced such cold in his life.

"Don't even try to imagine it. You won't be able to. I had read about it. Even long before setting foot in the Shivering Northern Wetlands, I had seen photographs of the city dusted with this powder they call snow. But you know, *Pohpoh*, I was entirely unable to truly comprehend just exactly how cold such cold might be. Not until I experienced it for myself.

"This hellish, endless event takes over your entire existence and you can do nothing but think of artful connivances for remaining dry and warm. In the depth of this ruthless winter, while I nursed a demon of a cold, I sat indoors and mournfully contemplated the bleakness of snow-covered yards and walkways and streets from my window. I thought it would never end."

"Hmm," Mala responded simply.

"And then one spring day that same year, I chanced upon a thread of spider silk attached to the higher boughs of a naked tree. The glistening thread was stretched almost to the ground in a perfectly symmetrical V by the weight of an eight-inch-long icicle clinging to it. I stood there, under the warming spring sun and for hours watched as the icicle dripped itself thinner and shorter.

Slowly unburdened, the thread itself rose elegantly, as if succumbing to spiritual levitation, higher and higher. When the icicle had succumbed to its watery demise, the spider-spun filament, now perfectly levitated, appeared not to have been stretched. It was, *Pohpoh*, glistening brilliantly and breathlessly, and as taut as any I had ever come across that had been freshly spun."

Mala grasped Ambrose's intent among the jumble of his words. "Ah! A bridge. You could make a bridge with the threads from this spider business, a bridge to cross the river and no matter how much people and animal and car they drive on it, it would never come falling down."

Mala laughed at her joke. Ambrose was still caught up in his reveries but when he noticed her enthusiasm, he leapt out of his chair, ran over to her, and in utter jubilation threw his arms around her, pulling her surprised and reluctant body into his. She instinctively crossed her arms in front of her chest yet when he looked at her she was smiling. In fact she was beginning to giggle. He knew the giggle from the long-ago days in the schoolyard. He also recognized the smile, yet instead of mirth he was overcome by concern.

"Ah, *Pohpoh*, my sweet, sweet *Pohpoh*."

Mala looked into his eyes. "Please don't call me by that name," she whispered. "Don't call me that. You remember my real name?"

Ambrose was taken aback.

"Which one? I am mortified. Tell me which name and it shall never be uttered again."

"*Pohpoh*. That is not my name."

After a quick joggle of his memory Ambrose smiled, pleased with himself. "Mala! You are right. Mala is indeed a name more fitting. The other one shall not be mentioned again." He continued, intending to make amends. "Come home with me. Come and see my dearest Mammy. She knows everything about you and she expects you soon. You will come, sweet Mala, won't you?" Her name, which he had not said aloud in many years, sounded foreign to him but he cottoned quickly to its adult sound. Mala relaxed her

face into his chest. He pressed his lips against her thick hair. His chest smelled even more sweet than she had imagined.

There is no point trying to explain a phenomenon that took place in another part of Paradise, a good half mile away from the Ramchandin kitchen. Suffice it to say that these things do happen. Sitting in a rum shop Chandin Ramchandin felt a sudden tightness in his chest at the precise moment his daughter embraced her gentleman suitor. He winced and swallowed another mouthful of prickly babash. The pain in his chest did not lessen. On the contrary, he felt as though he were being stifled.

Mala was troubled. Was this the day when she would either put an end to their trysts or tell Ambrose about the heavy hand with which her father ruled her life? Ambrose breathed in the sugary aroma of her sweat. Her scalp had a faint scent of coconut oil. Even though he wore a concoction of clove oil, bay leaves and cardamom, the natural fragrance of his sweet-and-tangy skin rose from his shirt. She knew now the taste of his skin by its smell. She pressed her face against his chest. He didn't smell like her father, of rum and stale genitals, the shrill severity of soured secretions. Ambrose brought his lips down to her temples and she closed her eyes and lifted her head.

The pain gripping Chandin was like a thick metal chain being yanked around his torso. He finished his drink in one mouthful and, to his fellow drinkers' surprise, made his way out of the rum shop. He walked slowly at first. The pain eased and Chandin carried on as a seasoned drunk would: he swayed a little and mumbled to himself but because of the years and quantity of his consumption, he was in control of his faculties. The pain lessened further but Chandin continued to hold his chest, worried it might creep up on him again. For safety's sake he headed home.

Mala smelled Ambrose's lips close to hers and felt his breath. She pulled away, a little startled, feeling both the repulsion she knew when her father forced his tongue into her throat and also an

unfathomable desire to take Ambrose's deep into her mouth and explore its taste and temperature and texture. Ambrose, startled by the sudden shift, responded to her shiver of discomfort.

