

*Pohpoh, my dearest sister,*

Long ago I left one country and now am leaving this one too. I am crossing the ocean and going to Canada. I don't even know if my letters are reaching you. I fear the worst. I will write you again when I get over there and settle down. What are you doing with your life? I still think all the time of you and love you. I am sure that is how Mammy must feel about us, wherever she is. I won't give up hope of seeing you. Just tell me that you want to come, even for holidays, and I will send you the passage . . .

Finally, there was a card from Canada:

*Dearest Pohpoh,*

Think of you every day. If you get this card please write me back.

I want to see you. I miss you. I am well and happy—except that I wish I knew how you were.

*All my love, Asha.*

Miss Ramchandin sat in her rocker, stroking the cat on her lap, while I read the letters out loud, one by one. By the time I finished, she appeared to be asleep. Her cheeks were stained with tears.

Lately restraint and I have been hostile strangers to one another. I find myself defying caution. To hell with Toby. I have powdered my nose on days that were not visiting days. To gentler hell with Sister and the nurses. I must, as a matter of life and death, wear scent in the crook of my elbows. I am readier than ever to present myself like a peacock in heat.

Otty—things have progressed so that he calls me Ty, I call him Otty—Otty's deportment has changed too. I recognize and appreciate the studied swagger of the lone bushwhacker he has cultivated

since we met. In light of his manly inability to bare his heart, I consider these eloquent declarations.

Otty and his charming father still visit the Paradise Alms House often. Mr. Mohanty treats the occasion as an opportunity to wear his swallow-tail jacket—regardless of the weather—a bow tie far too oversized for his small body, and a bowler that Otty recently purchased for him.

On visiting days Miss Ramchandin and I practically hover above the ground with excitement. She puts aside her mutterings and I put away my book and pencil. Before our visitors arrive I wash her, mildly rubbing her skin with frangipani petals from Mr. Hector's hedge and pay special attention in dressing her. She sits on a stool while I pin her hair up into a waterfall, or braid and set it off with a little ribbon or flowers. She giggles and twitches her feet. On visiting days she wears a garland of snail shells about her neck or a crown of wreaths that we wove with feathers and the wings of expired insects. Hours before the visitors arrive she and I, I more discreetly than she, are decked out and waiting.

The time inevitably arrived. I decided to unabashedly declare myself, as it were.

And so, last visit, I wore lip colour more thickly than usual, shades brighter than my dark lips. With powder I blotted the shine that tends to develop on my nose and cheeks on hot days. I tied a flower-patterned scarf around my neck, and on my temples I daubed enough scent to make a Puritan cross his legs and swoon. Miss Mala grinned and clapped her hands when I entered her room. She squealed when I pulled the nurse's uniform from behind her dresser and put it on.

They arrived. I could hardly look him in the eyes, suddenly thinking I was about to cross his line. I held Miss Mala by an elbow and Mr. Ambrose took the other arm. Otty, subtly attired in loose, off-white trousers and a shirt of such delicate white cotton that he

might as well have been bare-chested, supported his father's free arm.

We walked slowly to a bench. I could see the nurses had come to a halt and were watching us. I held my head high. The gossip mill began to rumble but I listened instead to the leaves in the trees. Otty took my arm and we walked off, leaving our companions to a private visit. We headed for the residents' garden. Mr. Hector was working and seeing us, he dropped his tools and stared.

"Well, I never! If I didn't know better . . . I wish my brother could meet you two. Christ where he is, I wonder? Where my brother? By any chance, you know my brother?"

From the cereus hung pink buds on the ends of long stems. Otty knelt down in the garden with no regard for his white trousers and proceeded to pack the soil around its base. He patted it with his bare, slender hands not because it needed work but rather to show it some attention and, I imagine, to honour its place in Miss Ramchandin's life. When he stood up I reached over to brush the soil off the knees of his pants. I felt the form of his shapely leg and when he braced himself, I heard him catch his breath. He too was stirring. I got up, my legs unstable, and walked as best I could throughout the garden, picking a bouquet of shrimp bush, lilac, rose bay and flame ixora. I presented the arrangement to Otty. He deliberately cupped my hands and held them to his chest. With practised elegance I moistened my lips and continued to stare at him.

"The cereus will bloom in just another few nights. Can you wait?" I whispered to him.

"Yes, yes. Just barely, but I will wait."

Mr. Mohanty and Miss Ramchandin were still seated next to each other when we arrived back at the bench. He was staring at his surroundings, shaking his head in a gesture of approval and saying, "No time to waste, not a moment to be wasted."

Miss Ramchandin bounced on the bench. She pointed up into the sky and traced a distant flight pattern that she alone could see.

She laughed as her eyes followed what her finger described, and waved to whatever it was she saw. She trembled with joy. In a tiny whispering voice, she uttered her first public words: "Poh, Pohpoh-poh, Poh, Poh, Poh."

The cereus will surely bloom within days—an excitement diminished only by the fact that there is still no word from Asha Ramchandin. Judge Walter Bissey has contacted a colleague in Canada, who promises to use all legal means to determine if an Asha Ramchandin still resides in that cold country.

Asha, if these words have already found your eyes, for the sake of your sister who worships your memory please return and pay her a visit: Paradise Alms House, Paradise, Lantanacamara. If for some reason you are physically unable to come here, please write, send a message, a photograph. I will respond immediately with the same. And if you were indeed reunited with your mother, Sarah, and with Lavinia Thoroughly, in the Wetlands or in Canada, please tell us how they fared. Not a day passes that you are not foremost in our minds. We await a letter, and better yet, your arrival. She expects you any day soon. You are, to her, the promise of a cereus-scented breeze on a Paradise night.