He was, in truth, relieved at the interruption. Not since he was a child had he felt such a shimmering on the edges of his extremities. He remembered Mala lying on his cattiya with nothing on but her underwear. He could feel her warm skin. There had been no shortage of women in the Shivering Northern Wetlands who offered to keep the handsome, unusual black man company through long winter evenings. Ambrose had no trouble resisting their temptations and he remained untouched, except in his thoughts of Mala. He had waited for the moment when he might do what he had dreamed of since he was a child: of putting that part of his anatomy that stiffened, making him dizzy with its trembling, so very close to . . . touching even . . . the place of mystery between Mala's legs, a place he imagined would exhale a hot mustiness with two very different scents—balsa wood from the silk cotton tree that he used to make spinners with, and the ripened fruit of the cannonball tree, a fearfully strong but very compelling odour. Lying in his bed in the Shivering Northern Wetlands he would close his eyes and lock onto an image of Mala. His blood would race around his body as he squeezed and rubbed himself, and he imagined placing his swollen self close enough to Mala to cause that mysterious mouth of hers to open in a wide yawn and pull him in.

Mala's abrupt withdrawal was welcome. It was as though, as time passed, Ambrose had fallen in love with desire itself and the act of desiring was its own fulfillment. Certainly, he craved the pleasures that would come from seeing Mala undressed, of delicately holding the nipple of her breast between his teeth and most of all, of his man's appendage moistened and caressed and drawn up into her body. But when Mala pushed him gently away, he was forced to acknowledge the companion that *desiring* had become for him over the years. He was, he realized, unwilling to jeopardize his

relationship with desire. If he succumbed to Mala's treasures, *desire* could change, would disappear even.

Mala watched his face. She was so moved by his generous hesitation that she grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled his face toward hers. She closed her eyes and repeated to herself, Enjoy him, he is not my enemy, he loves me. She smelled his cheeks and felt the stubble on his face against her soft cheek. Little kisses from his voluptuous lips alighted on her cheek, skipping toward her mouth and then shyly away toward her ear again. She cupped his face tightly in both hands, opened her mouth and covered his with her strong, wet lips. Her lapping tongue slid across his lips. Ambrose felt completely weakened. He had never experienced a dizziness so pleasant. He opened his mouth to gasp for air and Mala reached in with her tongue and licked his. He pulled back from her and gasped for air. He had never seen her face so close before. His eyes roamed over her face, followed by the light touch of his fingers. His other hand hovered near her buttocks. Mala pressed her body against him, knowing he would be quite hard. The hovering hand found her buttocks, and the shape of her body—a woman's body—so disarmed him that he thought he would faint. Mala's movements were different from the day at his mother's house when they were children. This time she had no goal in mind. This time she let him touch her for his pleasure too. She met, mirrored and embraced his passion. She moved against his hardness. He began to pull her dress up in little increments.

It was his first time, and her first time with someone of her own choice. In the kitchen, on the wood floor that smelled of the onions and garlic ground over the years into its grooves, Ambrose experienced what it was like to empty his semen into a woman, into his childhood love, rather than onto the pages of a magazine. For the first time Mala felt no pain. It was the first time she felt what it was like to be touched and to have her nipples licked and tasted as though they were a delicacy. And though she had been forced to touch her father countless times, it was the first time she explored

and felt on the tips of her fingers and the palm of her hand what a penis was really like.

They lay on the kitchen floor. Ambrose was propped on an elbow, his other hand caressing her pubic hair and delicately slipping a finger between her lips, amazed at her wetness. Suddenly Mala realized how late it had become. Her father would soon be home. She jumped up and started pulling her clothes on. It took Ambrose longer to dress, to tuck in his shirt, do up all the buttons and pull on his suspenders and socks. In less time than they liked, the day was coming to an end.

"We haven't danced today," Ambrose said. "But I must admit that loving you"—these words weakened her again—"quite rivals dancing. I do however promise you three extra sets to make up for today's missed one. It will be the pleasure of my life to hold you and to dance with you holding me."

"And I will practise and surprise you. Will you come tomorrow, Ambrose?"

How could he possibly stay away? He kissed her again and again to seal his response. It was the longest day Ambrose had spent with Mala since his return to Lantanacamara.

Chandin reached the gate at his front yard just as Ambrose took up his hat to leave the kitchen. Pressing the hat against his lower stomach he walked backwards out of the kitchen, not wanting to take his eyes off Mala as she lifted her hands to breathe in the traces of his body. He sniffed his own fingers and touched them to his lips. She closed her eyes. Ambrose slowly made his way down the back stairs.

Chandin grappled with the twisted front gate. It had been bent for years but he refused to fix it, convinced it contorted itself only to get the better of him after he had had a few drinks. He was determined not to be manipulated by its craftiness. He caught a glimpse of movement at the back of his house. Chandin stopped fiddling and focused his blurry eyes past the shrubs, past the underneath of the house with its high stilts, through to the back stairs. He

saw a man slowly descending backwards, black coat, white shirt and hat in hand. He hid behind a shrub and peered out.

Looking around to make sure Mala's father was nowhere in sight, Ambrose made a quick detour under the house to check on the spiders in the aquarium. Chandin, anger rising, could not see what the man was up to under his house. He stayed hidden.

Ambrose was stunned to find that although all the flies remained alive only four spiders were moving. The others were headless, their torsos strewn on the floor of the glass cage. He quickly understood the evidence of natural selection. Overcrowded, the spiders had waged war. Only the fittest had survived and not a fragment of web had been spun.

The unfamiliarity of pessimism deflated him. Ambrose turned his back on the spiders and pressing the hat against his chest again, reluctantly left the yard.

Chandin could hardly maintain his balance. He stumbled, holding on precariously to a handful of leaves from the shrub.

"What the ass. . . ?" he mumbled. "A man tiefing my baby? He brave to even try. I ent go let nobody tief my woman again. No man, no woman, no damn body go tief my property again. I go kill he. I go kill she too, if it come to that. I go kill meself too. I sharpenin' cutlass tonight."

Chandin crept up the front stairs and onto the verandah. He peered through the glass pane of the front door. His daughter still leaned against the kitchen sink, smiling to herself and smelling her hands. The plate and the cup that his wife once used for visitors were in full view on the table, and a chair was pulled out from the table.

Chandin's face was already flushed from alcohol, and anger caused the veins along his temples and neck to puff out a hard blue. He clutched his chest. His heart hurt with heaviness. He noisily pulled out a key ring from his pocket.

Hearing the keys and commotion on the front porch, Mala was shocked that her father had returned home so soon after Ambrose's departure. She whisked the cup and plate off the table and pushed

SHANI MOOTOO
the chair in. She shoved her mother's good dishes in the rubbish pan and pushed it out of sight. There was nothing unusual about her father's silence on entering. She glanced at his face for any sign that he might be suspicious but saw nothing. Mala took up a cloth and wiped the counter, pretending to be carrying on her regular chores. She watched him look at the table. He straightened the chair, then went over to her and spun her. He held her hands up to his face and pressed his lips to them. It was unmistakable that his intention was to smell her hands. She glanced over to the front porch to see from where he might have been watching. How much had he seen? Mala bent her neck in fear and began to sob.

Her father, silent since he entered the house, began to laugh. Then his face flared with anger, he jerked his body away from her and pulled out the chair. He held it by its back and lifted it high above his head and slammed it down on the kitchen floor. The chair shattered. Mala put her face in her hands and wailed, doubling over in fright. The memory of her father when he discovered her mother gone came flooding back. Chandin moved through the small kitchen like a hurricane. He stormed over to his cowering daughter and lifted his hand, splayed wide like a tennis paddle. When she cried out he slowly brought his hand back to his side, tears streaming down his face. Instead of hitting her he unbuckled his belt and unzipped his trousers. Mala ducked down and tried to slide past him. This infuriated him further. It was the first time she had ever tried to defy him. He caught her by her hair and pulled until she straightened up. He pressed his menacing face against hers and screamed.

"Mother ass! Don't try to make a fool out a me! I go kill you right here. I ent afraid."

"Please, Papa, please don't hurt me, don't hurt me. I beg forgiveness. Have mercy, Papa."

"I ever hurt you? I never before hurt you. You want to know what hurt is? Eh? Forgiveness? Mercy? I'll show you what hurt is."

He pushed her to the sink and shoved her face down into the

CEREUS BUDS
basin, pressing his chin into her back as he used both hands to pull up her dress. He yanked out his penis, hardened weapon-like by anger. He used his knees to pry her legs open and his feet to kick and keep them apart. With his large fat fingers he parted her buttocks as she sobbed and whispered, "Have mercy, Lord, I beg, I beg." He rammed himself in and out of her. He reached around and squeezed her breasts, frantically pumping them to mimic the violent thrusting of his penis.

Then he pulled out of her and flung her around. Standing with his pants around his knees, his still erect penis pointing at her, Chandin slapped her back and forth with the palm and the back of his hand. Her lower lip split and the outer edge of her left eye tore. She tried to stop crying but her chest heaved. He slapped her so hard that she stumbled and fell onto the ground. He lowered his huge frame astride her, pulled her up by her hair and shoved his penis into her mouth. She choked and gagged as he rammed it down her throat. When she went limp, he took the weapon out of her mouth and spurted all over her face.

He began to throw the chairs around, to tear down the curtains. He flung ornaments at the walls and used a frying pan to smash glasses and plates and pictures hanging in the drawing room. Mala covered her ears and shut her eyes tight.

Chandin roared into her room and tore down the old, heavy cotton curtains her mother had sewn twenty years before. He ripped them to shreds. He turned around and saw himself in the full-length mirror on the armoire door. With the heel of his foot he attacked it with one lightning blow. The mirror shattered and fell in a hundred brilliant shards. Still unsatisfied, he wrenched the door from its top hinge, snatched a few dresses off their hangers and ripped them to pieces.

Chandin grabbed the edges of her bed and flipped it over. He saw the new box. Opening it and seeing the gramophone, he put his face in both hands and cried. For several minutes he contemplated the gramophone and what it seemed to signify. He lifted the

needle arm and pulled it backwards. It snapped as easily as a crab's leg. Then he tried to do the same with the horn but it was more resistant. He stood up and thundered his bare foot onto the horn. His anger made him oblivious to the pain in his foot. He straightened himself up and marched back to the kitchen and kicked Mala where she lay sobbing on the ground. He pulled open a drawer and took up a cleaver. He dragged her into her bedroom.

"What is this, you whore? He give this to you? You taking presents from a man? What other presents you get? How long you doing this kind of thing? Everybody but Ramchandin know his daughter is the town whore?"

Mala turned her face to the ground and cried. He kicked her in the thighs.

"Answer me, you little whore. That man who was here give you this?" He flung the cleaver into the floor next to the gramophone. Mala looked up.

"Yes, Pappy. It was a gift for you and me."

"For me? What you think I is? Don't give me that shit. And what you give him? Come give me what you give him."

Still carrying the cleaver, he pulled her up by the front of her dress and pushed her toward his bedroom. He threw her on the mattress of his sagging bed and ripped her dress off. She shut her eyes and cried out loudly. It was the first time since that very first time when she was a child that she felt so much pain.

Chandin locked the bedroom door. He set the cleaver down by the bed. He raped her three more times that night. He made her stay in his bed. Next morning he got up as usual. He left the bedroom door wide open, carried the cleaver into the kitchen, stepped over the broken furniture and glass and made his way out to the verandah.

Mala got up slowly. To her astonishment he did not hurry her. He did not utter a word. Every inch of her body pained. She licked her lip. She could tell it was swollen. She could feel that her eye was also swollen. Her pelvis and thighs hurt so much the slightest

motion made her dizzy. As she made her way slowly to her room she noticed the cleaver was no longer by his bed.

The box was still on the floor, open. The gramophone lay inside, useless. It saddened her more than her bruises but she dared not touch it or be caught looking at it. She picked a dress off the floor and put it on.

Her father, to her embarrassment and fear, had boiled water and put the previous day's bread on the table. He was already eating. He did not look at her or say a word.

On the back porch, as she gently slapped water on her face, she heard the front door open and shut. She looked around the backyard hoping Ambrose would be nowhere in sight. She had no appetite to even think of him just then but she knew he would come as soon as her father had left. He would see her bruised face, he would see she was in pain. She would not tell him, she insisted to herself, what her father had done. After all, Mala berated herself, she should have known better than to cheat on her father. In the end she was to blame. She prayed that Ambrose had better things to do that morning.

She heard the front gate scrape shut. She hobbled in agony to the front door and looked out through the wooden jalousies that flanked the door. Her father was already out of sight yet she felt him in every nook of the house, in every corner of the yard, watching her every move. She hobbled back into the kitchen and looked around for the cleaver. It was nowhere to be seen. Mala latched the back door. She hoped Ambrose would assume she had gone to market or to run errands, and would leave.

Ambrose waited by the corner until he saw Chandin Ramchandin head up the road. He took off toward the backyard gate so eagerly that he did not see Chandin turn and duck behind a neighbour's cart. Chandin saw the ends of the tails of his daughter's suitor's black coat.

From the yard Ambrose noticed the bedroom curtains had been taken down. He thought nothing of it. When he got to the back

door and found it latched he became curious. He knocked and called several times. He looked around to see if the curtains had been washed and were hanging on the clothesline. Seeing no signs of early morning activity and finding Mala's door shut on him only one day after the most glorious day of his life confused him. He juggled a fear of rejection with panic. Something ominous seemed to be hanging in the air.

Chandin crouched behind the cart until he felt sure Ambrose had entered the house, then he made his way back. He climbed the fence to avoid being given away by the creaky front gate. The cleaver was where he had concealed it: at the base of the oleander. Chandin wedged himself into the bush. Neither Ambrose nor Mala was in sight and the house appeared quiet. Chandin was about to come out, cleaver in hand, when he was startled by footsteps heading toward the front yard. He ducked back into the shrubbery.

Ambrose hurried around the house and to the front steps, bounding up two at a time. Chandin peered out and saw him staring through the front windows.

Ambrose's heart thundered. He became wide eyed when he saw the disarray inside, believing at first that the house had been burgled. Mala was nowhere to be seen. Fearing the worst, he urged himself to take control of his wits. He began a quiet, insistent knocking. He loudly whispered Mala's name, then called out more urgently. He knocked so many times that even Chandin wondered where his daughter had gone. Ambrose tried the door. It clicked and released, startling him.

Apprehensive, he pushed the front door open and stepped inside. A single glance took in the demolished drawing room and kitchen. His beloved was in neither. Ambrose broke out in a sweat. He tiptoed farther into the house. At Chandin's bedroom he took a slow breath and pushed the partly open door. He feared finding his sweetheart tied up and gagged or worse—but he would not allow himself to imagine what might be worse. He was both relieved and terrified to find no one there. He stood still and listened,

wondering if the robber or murderer were still in the house. He tiptoed back to the drawing room. Hesitantly, he tried the door to the downstairs room. It was always locked and was still so.

Chandin, sneaking up the front stairs and crossing silently to the windows, saw the young man press his ear to the door. He watched him carry on toward Mala's room.

Ambrose felt nauseous. He placed his ear against her door and heard nothing. His eyes began to fill with tears of fright. He clenched his teeth, made a fist around the doorknob and very slowly turned it. The door gave way a hair and then shut again. He was so terrified he shoved the door with sudden and surprising force.

Mala had been hiding behind the door. She tumbled over. Keeping her face buried between her knees she sobbed so hard that her body shook violently. Ambrose saw everything except her face: the over-turned bed, the torn clothing, the broken gramophone and, worst of all, blue and violet bruises up and down Mala's arms and legs. He shrieked in alarm and threw himself over Mala like a protective blanket.

"Who did this? Who did this, Mala, tell me, tell me."

She sobbed louder, refusing to let him see her. "Please don't stay here. Go! Get away. Leave me, leave me."

Ambrose clutched her face by her chin. He forced her to face him. Damp hair clung to her face. Blood from her wounded eye had softened and smeared down her cheek. Mucus had run down and smeared her lips and chin.

Ambrose stared in disbelief. Mala stopped crying. She held her breath and looked defiantly straight ahead. Like a summer evening's first flash of lightning, Ambrose's face flared.

"Your father?" he whispered.

Mala closed her eyes. Suddenly Ambrose understood everything.

"So what you going to do about it?" Chandin said.

Mala's father stood in the doorway. Ambrose could not tell if the expression on Chandin Ramchandin's face was a grin or a snarl.

Chandin grasped the handle of a cleaver firmly with his hands and lifted it high above his head, arching his body back for leverage. Ambrose scuttled backwards in disbelief. Mala, looking up and seeing her father about to swing the weapon, gave an icy shriek.

She lunged forward, grabbed Chandin by the knees and with a might that frightened even Ambrose, jerked his feet out from under him. Chandin fell on his back, still holding the cleaver. Mala dived across the floor, seized the handle and struggled to wrench it from her father's hand. He clenched her hair at the top of her head, tightened his fist and pulled and pulled.

Ambrose inched forward. He wanted to help but how? His mind felt fragile and timid. Chandin raised his foot and kicked in Ambrose's direction. Ambrose recoiled and the foot fell heavily on the gramophone.

Mala's fury was so uncontrollable she didn't notice her hair being ripped out. She forced her face toward the hand holding the cleaver and sunk her teeth deep into Chandin's wrist. Chandin released his grip on her hair and curled his body in sudden agony. Mala had drawn blood.

Ambrose saw the opportunity to go for help or perhaps find a tool with which to fight. He gathered the smashed-up gramophone, yanked open the door and dashed out of the room. The heavy door hit Chandin's head with enough force to stupefy him, and he slumped down, his eyes open. Mala tore the cleaver out of his suddenly limp hand. With the back of her other hand she wiped her father's blood from her face and spat at him. She charged out of the room.

When Ambrose entered the kitchen, he stood still, trying to make sense of what had been revealed to him. He assured himself that it was he whom Chandin wanted to kill and not his own daughter. He looked feebly around for a knife to protect himself, all the while feeling shame for her and for himself—as though he had been betrayed by Mala, and at the same time wrestling with the notion that she could not possibly, not conceivably have been

agreeable to intimacies with her father. In that instant of hesitation he so distanced himself from Mala that, like an outside observer, he saw the world as he had known and dreamed it suddenly come undone. He rested the gramophone on the kitchen table and stumbled onto the verandah. At the bottom of the back stairs he hesitated again, wondering if and how to get help, and again shrank with the thought that a call for help would expose the shameful goings-on in the house, to which he had become connected.

Suddenly he heard a dreadful crashing. Mala was calling out his name. He ran back up the stairs as though jolted by a cord. In the kitchen he saw, instead of the woman he had made love to the day before, an unrecognizable wild creature with a blood-stained face, frothing at the mouth and hacking uncontrollably at the furniture in the drawing room. He watched her smash a side table with a single powerful blow. When she saw him she dropped the cleaver and moved heavily toward him, moaning lifelessly.

"Ambrose, don't go. Don't leave me, Ambrose. Please don't go." Ambrose couldn't make out her words. Thinking she had gone crazy and fearing once more for his life, he turned and bolted from the house.

Mala gasped in disbelief. She rushed to the verandah, screaming his name. He had already disappeared. She clutched the banister, choking as though there were no oxygen in the air. She fell to the ground. There was a bizarre familiarity in the moment. She remembered her father clutching at that same banister, and felt herself lying on the verandah in that same position. Long ago. Today.

Mala stopped crying and sat up slowly. She looked into the yard.

"Asha? Aunt Lavinia? You there? Mama? Boyie?" she whispered.

She looked and listened. Nothing. The house was quiet. She commanded herself to think. Shivering, she tiptoed back into the house, picking up the cleaver with a firm grip. Every few paces she stopped and listened for sounds of a buggy, her sister's voice, Ambrose returning, her father stirring. At the door of her room she

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listened. Unable to stand the tension, she nudged the door open and peeped in. Her father lay still on the floor, his eyes open and glazed, his legs limp, spread apart, his hands curled. The rage inside her ebbed. She stepped back, straightened her posture and pulled the door shut. She put down the cleaver. She walked to the door and lay both hands flat against it. She took a deep breath and pushed with all her power. The door hit Chandin's head and swung back shut. She took a deep breath and repeated the act until she was exhausted.

She opened the door that led to the sewing room downstairs and stared at the flight of steps. She walked back toward her own room and opened the door. Her father had not moved. She took up the cleaver and tiptoed around his body. She stooped down and waited. Still no movement. She lifted the gleaming cleaver to his face and rested the flat side under his nose. Did she only imagine the vapour of hot air that passed over the blade? She jumped up and, extremely vigilant, edged her way toward his feet. She grasped them and pulled. His body seemed oddly tensed. She hauled him with one sharp tug into the doorway. On the wood floor of the kitchen the body slid more easily. She dragged him to the open door. Positioning him on the top stair, she gave him a push and the body slid down two stairs and stopped. She kicked and pushed until she managed to get it all the way down to the bottom stair. Drenched in sweat, she stopped to catch her breath, not taking her eyes off the man. Then she dragged his unyielding weight into the sewing room. She ran out slamming the door shut behind her. Her mother used to keep a key on the ledge. She reached up and found it. She locked the door. She leaned against it with relief and then mounted the stairs. At the top she shut and locked the door.

She looked, not for Ambrose but for Boyie, for Asha, for her mother and for Aunt Lavinia. She picked up the broken gramophone and went down into the garden searching for them. She peered under the house. She left the gramophone there and went

to the fence. She walked the length of the fence looking up and down the road. There was no one to be seen.

She tore up the boards that had lain on the soil so that the yard would still be passable in the rainy season. She dragged the boards to the sewing room and hammered them over the window. She ran back upstairs. The door to the sewing room was still shut. She tried it and was relieved to find it was indeed locked. She sat down in the kitchen facing the door to the sewing room, waiting and wondering.

As evening approached Mala sat there still. She thought about the night and how she dared not sleep in her room. She dreaded the idea of sleep and refused to do so inside the house. She jumped up and ran into her room and dragged a dresser, an arm chair and a stool into the centre of the drawing room. She went into her father's room and did the same with his furniture. She spent the evening intricately arranging these and every piece from the drawing room and kitchen, including pieces she smashed apart, into a tight barricade from floor to ceiling. She worked until she had created an admirable wall that was almost impenetrable. It would be dangerous to anyone who attempted to dismantle it. Realizing she would need to know her father's condition and how much care would be needed to be safe from him, she made a small, well-camouflaged doorway.

When she finished she went out on the verandah. In the frothy wind that wildly stirred the trees in the yard she sat and waited.

She never lit a lantern in that house again. Nor did she, since that day, pass a night inside its walls.

THERE WAS NO dawn on the morning after the fire on Hill Side. The town, exhausted by the previous day's excitement, lay under a low umbrella of soot that had the fragrance of mudra-scented charcoal. Across Paradise could be heard a constant, scratchy coughing and sneezing as the town awakened. Most townspeople did not realize that morning had already come. They arose from their beds in darkness.

Ambrose E. Mohanty had stayed on his verandah all night. Otoh was utterly worn out and could have slept had he chosen to. He opted to stay with his father. In recent hours time seemed to have caught up with Ambrose. Otoh watched his father, amazed at how shrunken his posture had become since the afternoon, how stooped his shoulders, how pale and drooped his skin and eyes, as though they could no longer fight gravity. It occurred to Otoh that being awake really did not agree with his father. His father tapped delicately on the banister during the silences between them, as though with a jeweller's hammer. He often paused, sometimes for so long that Otoh resumed his own thoughts and quite forgot what had been said before.

"I appreciate your company, son." Otoh had heard this once already.

"You're so quiet though," Ambrose ventured. Silence.

"It's disconcerting, your quiet I mean," he tried again. Otoh nodded sadly.

"Each time I glance over at you, I feel obliged to respond to the questions that you have every right to ask but are polite enough not to voice." His father tapped.

"Is it my imagination or are there a thousand unspoken whys streaming out, swimming from your temples? I look at your silent face, and in my throat the feeble word *because* forms itself only to become stuck. *Because, because, because*, a menacing little word whose mere utterance tastes like an admission of culpability." Ambrose drummed a little on the wood railing.

"Save me my shame, son, and ask me, I beg you, those things that line your face and discolour your eyes. What say you, my son? What a terrible thing to be disgusted, or even disappointed with one's father."

And so the night passed. Otoh had questions but they were not foremost in his mind. Even as his father's verbosity irritated him he wanted to embrace him protectively.

"Have you ever wondered why I slept so much?" his father continued. "Have you? You know there was a time when I thought there was so much to do and life was so wonderful that I would sleep only when I was dead and buried.

"I slept not because I was avoiding you or your mother, as you both had every right to assume. I slept because I couldn't face myself. Whenever I caught sight of my own reflection what I saw was my own face watching me, mocking me, and shaking its head in disgust with my performance in the entire Ramchandin affair. I slept to avoid the nausea that seemed to sour my insides and the weight of defeat crushing my heart whenever I thought of my inaction . . . of my indecisiveness that day Mr. Ramchandin brandished his cleaver at me. In a way I didn't merely lose Mala Ramchandin. I lost myself also. Did I lose you too, son? Hmmm? At the end of each month of sleeping, I awoke to find that the beast caged in my sternum had grown, making me even more fatigued and ill. So I

hurried to smother the monster with sleep. Goodness. Sleep is an inactivity too, is it not? An act of indecision? Hmmm."

During this nonsensical ramble Otoh began to feel like his mother, to at last understand her fury at Ambrose's dance with words.

"Phew! Dear, dear, dear," said Ambrose, reading the look on his son's face.

"Otoh, I want you to know that I did go back the following day. In fact I returned three times. The first time I reached only as far as the bottom of the back stairs and she came flying at me with a stick, brandishing it and growling like an animal. My love charged at me with a long guava stick. She chased me out of the yard. She had no idea who I was. She had no idea who I was, Otoh.

"She just screamed sounds that had no meaning, and she beat the air in front of her with that stick, and it occurred to me then, and the thought broke my heart, that my sweet one's mind had flown out of her head.

"I managed on the second occasion to retrieve the gramophone, with the ambition to have it repaired and to present it to her again, god willing. God willing. That gramophone brought us such enjoyment.

"I went again and again, three times I tell you, I returned only to be met with the same fate. Mala, my sweet Mala, had aged overnight and was keeping her hair as wild as a worn-down, coconut-fibre broom. I decided it was unsafe for me to go back. On all three occasions her father was nowhere to be seen. So I thought she was safe from him, at least. I assumed he had gotten the hell out of there.

"But it was clear. I couldn't go back up there. All I could do to make up for my confusion and, call it neglect if you will, was to make sure that she had provisions and the essentials. Leaving those food supplies for her, you know the salted cod, butter, sugar and such, was all I could really do to try and loosen the knot that was growing in my heart."

The sounds of the townspeople finally rousing found them still on the verandah. (Elsie Mohanty, however, continued to sleep well into the day.) Otoh was weary. He resigned himself to the way things had turned out and the futility of dredging it all out and laying blame.

"Pappy, I would very much like to go and see her as soon as it is possible. Do you want to go with me?"

Ambrose clasped his hands at his chest as though in prayer and nodded, half grinning, half crying.

"Well, I will find out where she will be and when she can be visited. We will both go. I've got something up my sleeve."

"I'm sure you have. I'm sure you have!" An embarrassed chuckle came from Ambrose. Otoh remained serious.

"Also, I want to take a clipping of this plant for her. I wonder what it's called. Pappy, do you know?"



BEFORE ELSIE MOHANTY left Paradise she searched for an appropriate moment to have a talk with her son. She found such an opportunity in his restlessness one morning.

"Otoh, you walking in circles around me," Elsie said. "You making me dizzy. You couldn't be hungry—unless you have worms—you just eat lunch, child. If you have something on your mind why you don't just settle down and tell me?"

Otoh continued circling his mother, unsure how to ask her what she knew about Miss Ramchandin's life. Unskillfully broached, such a topic was bound to explode in every direction but the one he wanted. His mother could not have guessed that it was The Bird that he wanted to discuss, so she assumed that what made him uneasy was exactly what was on her own mind.

"All right. What about if I guess what it is that is on your mind? Hmm?"

"No, Ma, you can't guess . . ." he mumbled. He turned on his heels and circled her in the opposite direction.

"Yes, I am a mother. I must know my child. You are behaving like somebody who is ready to settle down. You have marriage on your mind, not so?" Otoh's circling came to an abrupt halt but he didn't answer. He did not, that is, have time to answer. Pleased that she had caught his attention, Elsie rushed ahead.

"Is time, you right about that. Is definitely time for you to be married. Now I know for a fact that Mavis interested in you. Mavis is a nice girl. I get on good with she and with she family. She like you too bad, long time now. If you want Mavis I will go and speak with her mother today self." She could not have been more to the point, nor more wrong, Otoh thought. Although she had never contradicted him, this talk about marriage showed that his mother had more fully accepted him as a man than he had ever realized. Otoh was both thrilled and too shocked for words. He stared at her.

"Now I have to admit, I am just a little confused. She knows about you?" Elsie asked.

Again she caught him by surprise. This time she waited for his reply. "Knows what?" Otoh asked.

"What you mean, 'knows what?' You know *what* I am talking about!"

He remained silent and she barged on. "She know you don't have anything between those two stick legs of yours? Don't watch me so. You think because I never say anything that I forget what you are? You are my child, child. I just want to know if she know. She know?"

"Ma!" was all Otoh, thoroughly embarrassed, could utter.

"What you ma-ing me for? You think I am stupid or what? Now the fact of the matter is that you are not the first or the only one of your kind in this place. You grow up here and you don't realize

almost everybody in this place wish they could be somebody or something else? That is the story of life here in Lantanacamara. Look at you father. Why you think The Bird end up in that situation? Look at her own father. And the mother . . ."

So his mother knew something about The Bird. "Well, actually that is what I wanted to . . ." Otoh interjected.

"Yes but we not concerned with that now. I want to talk with you about your situation. Now as I was saying, every village in this place have a handful of people like you. And is not easy to tell who is who. How many people here know about you, eh? I does watch out over the banister and wonder if *who* I see is really *what* I see. Look here, what I want to ask you is, you sure Mavis is a woman? I not asking you to tell me your business, but I just want as a mother to advise you to make sure she is what you want. Is a woman you want? I don't want to go and talk to her mother and then have to go back and retract. What you want? In a case like yours you just have to know, careful-careful, what you really want."

Otoh was reeling with the astonishing discovery that his mother had thought about his situation in even greater depth than he had ever done before. He quickly assured her that he would take her advice and think carefully. He implored her, in the meantime, not to approach Mavis' mother until he had time to decide.



THE DAY AMBROSE E. Mohanty rose from his wheelchair and became a regular man was the most upsetting day of Elsie Mohanty's life. She had not realized the peace and quiet that his month-long sleeps had afforded her. Now he was always in her midst, messing up her house, leaving his clothes for her to fold and put away. She found herself tripping over his shoes, bumping into

him, having to cook three meals a day and wash three sets of dishes and pots and pans, and, most tedious of all, having to listen when he talked to her. He cluttered the space she had come to regard unconsciously as her very own. And, besides, he was almost indistinguishable from the person she had married so many years ago—whereas she had changed and aged with the passing of time. Other than his body Ambrose had not changed at all. She wished he would go back to sleep. When it was clear that he wouldn't she packed her things, hugged and kissed her son and made him promise he would visit her in the north of the island where she had friends. She wrote one line on a piece of paper, left the sheet on the kitchen table and, without discussing the matter with Ambrose, departed.

"You was simpler when you was sleeping." When Ambrose found the note he shed a few tears, after which he took a red pen, made corrections to her grammar and saved the paper, just in case she were to return some day and he could explain the errors to her.

MISS RAMCHANDIN HAS had a most unexpected visitor. Judge Walter Bissey.

Unknown to Otoh and me, Mr. Mohanty had contacted his high school tormentor, requesting him to use his good office to locate Asha Ramchandin. It was difficult to weigh which was more wonderful: that Ambrose Mohanty had finally taken action or that some news of Asha Ramchandin had been uncovered.

Judge Bissey, no doubt tending to skeletons of his own, set his staff on a trail that ended on a dusty top shelf in a back room at the local post office. He came to the alms house bearing a shoe box with Mala Ramchandin's name pencilled on top.

Over the course of eight years Asha had written Mala enough letters to fill the box. The majority were sent from Upnorth in the far end of Lantanacamara. Several were mailed from the Shivering Northern Wetlands and one card was sent from Canada. After the first six years the frequency of correspondence had diminished. None of Asha's letters were ever delivered because the righteous postman, deeming the Ramchandin house to be a place of sin and moral corruption, refused to go up there.

Judge Bissey inquired after her health yet seemed unable to look directly at Miss Ramchandin's face. He didn't stay long, quietly promising as he left to look into the matter of the undelivered mail.

My dearest sister Pohpoh,

I didn't get ten minutes away from the house before I wanted to run back and make you come with me. I am not sorry that I left, only that you didn't come with me. That is my biggest worry now. Pohpoh, I hope we will see each other very soon. We must. I don't understand why you worry so much about Papa. He hurt us so much and still you think of him. The day after I got up here I got a job helping out a nice woman, and going to do market for her, and a little cooking. She said I can't cook so she will teach me how. You can write me at the above address. That is not where I am staying but I go there to collect my letters, because I don't want Papa to come looking for me. I am going to send money for you to come and meet me. I am not coming back . . .

My one and only dearest sister,

Did you get my letter? Please write me back. Don't be angry with me. I think of you every day and night. I love you and miss you. I send you enough money in the same envelope as this letter (I hope and pray you get it) so that you could take the train and come and meet me. It simple. When Papa go out in the morning, put a dress and some underwear in a brown bag. Don't forget the picture of Mammy and Aunt Lavinia. You don't need anything more. We will manage. Then go to the train station. A train leaves Paradise for Upnorth Junction every day at ten o'clock in the morning. That is a good one to take. I can get time off any day to come and meet you. I told the lady I work for about you. She is a nice woman, she said you could come and stay here until you get work. She might even get you a job. She knows a lot of people. I am waiting to hear from you, so write and tell me when you coming. Give the letter about ten days to arrive. Just don't tell anybody your plan. Pohpoh, I can't wait to see you.

I really want to go and look for Mammy. I have a feeling like I can do anything I want now. I can even make my way to the Shivering Northern Wetlands to look for her. Let us go together. I am waiting . . .

Dear Pohpoh,

It is a month now and I still didn't get a letter from you. Please don't be angry with me. I think of you all the time . . . I am saving all my money so that we could go abroad and find Mammy. Please write me. I am so sad that I didn't hear from you . . .

From the Shivering Northern Wetlands Asha first wrote:

Darling Sister,

I found work here. I will send money for you every month. It is cold here. I never imagined that cold could be so cold. I thought it would be easy to find Mammy here. But the city here is bigger than even Lantanacamara.

How are you? I am too stubborn to ask how Papa is, but I do wonder about him. I hope you are all right. I don't understand why you don't write me . . . You always protected me, Pohpoh, and I was hoping I could do that for you now, but since you don't even write me I feel as if instead of protecting you I left you. I am beginning to understand why Mammy left. I hope that one day you will understand why I left . . .

Other letters reported on Asha's work, which I am happy to say was nursing, in the Shivering Northern Wetlands. None of them suggested she had made any inroads in contacting her mother or her mother's lover. Some letters contained Wetlandish currency. The last one from the Wetlands said: