

THE SOUR OF TAMARIND AND OTHER STORIES

DAIZAL R. SAMAD

Introduced by Ashwannie Harripersaud



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The Sour of Tamarind and Other Stories is dedicated to

Damien Raphael Samad

Sebastian Vincent Samad

Ollivia Margaret Peon

Introduction

To enter the world of Daizal R. Samad's short stories is to embark on a profound and often unsettling journey into the heart of the post-colonial human condition. *The Sour of Tamarind and other Stories* is not merely a collection of narratives set against Guyanese and Malaysian backdrops; it is a meticulously crafted universe in which the personal and the political are inextricably fused. Throughout these scenarios— whether physical, social, or psychological—settings function as active, breathing entities that both shape and are shaped by their inhabitants. Samad emerges as a master cartographer of the soul, mapping the intricate terrains of identity, power, and memory with unflinching honesty and deep compassion. His work consistently argues that the self is not a stable, singular entity, but rather a fragile construct, perpetually negotiated amidst the crushing pressures of history, societal expectation, and the relentless pursuit of a sense of belonging.

The title story, “The Sour of Tamarind,” serves as a powerful overture to the collection's central themes. Here, Samad masterfully demonstrates how external reality mirrors internal turmoil. The town of New Amsterdam is not a passive setting but a malevolent character, “squatting in a state of gloom,” its decay a direct reflection of the protagonist Nadira's psychological suffocation. The titular sourness becomes a complex, dual metaphor: it is both the punishing sting of a tradition enforced through the tamarind whip and the devastating acid of personal betrayal. Through the school-aged Nadira's harrowing journey, Samad establishes a core tenet of his literary project: the places we inhabit are not mere backdrops but active psychological forces that can mirror, amplify, and ultimately dictate our deepest sufferings and most bitter lessons.

This exploration of fractured identity reverberates throughout the collection. In stories such as “Tarzan, West Indian” and “An Arm Rose

Up,” Samad dissects the performative nature of the self. Characters are often trapped by the labels and roles imposed upon them by their communities, whether it is the village “Bad John” whose attempted reinvention is violently thwarted, or the Irish teacher and the local intellectual whose potential connection is sabotaged by the enduring ghosts of colonial heritage. Samad shows how these performances are desperate attempts to forge significance in a world that frequently renders the individual ordinary or invisible, a struggle tragically taken to its nihilistic extreme in “A Considered Act,” where a man seeks a morbid, bloody redemption from his own corruption.

Yet, for all its focus on fracture and despair, the collection is equally concerned with resilience and the quiet, often overlooked acts of endurance. In the poignant “At a Time Like This,” Samad offers a tender counter-narrative, locating profound love and dignity not in youthful passion, but in the compromised, gentle companionship of two middle-aged outcasts who create a private world of shared rituals. Similarly, “Kan-Kan: The Story of a Dog” transcends its simple premise to become a powerful allegory of the indomitable will to live, in which an “ugly, thin, almost hairless” mongrel, through sheer, unstoppable resilience, shames the conditional and utilitarian morality of the humans around her. These stories affirm that significance can be found not in grand, often destructive gestures, but in the quiet commitment to care, to endure, and to connect.

Ultimately, *The Sour of Tamarind* establishes Daizal R. Samad as a vital and uncompromising voice in world literature. His stories are immersive, psychologically astute, and politically urgent, offering a devastating critique of corrupt and corrupting systems while simultaneously honouring the enduring, if fragile, human spirit. With a surgeon’s precision and a poet’s empathy, Samad lays bare the sourness of betrayal, the crushing weight of history, and the corrosive effects of power; yet he also, always, makes room for the golden, fleeting moments of connection, clarity, and grace that render such a world endurable. This collection stands as a definitive testament to the

power of the short story form to capture the vast, complex truths of our lives.

In his heartrending short story “The Sour of Tamarind,” Daizal R. Samad masterfully constructs a narrative in which the external world is inextricably fused with the internal emotional depths of its young protagonist. The story is far more than a simple tale of first love and betrayal; it is a profound exploration of how environment, tradition, and trauma shape identity. Through the grotesque personification of New Amsterdam, the potent symbolism of the tamarind whip, and Nadira’s devastating journey from innocence to desolate experience, Samad argues that the places we inhabit are not mere backdrops but active psychological forces that can mirror, amplify, and even dictate our deepest sufferings. The sourness of the tamarind thus becomes a complex metaphor for the bitter lessons imposed by rigid tradition and the acute pain of personal treachery inflicted by an unscrupulous teacher upon an innocent child.

From the very outset, Samad establishes the town of New Amsterdam as a central character - a malevolent entity whose presence dominates the narrative. The description is not one of mere decay but of a living, suffering organism. The town “squatted in a state of gloom,” its wooden frame “rigid from awakening,” its paint peeling “as from a disease.” This anthropomorphism continues as the town’s “wooden shoulders” rise into the forest and its “sleeve of hut-like houses” is “ripped to threads.” Most significantly, it is trapped, “caught between the twin demons of insanity and death,” pressing between the mental asylum in the north and the burial ground in the south. This framing is not accidental; it creates a pervasive sense of entrapment and psychological suffocation that prefigures Nadira’s own experience. The town functions as a physical manifestation of a disturbed psyche, a place where the boundaries between sanity and madness, life and death, are perilously thin. Each weekend, this setting becomes a prison for Nadira- a place she is forced to visit and from which her only escape

is the toxic, artificial solace of insecticide smoke, itself a symbol of seeking relief in something inherently poisonous.

Within this oppressive environment, the central symbol of the tamarind whip embodies the story's core conflict between rigid tradition and the desire for personal connection. Nadira's lessons in Arabic and the Koran, conducted under her grandmother's strict tutelage, are characterisecharacterised by fear and rote memorisation, devoid of understanding. The two tamarind switches stand in the corner like "two forefingers in warning or admonishment." Their description is intensely visceral: the skin is torn off to reveal a "white suppleness, much like the initial shock of white from a deep wound before the blood wells up." This imagery explicitly links the whip to violence and pain, foreshadowing the deeper emotional wound that awaits Nadira. The "sour" of the title thus first represents the acute, punishing sting of a tradition enforced through fear rather than nurtured through love and explanation. This sourness is thrown into sharp relief by the contrasting sweetness of her grandmother's pancakes and the intellectual joy of their discussions about comparative religion, proving that a different, more loving form of guidance was always possible but deliberately withheld from Nadira's religious education.

It is against this backdrop of oppressive tradition and geographical dread that Nadira's first love blossoms, initially transforming her perception of the world before devastating it completely. Her love for her biology teacher, Mr. Rohan Armogum, is portrayed with the heightened drama of a Shakespearean tragedy; she feels what "Juliet must have felt" and chastises her past self for mocking such passion. This love becomes her personal rebellion and her true escape, so powerful that it alters the very fabric of New Amsterdam, transforming the once-loathed town into a place "linked to her beloved." However, Samad meticulously seeds this romance with signs of its inherent corruption. Armogum's "razor-sharp creases" in his trousers are compared to the "razor grass" that cuts Nadira's calves, a subtle hint that his polished exterior conceals a dangerous edge. His manipulation

is calculated: he isolates her, demands secrecy, and gaslights her with concerns for her reputation, all while making hollow promises of marriage. When Nadira witnesses his betrayal on Pitt Street, the town does not merely revert to its former self; it actively turns against her. The personification becomes monstrous: “The doors of buildings were large mouths that consumed her hopes like raw flesh.” The external landscape fully internaliseinternalises her trauma, becoming a projected nightmare of her shattered psyche.

The story’s conclusion is a masterstroke of ambiguous yet powerful imagery, suggesting a final, desperate search for solace. After a public humiliation at school that echoes the private betrayal in the town, Nadira embarks on a purposeful journey back to New Amsterdam’s ferry stelling. Her actions are calm and deliberate, devoid of the hysterical pain of her initial shock. As she leans over the side of the *Torani*, watching the “golden rush of the river,” she experiences a moment of cathartic clarity, weeping as a gentle rain falls.

The final lines offer a touching yet ambiguous resolution: “The river was like that dense and swaddling smoke in which she found comfort in New Amsterdam. But the smoke in which she swam or sailed now was golden, and it did not disappear.” This golden, permanent smoke can be interpreted in two ways: as a symbol of a cleansing release and the beginning of a painful healing process, or as a more ominous suggestion of a final, suicidal escape into the river’s oblivion. This ambiguity is the story’s greatest strength, refusing a neat resolution and instead forcing the reader to confront the immense weight of Nadira’s trauma. Whether she chooses life or death, her innocence is gone, forever replaced by the enduring “sour” knowledge of betrayal.

In “The Sour of Tamarind,” Daizal R. Samad creates a haunting and deeply resonant narrative about the crucifixion of innocence. The story powerfully demonstrates that environments are never neutral; they are saturated with meaning and emotion. New Amsterdam is both a real place in Guyana and a universal symbol of the psychological traps that can confine us. Through the dual sourness of the tamarind—

representing both the harsh sting of impersonal tradition and the devastating acid of personal betrayal—Samad illustrates how pain is inherited and inflicted. Nadira’s journey serves as proof of the fragility of the youthful heart and the brutal ways in which it can be broken, not by people, but by the very world it learns to love.

Samad’s devastating short story, “Immortal Longings In Him,” is a profound exploration of the ways in which unprocessed grief can manifest as performance, blurring the line between a cry for help and a death wish. The title, a likely allusion to Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* (“I have / Immortal longings in me”), immediately frames the narrative around a desire that transcends the mortal realm—a yearning for something beyond the pain of earthly existence. Through the tragic figure of Ram, a bodybuilder shattered by his brother’s murder, Samad constructs a powerful argument about the nature of masculine grief, the dangerous allure of ritual, and the ultimate failure of the body as a vessel for containing immense psychological and emotional torment.

The story establishes its central theme through the powerful, contrasting symbolism of the body. Initially, Ram’s physique is a proof of life, strength, and control. He is a champion bodybuilder, his skin “golden” and his muscles “hard as plates.” This body is his identity, a source of pride and a connection to his brother, Latchman, a fellow athlete. However, after Latchman’s tragic poisoning, this symbol of vitality becomes the stage for a dangerous theatre of grief. Ram’s body is no longer used for building but for performing acts that mimic death: holding his breath underwater in a “foetal position” in a “ritual of birth and death,” and most horrifically, his hanging stunt. Samad’s description of this act is rich with symbolic meaning: Ram’s arms are held “in the posture of one crucified,” his face a “mask of pain upon which was painted a grotesque smile.” This performance is a complex public enactment of his internal state—a simultaneous display of his immense physical power (his ability to survive the noose) and his profound spiritual suffering (his identification with a crucified martyr).

The body, once a fortress, becomes a prison from which he desperately seeks an escape he cannot fully commit to, a paradox that defines his anguish.

This performative aspect of Ram's grief is crucial to understanding the story's tragedy. His stunts are not private moments of despair but public spectacles, "insisting that everyone watch." They become a language when words fail him, a desperate attempt to communicate the magnitude of his pain to his wife, Sita, and his mother, Janie. Initially, these acts terrify them, but Samad masterfully charts the path to tragic complacency: "these stunts were done with such frequency that everyone became complacent about them, ceasing to see them as dangerous. And so, bit by bit, Ram's death wish became entertainment." This normalisation marks the story's turning point. The family, worn down by his depression and drinking, begins to misread the deadly serious language of his grief as mere "stupidness" or a "joke." This miscommunication seals his fate, as his final performance is dismissed as just another trick, even as he is moments from death.

The catalyst for Ram's brief redemption and ultimate downfall is the women in his life. Sita's courageous outburst, which challenging his self-destruction and reminds him of his responsibilities, provokes a violent reaction—a slap that serves as a shocking catharsis for them both. This violence breaks the cycle of performative grief and leads to a raw, authentic emotional release. Ram finally weeps, asking the unanswered question at the heart of his pain: "Why they had to do that to Latch, Ma? Why?" This moment of vulnerability, witnessed by Sita and Janie, allows him to temporarily reinhabit his body in positively way. He returns to training, wins his championship, and appears to be healing. However, Samad suggests that this recovery is fragile. The trauma is not resolved but merely submerged. The mention of boxing during the celebration triggers his silence, and his need to defiantly prove the harmlessness of his old stunts reveals that the "immortal longing" for his brother - and for release from his pain - has never truly

left him. His final stunt is not an act of suicide in a cold, calculated sense, but a tragic relapse into his performative language at the very moment when his audience has stopped believing in its danger.

The story's conclusion is a heart-wrenching inversion of its opening. The opening scene, in which a doctor cuts into Ram's golden skin, symbolisesymbolises the futile attempt to locate a physical cause for a spiritual and psychological malady. The closing scene offers a final, powerful image of performance and connection. Sita's embrace of her dead husband—laying upon him, aligning her body with his, spreading his arms—mirrors his crucifixion pose. Yet her act transforms it. Where his performance was one of isolated agony, hers is one of unified love and tragic communion. She attempts to share his fate, to join him in his chosen posture, in a desperate final performance of her own devotion. It is Janie, the matriarch who has now lost both her sons, who must finally break this connection, leading Sita away with the "tenderness of one who has known loss."

In "Immortal Longings In Him," Daizal R. Samad presents a searing portrait of grief that cannot be contained by traditional masculine ideals of stoicism and strength. Ram's body, the very source of his pride, becomes the only tool through which he can express an anguish too deep for words. The story serves as a tragic cautionary tale about the perils of misreading the performative language of depression and the devastating consequences that arise when a cry for help is mistaken for a joke. At its core, Samad suggests that some longings are indeed immortal—the longing for a lost brother, for peace, and for a love that seeks to follow even into the void—and that these longings can, tragically, overwhelm the mortal will to live.

In "Kan-Kan: The Story of a Dog", Samad operates on two distinct yet interconnected levels. On its surface, it is a simple, bittersweet narrative about a boy and his first dog. Yet, from the perspective of this "ugly, thin, almost hairless, awkward, ill-tempered" mongrel, Samad delivers a profound and unsentimental commentary on the nature of resilience, the harsh pragmatism of poverty, and the complex morality

that arises when survival is pitted against sentiment. The story transcends its canine subject to become a powerful allegory for the indomitable will to live and the often-ambiguous choices forced upon individuals by circumstance.

From the outset, Samad establishes a world defined by stark economic reality. The setting is an impoverished community in Berbice county, where leashes are “only things used by people in movies” and the concept of a veterinarian is an unimaginable luxury. This context is crucial, as it frames every subsequent action. The narrator’s family, like their neighbour Randolph, operates within a framework of pragmatic utility. Dogs are valued for their function—as alarms or disposals for leftover food—rather than as emotional companions. This is why Randolph keeps the “mixed-breed” Beauty for her perceived superiority while giving away the mongrel Kan-Kan. It is also why Kan-Kan’s own value is initially derived from her fierceness, a functional trait that earns her a “grudging” acceptance. This utilitarian worldview dictates the story’s central conflict: when Kan-Kan ceases to be useful and becomes a burden due to her putrid, infected wound, the solution is not medical care—an impossible fantasy—but disposal. The chillingly matter-of-fact tone with which the narrator recounts plan to drown or “stray” her accentuates how normalised such harshness is within this environment.

It is against this backdrop of pragmatic cruelty that Kan-Kan’s heroic resilience shines. She is not a conventionally likeable protagonist; she is ill-tempered and fierce. Yet her will to live is absolute. Her first miraculous return after being hit by a car establishes her preternatural endurance. However, it is her second and third returns that elevate her to a mythic status. After being sealed in a sack with rocks and thrown into a canal teeming with alligators, she not only escapes but finds her way home. This feat defies all logical explanation, moving her character from the realm of a mere animal into that of a force of nature. Her final return, after being abandoned twelve miles away, cements this status.

These are not merely acts of survival; they are profound, wordless rebuttals to the family's attempts to erase her. Each return is a testament to a spirit that refuses to be extinguished or cast aside, a loyalty that shames the conditional love offered to her.

This relentless survival forces a deep moral reckoning, primarily within the young narrator. His emotional journey forms the story's human core. His initial pride in Kan-Kan's fierceness turns to horror and grief after her accident, which then curdles into a complex, shame-filled resentment as her stench becomes unbearable. He actively participates in her attempted executions, luring her into the sack, yet is consumed by guilt afterwards. His confession- "I hated her for living. I hated her for her devotion to me and for not being able to see that she was not wanted. Yet I hated all of us for wanting to drown her,"- captures this exquisite internal conflict. He is trapped between his innate childhood compassion and the hardened pragmatic logic of the adult world he is being taught to inhabit. Kan-Kan's forgiveness upon her final return, "proud, playful," and healed, is a moment of immense moral grace that highlights the superiority of her simple, steadfast devotion over the complicated, conditional morality of the humans.

The story's ending offers a circular resolution that affirms its themes of resilience and legacy. Kan-Kan's transformation from a burden to a "folk heroine" is complete. Her pregnancy and motherhood symbolise a triumphant renewal. The naming of her pups after racehorses—Red Flame and Donna Louisa—echoes her own name (Kan-Kan, after a Trinidadian racehorse) and creates a legacy of strength and value. In the end, she does not succumb to the violent or neglectful fates the humans devised for her. She dies of a simple cold, of old age, and is buried softly in the yard—a dignified end she claimed for herself on her own terms. Her story becomes legend in the neighbourhood, a testament to a spirit so potent it could overcome poverty, violence, and human betrayal.

Through Kan-Kan's unyielding life, Samad argues that true value is not found in pedigree, beauty, or utility, but in the raw, unstoppable

force of the will to endure and belong. The story, in its unflinching honesty and ultimate tenderness, serves as a powerful elegy for the countless "unwanted" beings whose fierce, quiet dignity forever alters the landscapes they refuse to leave.

Daizal R. Samad's "At a Time Like This" is a quiet, profound, and deeply moving exploration of love found not in youth's passionate bloom but in the compromised shadows of middle age. The story deftly contrasts public perception with private reality, arguing that true companionship is often built not on grand romance or societal approval but on mutual need, gentle understanding, and the creation of a private world inaccessible to outsiders. Through the subtle relationship between Auntie Lena and Uncle Shaw, Samad dismantles societal expectations of marriage, beauty, and strength to reveal a tender, resilient bond that flourishes precisely because it is overlooked and misunderstood by the world.

The story establishes its central theme through the initial isolation of its two protagonists. Auntie Lena and Uncle Shaw are introduced as societal rejects, resigned to their fates of "spinsterhood" and being "not wanted by any woman." Their perceived flaws are meticulously catalogued through the cruel lens of community standards: Lena's "average" looks are fading despite her "fair skin," and her kindness is dismissed as a lack of sophistication by her sisters. Shaw, though a successful lawyer, described as "dark" and "not at all a good-looking man," his worth negated by his appearance and his "harsh" demeanour. Samad skilfully shows how their loneliness is compounded by a community—including their own families—that views their single status as a failure to be remedied with "increasing desperation." Their coming together is thus presented not as a triumph but as a pragmatic solution born from a "sense of futility," a last chance for companionship that everyone expects to fail.

The heart of the story, and its most significant achievement, lies in the meticulous construction of the couple's private world, which stands in stark opposition to their public personas. Samad unveils this world

through the narrator's privileged perspective, revealing a dynamic rich with gentle humour, unspoken affection, and role-playing. The public "harshness" of Uncle Shaw melts away in the home to reveal a man of surprising tenderness—a man who cries at movies and makes whimsical requests for ice cream at two in the morning. His trademark gruffness is transformed into an intimate catchphrase, "Ahem, Yasmin? ... a [blank] would go down nice at a time like this," which becomes a ritual of request and fulfilment that defines their partnership.

Similarly, Auntie Lena's public image of pitiable resignation is replaced by one of active, loving agency. She is not a subservient victim but a willing participant in this private theatre, deriving clear joy from caring for him and sharing the secret of his softness with the narrator "in hushed tones." Her conversion to Islam and her new name, Yasmin, symbolise not erasure but her willing "pliability" and commitment to this new, shared identity.

This fragile private world is perpetually threatened by the outside community, forcing them into a protective isolation. The neighbours are "fearful and suspicious of him, and he was fearful and suspicious of them." Lena is "caught" in the middle, comfortable with each party only in the other's absence. This isolation, however, becomes the incubator for their love. "The life they led... was in some isolation from the rest of the community," a necessary condition for their bond to deepen away from judging eyes.

This tension between public and private is crystallised in Uncle Shaw's act of judicial bravery, in which he condemns a corrupt Party Member. While this action makes him a public "folk hero," it only serves to heighten the community's fear and further isolate the couple. Their retreat from the world is complete, making their reliance on - and closeness to - each other absolute. Their happiness is found not in social integration but in a mutual "surrender"—he to lead, she to follow—that is entirely voluntary and deeply fulfilling.

The story's devastating conclusion serves as the consummate symbol of the depth and authenticity of their private bond. Shaw's fatal stroke

strips away everything but the essential truth of their relationship. All that remains is the silent communication of love and fear through his tear-filled eyes and her comforting touch. The most powerful moment is not his death but Lena's act of catching his tears "on the tips of her forefingers" and pressing them "as one would press the softest petal." This is an act of intimate preservation, a final, wordless acknowledgement of the tender man she alone knew. His death returns her to her starting point—sitting in her rocking chair, gazing at the empty road—but she is utterly transformed. She does not look for the road or the community; her gaze is fixed only on "the empty rocking chair opposite hers." The chair is no longer merely a piece of furniture; it becomes a symbol of the void left by her partner, the architect of their private world. The world has shrunk back down to the size of their two chairs, and now one is empty.

In "At a Time Like This," Daizal R. Samad offers a masterful and humane lesson: that love is not defined by its adherence to societal ideals of beauty, youth, or passion. Instead, it is often found in the quiet spaces of compromise, in the gentle rituals built between two people, and in the courage to create a private sanctuary against the world's judgement. The story asserts that the most profound partnerships are those misunderstood by outsiders, for it is within that misunderstood space that the most authentic connections can grow, unfettered by expectation—until all that remains is the quiet echo of a shared phrase and the memory of a saved tear.

"And The Fire Light" is a harrowing and politically charged short story that functions as both a specific allegory of post-colonial tyranny and a universal account of the brutal cost of resisting totalitarianism. Through the devastating destruction of Patrick Obeng Khan and his wife, Irene, Samad explores the absolute war waged by an oppressive state against the individual conscience, demonstrating how such regimes seek not merely to punish dissent but to systematically annihilate the very humanity of those who dare to speak a quiet truth. The story stands as a stark examination of the mechanisms of terror,

the fragility of the “small man” in the face of absolute power, and the ultimate, soul-crushing price of resistance.

The story’s power is immediately established through its allegorical framework. The ruling dictator is not named but is instead referred to as “King Kong,” his party as “apes,” and his predecessor as “Tarzan.” This bestial imagery humanisehumanisedehumanises the regime, presenting it not as a political entity but as a violent, primal force. The central conflict is laid out with chilling clarity in the opening lines: “It was a time when they declared war against conscience. Patrick Obeng Khan had a conscience. Therefore, they wage war against Patrick Obeng Khan and those like he.” This framing elevates the narrative from a simple tale of political oppression to a metaphysical battle between the soulless machinery of the state (“Machine don’t think, they follow instruction”) and the innate, thinking human spirit. Patrick’s crime is not an act of organiseorganised rebellion but merely the possession of an internal moral compass that the state cannot tolerate.

Patrick Obeng Khan is scrupulously constructed as the embodiment of the “small man,” making his destruction all the more tragic and illustrative of the regime’s gratuitous cruelty. He is apolitical - a simple mechanic whose world is defined by the struggle for daily survival: putting “bread and rice ‘pon he table,” cherishing the rare luxury of a potato, and cutting a single apple into tiny pieces for his family on Christmas Eve. His character represents decency, hard work, and quiet dignity. His rebellion is not premeditated; rather, it is an almost involuntary eruption of his suppressed conscience during a state-sponsored rally. The moment he speaks his thoughts aloud—“We don’t want they sweet word, we want...”—is a moment of profound humanity breaking through the enforced silence. This spontaneous act emphasises Samad’s point that under such regimes, even private thought is a threat, and its accidental expression is sufficient to trigger a catastrophic response.

The state’s retaliation is not merely punitive; it is a calculated, theatrical act of terror designed to erase identity and break the human

spirit. Samad masterfully builds a sense of dread as Patrick and Irene, operating on a desperate hope for mercy, navigate the Kafkaesque bureaucracy of the Party Headquarters. Their attempt to appease the regime—spending their meagre savings on a bribe and humiliatingly recanting the truth in a written apology—only seals their fate. It demonstrates their naivety and, more importantly, reveals the regime’s true objective: it does not want submission; it wants total domination. The horrific violence that follows is a ritualistic performance. The soldiers’ actions are slow, deliberate, and sadistic -lighting matches without throwing them, forcing Patrick to watch Irene’s rape, and finally setting him ablaze. This is not merely punishment; it is a message.

The fire is both a literal and symbolic instrument of purification for the state, intended to burn away Patrick’s conscience, his masculinity, his role as a protector, and his physical autonomy.

In its final, devastating moments, the narrative reveals the state’s crowning success: the complete annihilation of two people. Patrick is reduced to a silent, vegetative body in an asylum, his mind and spirit utterly broken. Irene, transformed from a proud, resourceful woman plastering her home with cow dung into a “beggar-woman” staring with dead eyes, is reduced to a hollow shell. The final, haunting image is of her rusty enamel cup—once used to tenderly give water to her injured husband—now used to collect alms, a symbol of how every vestige of their loving domestic life has been corrupted into an instrument of mere survival. The state has not just crippled them physically; it has extinguished the “fire light” of their humanity, their love, and their conscience.

In “And The Fire Light,” Daizal R. Samad moves beyond a simple condemnation of dictatorship to deliver a profound meditation on the nature of terror. The story argues that the goal of totalitarian regimes is not merely political control but the eradication of individual conscience - the most fundamental threat to their power. Through the evisceration of Patrick and Irene, Samad illustrates that this war is

waged not on battlefields but in homes, on bodies, and within minds. The story serves as a grim memorial to all the “small” people who, armed with nothing but a conscience, are crushed by the overwhelming machinery of the state, and a powerful warning of the terrifying ease with which humanity can be extinguished, leaving behind only the cold, rusty artefacts of a life that once was.

In his evocative short story “Tarzan, West Indian,” Daizal R. Samad presents a profound exploration of how identity is constructed, performed, and ultimately constrained by social expectations. Through the framework of a young narrator’s admiration, Samad dissects the life of a village figure whose very name—Tarzan—becomes a prism through which themes of poverty, community, and the desire for transformation are refracted. The story argues that while self-reinvention is possible, it remains perpetually vulnerable to the rigid roles imposed by society and the inescapable shadows of one’s past. Tarzan’s journey is not merely one of personal change but a poignant commentary on the performance of identity within the post-colonial Caribbean landscape.

From the inception, Samad establishes identity as a collaborative construct between the individual and the community. The protagonist is not named at birth but is christened “Tarzan” by his village, a label derived from his “curly, soft and long” hair and his “fearlessness.” This act of naming is the first step in myth-making, a process that simplifies a complex human being into a recognisable, almost archetypal figure. Initially, the name is an ironic fit; the narrator quickly subverts the Hollywood image by contrasting the bronze-skinned, mixed-race villager with his “formidable” wife, who is “quite unlike the svelte, blond Jane.” The early Tarzan is defined not by violence but by a “gentle nature,” particularly toward his children, and an extraordinary kindness that leads him to give away food his own family cannot spare. The name is a shell he wears lightly, a performance that does not yet fully define him.

However, this performative identity soon hardens into a more destructive reality. The narrator observes the pivotal shift when “the man started to fit the shell which the name implied.” Driven by the community’s expectation of the “Bad John” archetype, Tarzan’s behaviour changes to match the legend. He begins beating his children, engages in violent fights, and proudly displays a scar “like a badge of badness.” His shirtless chest becomes a uniform, aligning him with his primal namesake. This transformation reveals the powerful influence of external perception; the community’s need for a certain narrative shapes Tarzan’s actions, and he, in turn, internalises this role, demonstrating how identity can become a prison forged by the expectations of others.

This performance unfolds against a backdrop of stark poverty, which Samad depicts with unflinching clarity and a deep sense of empathy. Tarzan’s world is one of material lack but immense dignity. His “ramshackle, one-bedroom place” stands in defiant opposition to the “pervasive smell of pee” from the nearby cinema, its own air thick with the “cloying” scent of burned sugar. The heartbreaking detail that every sweet given to the narrator means “one of Tarzan’s children went without” is a powerful demonstration of a generosity that transcends material scarcity. Furthermore, the community’s preference for the traditional “fire-side” over modern gas cookers is brilliantly analysed by the narrator as a “defence of their dignity.” By claiming the fire-side is cheaper and cooks “sweeter” food, the villagers perform an act of collective self-preservation, transforming a symbol of poverty into one of cultural pride and resilience.

The possibility of redemption and authentic transformation arrives through the intervention of the narrator’s father, who recognises a hidden aspect of Tarzan’s identity: his artistry. The gambling board, painted with a “curling flourish,” reveals a talent that leads to legitimate work decorating shop windows. This artistic expression, combined with “deep” philosophical conversations, facilitates Tarzan’s most radical transformation: his conversion to Islam. This

shift is profound; he swaps rum for prayer, gambling for a steady job, and his shirtless torso for a long-sleeved white shirt. He exchanges the community's fear for "awe," finding a new form of respect and a seemingly stable identity grounded in faith and principle. This phase suggests that identity can be consciously chosen and remade, moving beyond the destructive shell of "Tarzan."

Yet, Samad ultimately delivers a tragic conclusion on the fragility of this reinvented self. The return of Cuffy, a figure from Tarzan's violent past, represents the inescapability of that former identity. The community's speculation about a confrontation emphasises their desire for a dramatic climax between two legendary "Bad Johns," a narrative they understand better than that of a quiet, religious man. In this crucial moment, the performative identity of the pious Muslim fails him; his non-violent response is interpreted as fear, and his refusal to fight is a rejection of the old rules of engagement. Cuffy's knife, however, does not respect his new identity. The image of blood soaking "the front of his white, long-sleeved shirt"—the very symbol of his conversion—is devastatingly symbolic. His new self is literally and metaphorically stained by his past. The wound that leaves him with a "hoarse whisper" signifies the silencing of his transformed identity, forcing him and his family to disappear from the village, their story ending not with redemption but with quiet erasure.

"Tarzan, West Indian" is a masterful study of the interplay between self and society. Daizal Samad uses the rise and fall of a village legend to argue that identity is a constant performance, shaped by economic reality, social pressure, and the stories others tell about us. While the story acknowledges the profound human capacity for change, as seen in Tarzan's artistry and spiritual awakening, it soberly recognises the powerful pull of inherited narratives. Tarzan's tragedy is that his community could only ever see him as a myth—first as a hero, then a villain, and finally, a disappointment—never allowing the complex, gentle, and talented man beneath the legend to truly be free. His silent departure serves as a powerful critique of a society that often prefers

the simplicity of a shell to the evolving, shifting reality of the human within.

Daizal R. Samad's "A Stay At Innocence" is a rich, multi-layered allegory that uses the journey of three men—Wong, Mokhtar, and Kumar—to explore the fractured psyche of a multi-ethnic nation and the painful, necessary process of forging a unified identity. The story moves from a state of discord and mutual resentment to a symbolic death and rebirth, culminating in a vision of harmonious coexistence. Through this narrative arc, Samad argues that true national unity cannot be imposed from the outside or built on the shaky foundation of shared resentment, but must be born from a collective, near-fatal crisis and a willing surrender to a new, shared way of being.

The story's power lies in its potent allegorical framework. The three protagonists are not merely individuals but representations of Malaysia's major ethnic groups: Wong (Chinese), Mokhtar (Malay), and Kumar (Indian). Their initial state is one of profound dysfunction, mirroring the racial tensions and silos that often characterise post-colonial societies. They are physically together in the same canoe—a classic symbol of the nation-state—but are psychologically isolated, bound by "open secrets, like open wounds, bandaged by newspaper." Each character embodies a specific grievance: Mokhtar resents Wong's perceived economic success; Wong resents Mokhtar's claims of indigenous primacy; and Kumar, feeling powerless, resents them both. Their only previous unity was negative, formed in "common loathing" for Mr. Wright, the condescending English lecturer who represents the colonial past. This is a powerful critique: a nation defining itself only in opposition to its coloniser remains fractured, its internal alliances "tolerable" but not transformative.

The journey itself is an allegory for the national project. Their quest for the mythical village of "Innocence" is driven by a corrupted, individualistic desire. They do not seek a collective good but a place where each can be chief, projecting their own ethnic fantasies onto the destination "without even a belief of its existence." This reflects the

failure of top-down national visions that do not reconcile competing ethnic aspirations. Their inevitable failure is symbolised by the catastrophic shipwreck on the “rock,” a moment in which their inability to communicate—each shouting a warning in a “different language”—leads to mutual destruction. The “crucifixion” is not merely physical but ideological; it represents the necessary death of their old, prejudiced selves and the bitterly, failed model of coexistence.

The heart of Samad’s argument lies in the transformative five-year interlude in the village of Innocence. This section presents a Utopian vision of what a nation could be if it shed the baggage of ownership, competition, and ethnic hierarchy. The villagers “did not own but borrowed the land,” and their language contains “no words for *my* or *mine*, only *ours*.” This is a radical deconstruction of the very concepts of possession and identity that fuel modern and ethnic conflicts. The resurrection of the three men is a rebirth into this new consciousness. They are not stripped of their individuality but are freed from their “habitual constriction” and “learned ability to edit experience.” They learn a new language that is “strangely familiar,” a creolised tongue that incorporates elements of all their old languages but with new, shared meanings. This represents the ideal of a national culture: not a monolithic imposition, but a fluid, poetic synthesis that honours its diverse roots while creating something new and collectively owned.

Their return journey demonstrates the internalisation of this new ethos. The roles in the boat remain the same—Wong steers, Mokhtar provides power, and Kumar balances—but the spirit is utterly transformed. Their calls lose “the bruise of warnings and assumed the rhythm of poetry.” This is Samad’s central thesis: unity is not about erasing difference, but about harmonising it. Each group contributes its essential strengths (steering, power, balance) to the collective enterprise, and their distinct voices become part of a shared, beautiful song rather than a cacophony of conflict.

The final image is one of poignant hope and stark contrast. The three friends, now “carved from the same wood as the boat,” return to see the people at the resort, who appear “old and tired” in their segregated “clutches.” The friends regard them with pity and familial love, while the resort guests see the returning trio as an “unbroken and unspliced sculpture.” The message is clear: those who remain trapped in the old paradigms of separation age and wither, while those who undergo the difficult rebirth into a new, shared identity achieve a wholeness that seems almost mythical to those still on the outside.

In “A Stay At Innocence,” Daizal Samad moves beyond mere critique to offer a prophetic vision. The story acknowledges the deep-seated resentments and failed communication that plague multi-ethnic nations such as Malaysia and Guyana, but insists that a unified identity is possible. However, this unity cannot be achieved through superficial nostalgia or shared hatred of a colonial past. It requires a symbolic death—a willingness to let old prejudices and hierarchies shatter—and a rebirth into a new social contract based on shared stewardship, a reinvented common language, and the harmonious integration of diverse strengths. The stay at Innocence is not a retreat from reality but a necessary pilgrimage to the source of what a nation, at its best, could truly be.

In his unflinching short story “Pearlie,” Daizal R. Samad constructs a devastating portrait of a community whose social fabric is woven from threads of exploitation, self-deception, and internalised racism. The narrative, centred on the titular prostitute, functions as a powerful critique of the ways in which the marginalised are used as instruments for the construction of others’ identities. Through the brutal dynamics of a Guyanese village, Samad reveals how the desperate need for status and validation among the male youth is purchased through the degradation of the most vulnerable, eventually exposing the fragile and tragic illusions that sustain a cycle of shame.

Pearlie herself is presented not as a romanticised figure of tragic beauty, but with a stark, almost naturalistic physicality that

emphasiseemphasises her commodification and dehumanization. Samad's description is brutally precise: she has "battered, blackened gums," "collapsed" breasts, and a single dress that is "drab, dirty and coming apart at the seams." This unsparing depiction serves a crucial purpose: it establishes her not as an object of desire but as a blemished canvas upon which the men and boys of the village project their fantasies. Her profound poverty and physical decay are the very conditions that make her accessible for the meagre sum of twenty-five cents, transforming her into a communal resource for male initiation. The boys' vulgar fantasies about making her "scream blue murder" are less about her and more about their own performative masculinity. She becomes the necessary prop in their theatre of becoming "studs," her reality erased by their "feeble imagination", which transposes her squalid hut into a "white mansion with large, solid white pillars."

The central mechanism of this communal delusion is Corn Joe, a character who embodies the toxic intersection of colonial mindset and masculine bravado. His self-proclaimed superiority is built on two shaky pillars: his "light-brown complexion" and his "sexual expertise" gained with Pearlie. Samad masterfully links these two facets, showing how internalised racism fuels the exploitation. Corn Joe's greatest fear is "blackness," and he relentlessly torments Abel for being "black till he blue." By scorning blackness, Corn Joe attempts to align himself with the whiteness he simultaneously fears, a psychological conflict born of a colonial history that privileged lighter skin. His authority, derived from cheap western novels and repeated visits to Pearlie, is a performance designed to mask his own inertia—he "never worked, had never left the village"—and his deep-seated insecurities. He is the architect of the story's central cruelty, orchestrating Abel's initiation not as a gift but as a setup for a brutal public humiliation.

The climax of the story is one of the most devastatingly concise scenes in Caribbean literature. The planned voyeurism reduces the act to its most pathetic and transactional reality. The image of Pearlie reading a newspaper while Abel fumbles atop her is a crushing antidote to the

boys' lurid fantasies. Her question, "You done a 'ready, boy?'" delivered in a "cool and gentle" voice, is not one of cruelty but of sheer, bored practicality. It is this mundane reality that shatters the carefully constructed illusion. The boys flee from this truth, but Corn Joe weaponises it, ensuring the moment becomes a punchline to reinforce his own social standing at Abel's expense.

The story's tragic conclusion lies in Abel's attempted participation in the very delusion that destroys him. Returning to the group, he adopts the expected posture of the conqueror: the clenched teeth, the cigarette, the boast, "I give it to she, man...good-good." His performance is a last, desperate attempt to claim the masculinity promised by the ritual. However, the repetition and hesitation in his speech ("good- good," "Just-just now") betray his shattered confidence. When the younger boy mimics Pearlie's line, the laughter of the group does not merely mock Abel's sexual performance; it obliterates his fragile new identity, revealing it as a fiction. His silent departure, tears in his eyes, signifies a permanent exile. He is now doubly shamed: first by his perceived inadequacy, and second by his exposure as a fraud in the game of masculinity.

In "Pearlie," Daizal Samad demonstrates that the true currency in this village is not the twenty-five cents paid for sex but shame. Pearlie, though exploited, possesses a weary authenticity that contrasts with the boys' desperate illusions. Corn Joe traffics in shame to maintain his status, and Abel becomes his ultimate victim. The story thus functions as a bleak ecosystem: Pearlie's body is the ground upon which the men build their fragile identities, and the entire structure is maintained by the relentless policing of hierarchy and the brutal enforcement of communal myths. Samad offers no redemption, only a clear-eyed examination of how power, even among the powerless, is often sought by pushing someone else further down.

Daizal R. Samad's "Children at Play" is a profoundly unsettling short story that masterfully subverts its seemingly innocuous title to explore the dark undercurrents of power, corruption, and the loss of innocence.

Set against the backdrop of a New Year's Eve in Georgetown, Guyana, the narrative uses a confined domestic setting as a microcosm for a broader societal sickness. Through the eyes of a young, impressionable narrator, Samad meticulously charts how the toxic exercise of authority by national and familial figures is mimicked, internalised, and grotesquely enacted by the youth, revealing a chilling cycle of abuse and the painful birth of a shameful complicity.

The story immediately establishes a framework of power dynamics. The teenagers are left in charge, wielding their newfound authority with “the ruthlessness of those unaccustomed to power.” This small-scale tyranny is explicitly linked to a national context, as the narrator observes, “Our national leaders showed by example their smallness by being ruthless and corrupt... The young followed most closely.” This opening thesis is crucial; it frames the ensuing events not as an isolated incident of juvenile delinquency, but as the logical outcome of a culture that holds up corruption as a form of strength. The “castle” of the house, with its mysterious shadows and whispers, becomes a stage for this perverted coming-of-age ritual, where the thrill of mystery will curdle into the horror of violation.

The central symbol of this corrupted adult world is Uncle Ayoob's attaché case. To the naïve narrator, it represents the glamorous wealth of “one million dollars,” a fantasy gleaned from movies. Its true contents—a set of meticulously arranged guns—are a more potent symbol of the violent, masculine power that the boys, particularly Ishmael, idolize. The scene in which Ishmael opens the case is a masterclass in building tension and mimicking cinematic tropes. His performance, complete with a pen torch and warnings about booby traps, casts him in the role of a James Bond or Clint Eastwood figure. This moment is not merely about seeing guns; it is an initiation into a worldview in which power is hard and beautiful, and in which secrecy and intimidation are the tools used to wield it. The case's contents sanctify Uncle Ayoob as a “man of power,” a “hero” in the narrator's

eyes, thereby legitimising the very authority that will enable the ensuing abuse.

This corruption of power finds its ultimate, horrific expression in the treatment of Veronica, the family's maid. Samad carefully establishes her vulnerability and humanity before the attack. She is a "doughlah girl" (of mixed Indian and Black ancestry), occupying a precarious social position. She is pretty yet perpetually unsmiling, trapped in a life of endless chores under the pious yet hypocritical eye of Aunt Mary. The narrator's empathy for her - "my heart hurt for her" - sharpens the reader's sense of impending dread. Ishmael's cruel manipulation of power is first displayed in his condescending and physically invasive treatment of her at the dinner table, a prelude to the main atrocity. He explicitly equates her to the gun case: "Veronica is the same as that set. Only Uncle Ayoob can touch and do." This chilling statement reduces her from a person to an object, a possession to be used by those in power, and it explicitly reveals that the boys are merely mimicking the predatory behaviour they have learned from their uncle.

The climax of the story is the gang rape itself, described with a brutal, hushed realism that is far more effective than graphic detail. The narrator's perspective is key: he witnesses the event as a confused and terrified spectator, focusing on the disembodied mechanics of the assault - "a strange knot or arrangement of bodies," "panting and grunting," "his moving buttocks." The most devastating moment occurs when Veronica's struggling ceases as she makes eye contact with the narrator in the shadows. Samad's choice to have her express not accusation but *guilt* is a heart-breaking commentary on the psychology of the victimised, who often internalise shame that rightly belongs to their tormentors. This silent exchange implicates the narrator not as a perpetrator but as a witness whose inaction becomes a form of participation.

The story's profound conclusion lies in the narrator's reaction. His flight to the kitchen and the horrifying realisation that he is physically aroused constitute a moment of devastating psychological complexity.

It forces him—and the reader—to confront the uncomfortable truth that even within horror, there can be a confused and shameful physiological response. This revelation shatters any remaining innocence and cements his complicity. His final silence—never asking his father to help Veronica, never speaking of her again—is the story’s true tragedy. It signifies the completion of the cycle: the infection of corruption has taken root. The “children at play” have not merely witnessed the world’s cruelty; they have participated in its rancid economy of power and silence, and the narrator must carry the burden of that knowledge alone. In this powerful and disturbing story, Samad demonstrates that the most enduring wounds are often inflicted not by the act of violence itself, but by the silent complicity it breeds, forever corroding the possibility of innocence.

In his masterful short story “Fred Singh, Principal Shoemaker,” Daizal R. Samad constructs a poignant microcosm of colonial society, exploring the intricate and often brutal dynamics of power, dignity, and respect. Set against the backdrop of a Guyanese village, the narrative uses the contrasting figures of the aloof, educated Principal Chandaball and the humble, meticulous shoemaker Fred Singh to establish the difference between ascribed authority and earned integrity. Through rich characterisation, potent symbolism, and a carefully calibrated narrative voice, Samad argues that true worth is not found in titles or suits but in the quiet pride of craftsmanship and self-respect, and that the violation of this principle can have a deeply corrosive effect on the human spirit.

The story establishes its social hierarchy immediately through the formidable presence of Principal Chandaball. He is a man defined by his appearance and his distance, “much feared and revered”, and “never to be seen without a suit and tie” despite the “sweltering heat.” Samad’s description of him is grotesque and vampiric: his skinny wrists are like “bare bones, brown and shrunken,” his fingers resemble “distended dried prawns,” and his face has skin “drawn tightly across the bones... as if there was no flesh in between.” He appears consumed

by his own austerity and ambition. His power is performative, maintained through ritual and aloofness, such as his deliberate ignoring of the young narrator. His secret—that the mysterious sheets he pores over contain not educational data but horse-racing statistics—reveals a hypocrisy at his core. He engages in the common vice of gambling but does so at a remove, using the narrator as a proxy to avoid mingling with the “rabble” at the betting booth. Chandaball represents colonial mimicry; he embodies the “English” ideals of discipline and superiority, while looking down upon the very people he lives among, whom he deems “too stupid to learn” despite the efforts of their English educators.

In stark contrast to Chandaball’s hollow performance of power stands Fred Singh, the shoemaker, whose authority is derived not from position but from skill and character. Fred is introduced through the narrator’s fondness for him, a stark contrast to the fear inspired by the principal. Where Chandaball’s world is one of abstract numbers and distant races, Fred’s is tactile and immediate, built on the integrity of tangible work. Samad lavishes detail on Fred’s process: the waxing of the string, the sharpening of knives on leather, the careful measuring and cutting. Fred’s philosophy is simple but profound: “If you’re not going to do your work good, then don’t do it at all.” His pride is not the arrogant pride of Chandaball but a “good pride,” a reciprocal relationship in which good work begets pride, which in turn inspires better work. He is, in his own right, an intellectual, having read Shakespeare and Coleridge not for status but for personal enrichment, revealing a depth of character that Chandaball, for all his education, utterly lacks. Fred Singh is the moral centre of the story, a man whose dignity is self-made and inherent in his craft.

The central conflict of the story erupts when these two worlds collide. Chandaball’s arrival at Fred’s booth is an exercise in condescension. He interrupts, dictates terms, and unilaterally reduces the agreed price, asserting his social dominance with a brutal “Clear?” This moment is not about shoes; it is about reinforcing the social order. Fred’s

subsequent silence reveals his deep hurt—not at the lost dollar, but at the profound disrespect shown toward his profession and his person. His response, however, is not one of defeat but of defiance through craftsmanship. He works through the night by candlelight, not for the underpaying client, but for himself. He tells the narrator, “This gon be the best job I ever do -even though he gon underpay me. This is what I mean by pride. The right kinda pride.” This act is a reclamation of agency. He seeks to force Chandaball’s recognition, to use the undeniable quality of his work as an argument for his worth that cannot be ignored.

The story’s devastating climax lies in the fact that this argument fails utterly. When Chandaball returns, he pointedly refuses even to look at the shoes, reducing Fred’s night of sacred labour to a mere financial transaction. In his final, crushing act, he shoves the payment into Fred’s shirt pocket as if he were a beggar and delivers a speech that lays bare his colonial mindset, blaming the people themselves for failing to be properly educated by the English. This is the ultimate insult: the denial of Fred’s humanity, his intelligence, and his craft. The carefully built dignity of Fred Singh shatters. He stands frozen, “like an island,” completely isolated by the encounter. The narrator’s desire to lead him back to his stool is a powerful image of wanting to restore the old order, but it is impossible. Chandaball’s cruelty has broken the sacred “circle” of Fred’s work and pride.

The denouement is one of quiet tragedy. Fred Singh disappears, and with him goes the story’s sense of order and integrity. The fate of his toolbox—broken into, looted, and discarded with its “worthless insides” spilling out—serves as a powerful metaphor for Fred’s own spirit. It represents how a community’s value system, built on craft and respect, can be vandalised by the corrosive influence of arrogant, institutional power. The narrator, too, is a casualty, losing his mentor and ceasing his visits, his own connection to this world of quiet dignity severed.

In “Fred Singh, Principal Shoemaker,” Daizal R. Samad delivers a profound critique of social hierarchy. The title itself, yoking the principal and the shoemaker together, poses a question: Who is the true principal? The answer is clear. Chandaball, for all his authority, is a hollow man playing a part, while Fred Singh is the true master—a principal of his craft. The story ultimately mourns the vulnerability of dignity in the face of power and the tragic ease with which a man’s spirit can be irreparably bruised by those who refuse to see the soul within.

Daizal R. Samad’s “The Funeral” is a profound and introspective meditation on identity, memory, and the inescapable presence of mortality, framed within the experience of the diasporic individual. The story uses a slow-moving funeral procession in Malaysia as a catalyst for a sprawling internal monologue, in which the external heat and glare of the tropical day become metaphors for the internal pressure of a life examined. Samad masterfully blurs the lines between observation and memory, the present and the past, the living and the dead to argue that the self is a fragile, fragmented construct, perpetually caught between homelands and forever shadowed by the knowledge of its own end.

The narrative is anchored by a simple, almost mundane event: the narrator is stuck in traffic behind a truck carrying a Hindu priest and a small, burnished coffin. This coffin becomes the story’s central symbol, a “mirror” that forces a confrontation with mortality. The narrator’s initial reaction is one of clinical, distanced observation—speculating on the age and identity of the corpse, using intellectualisation as a defence mechanism (“These are tricks we, the living, play upon ourselves”). However, the coffin’s power is irresistible; it “commands my attention” and triggers a visceral, physical response—sweat, a sense of cold in an air-conditioned car. This is the story’s first major turn: the recognition that the anonymous dead is not an abstract concept but a direct reflection of the self. The observation “It is the coffin, the dead, that gives him his importance”

applies equally to the narrator; it is the fact of his own eventual death that gives urgency and meaning to the life he is about to recount.

This confrontation with mortality unleashes a torrent of memory, structuring the narrator's life review around the people and places that have defined him. His thoughts turn first to his wife, depicted with tender, specific physicality—the “Pleiades of brown moles just above her knees,” her “perfectly formed ears.” This intimate detail establishes the profound personal loss that death represents. His thoughts then spiral out to his sons, each relationship painted with the brush of painful regret and absence. The eldest son's “bitterness and aggression,” born from the narrator's abandonment, and the younger son's “face... cut by tears like tiny blades” speak to the collateral damage of a diasporic life - the personal betrayals that are the hidden cost of global movement. The memory of his third son's birth forms the story's emotional core, a beautifully rendered epiphany in which intellectual distance collapses into raw, uncontrollable emotion. His weeping is a moment of pure, unvarnished humanity, a stark contrast to the controlled observer at the story's beginning. This memory serves as the ultimate argument for what makes a life precious: not grand achievements, but the profound, vulnerable connections to others.

This personal inventory seamlessly expands into a geographical and cultural one, reflecting the fragmented identity of the diasporic subject. The narrator is a man of three countries, three continents: Guyana, in South America; Canada, in North America; and Malaysia, in Southeast Asia. Each represents a different facet of his identity and a different form of alienation. Guyana is the lost homeland, a place forever changed by time and distance, where “the young man who leaves is no longer the son when the man is a stranger.” Canada is the place of “new hopelessness,” where even mastering new rituals— “a palm upon the trunk of a tree to sense the first flush of sap”—could not overcome the feeling of being “unnecessary as a casket for a small mound of ash.” Malaysia, his present, is a place of deep contradictions, both familiar in its tropicity and alien in its “look of dilapidated impermanence”

and its “politics of race.” He exists in a state of perpetual in-betweenness, belonging wholly to nowhere, his identity a patchwork of memories and dislocations.

The story’s conclusion masterfully merges these internal and external landscapes. The car enters the “tunnel of leaves and boughs,” a space of “coolness against the heat.” This tunnel symbolises the narrator’s descent into memory and acceptance. The external noises—the pundit’s drone in Tamil and English, the driver speaking Mandarin and Malay—blend into a “curious absence of confusion,” a “melody... I am very familiar with.” This represents a hard-won peace, an acceptance of his hybrid, creolised identity. The final lines are breathtaking in their ambivalent resolution. The fear of not seeing his wife subsides, replaced by a “stillness.” The dark tunnel, which initially represented the unknown of death, transforms. It “continues forever,” and within this eternal present, “there is home.” Home is no longer a physical place to be found in Guyana, Canada, or Malaysia, but a state of being—a calm acceptance of one’s fractured journey and the ultimate unity of all experience in the face of mortality.

In “The Funeral,” Daizal Samad demonstrates that the most profound journeys are internal. A simple traffic jam becomes a portal to a life fully recalled, judged, and ultimately accepted. The coffin in the truck ahead is indeed a mirror, reflecting not just the narrator’s inevitable end, but the sum total of his loves, his failures, his displacements, and his fleeting moments of grace. The story asserts that to be truly alive is to be aware of this death, and that meaning is found not in rooting oneself in one place, but in embracing the entire, chaotic, beautiful tapestry of a life lived across borders, right up to the final, still border we all must cross.

Daizal R. Samad’s “A Considered Act” is a harrowing descent into the mind of a man who, in a twisted quest for moral purity, commits the ultimate atrocity. The story is a profound and disturbing exploration of the psychology of corruption, the seduction of absolute power, and the terrifying logic that can emerge when a guilty conscience seeks

redemption not through penance, but through a final, grandiose act of violence. Samad constructs a narrative that is both a chilling character study and a powerful political allegory, arguing that the pursuit of purity, when divorced from humanity, leads not to salvation but to a deeper, more absolute damnation.

The narrator's voice is the story's most masterful achievement. He presents himself as a rational, "frighteningly lucid" logician, meticulously detailing his plan to murder his family and himself. This calculated tone is established from the opening lines, which show him sitting on the stairs, counting down the minutes with the precision of a metronome. He justifies his impending actions as a "considered act," a necessary "purging deed" to wash away the "blood up to my elbows" from his corrupt dealings with a tyrannical government. This rationalisation is the core of his madness. He has replaced a moral compass with a perverted ethical calculus, in which the murder of his innocent family becomes a logical, even noble, solution to the problem of his own spiritual contamination. His belief that "blood must be washed away with blood" is a chilling perversion of atonement, transforming him from a sinner into a self-appointed priest of a horrific, sacrificial rite.

This psychological unravelling is directly linked to the story's potent political critique. The narrator's wealth is built on the "rotting meat of the poor and powerless," acquired by feeding the voracious appetites of a grotesquely corrupt regime. Samad's satire of the "Comrade Leader" and his absurd, destructive policies - the road to nowhere, the banned potatoes, the air-conditioned, apple-eating pigs - paints a picture of a nation in which insanity has been institutionalised. The narrator initially believes himself superior to this corruption, practising "intellectual dissociation: to be in the middle of chaos but to be still, serene." He sees himself as the "truly powerful," the "pure" puppet master. However, his audience with the Comrade Leader shatters this illusion. The Leader, with his "dead eyes" and "deep red" sclerae, recognises and claims the narrator's own "purity" for himself. This

moment is the story's turning point; the narrator realises that his supposed purity is indistinguishable from the Leader's absolute, psychopathic evil. He is not controlling the corruption; he is of it, and this realisation triggers his existential crisis.

The narrator's response to this crisis is not to repent but to escalate. His corrupted logic leads him to believe that everything he has touched is contaminated—his house, his wealth, his wife, his daughters. They have “eaten rotting bread dipped in blood” simply by association with him. In his twisted worldview, their murder is not an act of violence but an act of mercy, a way to “preserve their innocence” and purge them of his sin. This is the ultimate arrogance: appointing himself the arbiter of who is worthy of life and purity. The meticulous preparation—cleaning the gun, positioning himself on the stairs—mirrors the cold, procedural efficiency with which he once orchestrated bribes. His humanity has been entirely supplanted by this lethal, procedural logic.

The execution of the act is rendered with a brutal, detached clarity that heightens the horror. The murder of his twins is described not with emotion, but with technical detail: “aim at her chest and squeeze the trigger,” “aim at the midway of the tie.” He observes their “navy-blue uniforms” and “silver stripes” with an aesthetic detachment, further emphasising his complete emotional divorce from the reality of his actions. His brother's death is “protracted” for a “thorough” purification, and his wife's supposed suicide is noted with clinical observation. He moves through the house like an “angel, pure,” but this is the purity of a void, an absence of all human feeling.

The story's devastating conclusion lies in the tragic irony of the narrator's quest. He seeks “significance” and believes his act will finally make him “extraordinary,” earning him a newspaper column. Yet he correctly predicts that it will be a “small column at the bottom of the page,” misinterpreted as a “moment of madness.” Samad's final judgement is that such an act is not extraordinary, but the ultimate failure. It is the final, selfish act of a man who, rather than face the

difficult, human work of atonement and reparation, chooses a bloody spectacle that annihilates the very innocents he claims to love. His suicide is not a redemption but an escape from accountability.

In “A Considered Act,” Daizal Samad presents a terrifying case study of how absolute power corrupts absolutely, and how a guilty conscience, when filtered through a corrupted intellect, can justify any horror. The narrator’s “considered act” is not a return to innocence but a deeper plunge into the abyss. It is a warning that the desire to be pure, when untethered from compassion and humanity, becomes a more monstrous evil than the original sin it seeks to erase. True significance, Samad suggests, is not found in grand, bloody gestures of self-destruction, but in the quiet, ordinary, and profoundly difficult commitment to live with one’s failings and strive for genuine goodness. The narrator’s ultimate failure is that he could never understand this.

Daizal R. Samad’s “An Arm Rose Up” is a complex and psychologically nuanced exploration of the enduring power dynamics of colonialism, played out not on a political stage but within the intimate confines of personal identity, desire, and connection. The story uses the fraught relationship between Moyna Parrot, an Irish teacher, and Salim Hussein, a local Guyanese teacher, to dissect the internalised hierarchies of race, the burden of the colonial gaze, and the fleeting, tragic possibility of transcending these constructs through human intimacy. Samad argues that while the physical structures of empire may have receded, their psychological architecture remains, dictating relationships and self-perception long after independence has been won or granted.

The story’s central mechanism is the concept of the gaze, particularly the colonial gaze that Moyna, despite her own Irish heritage, unconsciously inherits and projects. Her whiteness functions as a “skin she wore,” a costume that renders her “exceptional” and “untouchable” in the Guyanese context. The students and male teachers project their fantasies and insecurities onto her: the girls see in her an unattainable

ideal of beauty and accent, while the men see a conquest that would validate their masculinity and historically avenge “four hundred years of messing with our women.” Moyna is acutely aware of this power and “rather enjoyed being at the centre of things,” safe within the “storm she created with her whiteness.” Her distance is a performance of superiority, a wall built from the very bricks of colonial ideology she believes she understands because of “Ireland’s own history of oppression”, thereby establishing a ridiculous historical parallel. This irony is central to Samad’s critique: Moyna feels a condescending missionary’s compassion for the Guyanese people’s plight, yet she remains fundamentally separate, believing “they could not understand her, nor could they understand that she understood them.” At times, she fancies herself the Christ; at other times, the Madonna. One way or the other, she seeks to offer abstract help from her superior position. Teaching, for her, is merely a pretence for her missionary zeal.

Salim Hussein represents the conflicted post-colonial intellectual. He is energetic, passionate, and deeply committed to his students. He is also insecure, volatile, and trapped in a failing marriage. His identity is under constant negotiation: he is accused by the hypocritical headmaster of inappropriate conduct, mocked by his colleagues, and misunderstood by his wife. His outburst in the staff meeting is an eruption of this frustrated energy, the “misdirected” force that Moyna initially scorns. Hussein’s struggle is to be seen for who he is—a dedicated teacher—rather than through the distorting lenses of stereotype, jealousy, or colonial expectation. He is caught between the demand to be a “hero” and the reality of his human vulnerabilities.

The pivotal moment that begins to dismantle these rigid roles is the incident involving the student, Roxanne. This scene is a masterful display of role reversal and humanising vulnerability. Hussein, the supposed predatory male, is rendered helpless and awkward by a natural biological event. The student has her period. His panic and inability to handle the situation shatter the image of the hyper-masculinity and reveal his tenderness and innocence. Conversely,

Moyna, the aloof outsider, is moved to practical compassion, fetching a new skirt. Her observation of Hussein's gentle care—"It was something like love"—becomes the catalyst for her own emotional thawing. The shared, unexpected laughter in the headmaster's office afterwards is a moment of genuine, unscripted human connection that exists outside of their racial and professional scripts. It is the first crack in the wall between them.

Their subsequent affair is portrayed not as a simple romance, but as a desperate and poignant attempt to find authenticity and solace outside the confines of their assigned roles. For Moyna, it is an "annunciation," a terrifying and exhilarating descent from her pedestal of whiteness into the messy reality of human need and desire. She seeks not to be a saviour, but a saviour *to* him, to offer the comfort and belief he lacks. For Hussein, it is a "moment of relief" from the condemnation and pressure that define his life, a chance to be appreciated as a man rather than a symbol. The motel room, bathed in the silver light of the Atlantic—which both connects and separates their worlds—becomes a temporary sanctuary where, for a brief moment, they can simply be "Moyna" and "Salim."

However, Samad is ultimately a tragic realist. The weight of the outside world cannot be held at bay forever. Hussein's whispered line, "I know. And then, tomorrow's a new day," forms the story's heart-breaking climax. It acknowledges the transient nature of their escape. bound by his responsibilities—to his son, his job, and his culture—he cannot imagine their connection surviving in the harsh light of day. Moyna's subsequent tears make her realisation that this moment of "new freedom" is ephemeral. The titular image, borrowed from Tennyson's *Morte d'Arthur*—"an arm rose up from out the bosom of the lake / Clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful"—is profoundly repurposed. For Hussein, it first appears as a whimsical thought during the Roxanne incident, but at the story's end, it transforms into a symbol of elusive, unattainable ideals: love, freedom, and redemption - in mystical and wonderful, yet ultimately insubstantial ways.

The conclusion is one of resigned return to separate prisons. Moyna leaves Guyana knowing she can never return home to Ireland nor find a home in Guyana; her identity is forever fractured. Hussein returns to his car, his school, and his life, seeking mere “moments of relief” from his quiet despair. The calm, mirror-like surface of the Atlantic at the end reflects not a unified future, but his own isolated reflection. Samad’s final argument is that the arm of the past—of history, race, and expectation—inevitably rises up to pull individuals back into their designated roles. “An Arm Rose Up” stands as a powerful illustration of the difficulty, and perhaps the impossibility, of achieving true personal liberation when the self is so deeply entangled in the unresolved legacies of colonialism. The connection between Moyna and Salim is real and transformative, but it is ultimately no match for the currents of history that continue to shape their lives.

To read this collection is to bear witness to the profound and often painful negotiations that the Guyanese/West Indian self must undertake and endure. Samad’s characters are perpetually caught between the crushing weight of external forces—be they political tyranny, communal expectation, or the lingering ghost of colonialism—and the desperate internal yearning for autonomy, love, and significance. Whether it is Nadira’s psyche shattered by betrayal and mirrored by a malevolent town: the narrator of “A Considered Act,” seeking a bloody purification from his own corruption; or the diasporic protagonist of “The Funeral” taking stock of a life lived across borders, each story is a meticulous case study in the struggle to assert one’s humanity in a world that seems intent on denying it. Samad does not offer easy resolutions; his conclusions are more likely to be ambiguous, tragic, or quietly resigned than triumphant. Yet, in this very refusal to provide false solace, he affirms a deep respect for the complexity of the human experience.

What makes Samad’s work so enduring and vital is its unwavering moral core, which persists even in its grimmest explorations. This is not a morality of simple right and wrong, but a profound commitment

to examining the ethical consequences of human action and inaction. He holds a piercing light to the mechanisms of power, exposing the rot within corrupt regimes in “And The Fire Light” and the insidious, mimetic nature of violence and exploitation within the family and community in “Children at Play” and “Pearlie.” He masterfully illustrates how systems of power corrupt absolutely, yet he is equally interested in the quiet, often invisible acts of resistance: the unwavering loyalty of a dog, the tender rituals of a middle-aged couple, the dignified craftsmanship of a shoemaker. In Samad’s world, morality is found not in grand pronouncements, but in the daily choices to endure, to care, and to maintain one’s integrity against overwhelming odds.

The Sour of Tamarind and Other Stories cements Daizal R. Samad’s place as a crucial voice in West Indian and postcolonial literature. His is a unique talent, blending the sharp, satirical eye of a political critic with the deep, empathetic soul of a poet. He guides us through landscapes of profound beauty and brutal decay, navigating the intricate channels of memory and desire with a surgeon’s precision and a philosopher’s depth. This collection is more than a book of stories; it is a comprehensive world, a haunting and resonant symphony of voices from the margins. It leaves the reader with a deepened understanding of the wounds that life can inflict, but also—and perhaps more importantly—it leaves us with a lasting appreciation for those fleeting, golden moments of grace, connection, and unwavering resilience that make such a life not only endurable, but profoundly meaningful.

Dr. Ashwannie Harripersaud

THE SOUR OF TAMARIND

Fifteen long miles from where Nadira lived, New Amsterdam squatted in a state of gloom. It was a town in tatters even as it emerged from the jungle, its wooden frame rigid from awakening, its skin of new paint peeling as from a disease borne upon the whip-like rays of the midday sun.

To the east, the wooden shoulders of this town rose upward into the forest, its brown sleeve of hut-like houses ripped to threads as the town jutted its arm into the green wall of trees and vines. To the west, its other shoulder drooped steeply into the murky violence of the Berbice river, across which plied the ferry, *Torani*. This Quasimodo of towns pressed its nose in the north against a mental asylum, the only one in the country. New Amsterdam's misshapen back pressed up in the south against a burial ground. Caught between the twin demons of insanity and death, the residents suffocated for air.

It was to this town that Nadira travelled, a journey she had made many times to visit her grandmother. Each weekend, from seven to seventeen, she had journeyed, noting - without knowing it - the houses along the way: large, well-tended ones conspicuous for standing alongside many others in various states of collapse. She noted the cows grazing on bright grass, wet from last night's sweat, in some villages: sheep nibbling on grass burnt to a brown stubble in others. These villages whizzed by with the monotony of the telegraph poles, which she counted in her boredom, or else to keep at bay the dread of arriving in New Amsterdam. Even up to six months ago, she had hidden in the latrine every Saturday morning, protesting in vain that she was too ill to travel. But with the regularity of the cock's crow, her uncle's bus would stop and wait to ferry her to New Amsterdam. And her father's impatient bellow would expel her from the latrine.

She had to go, for she had to be taught Arabic by her grandmother, a strict woman of formidable faith and impeccable Islamic pedigree, the daughter of an *imam*, or religious priest, from North Africa. Nadira's uncle would deposit her in front of Mama's yard, and she would feel small and abandoned with her bag of clothes for the weekend. She hated the dilapidation of the house that blocked her grandmother's from view, the grass wild and as sharp as blades. She would wind her way carefully along the thin planks that offered a narrow ribbon of safety from the sea of grass. Sometimes, when it rained, these planks would slide, and she would be thrown off balance, ending up with one leg in the grass, her calf stinging from the thin cuts inflicted by the razor grass.

She would arrive at Mama's house, neater and sturdier than the rest, with its array of violently coloured flowers close to the stairs. But even these did not relieve her sense of despair and resentment. She would draw a deep breath as if she were about to dive into some deep river from which she might never emerge. The scent of the flowers was always overpowering. Yet she knew that if these same flowers were in her yard in her town, she would love them- their colours so alive, their fragrance thick like honey. Sometimes she thought that a single flower elsewhere was brighter than these many flowers. As she climbed the stairs, a prayer to Allah would spring to her lips, a prayer for time's quick passage. And so, buoyed up by the prayer and by the assurance that she would leave again by the following afternoon, she would knock.

"Assalaamalaikum, Mama," she would greet in the Muslim fashion.

"Walaikumsalaam, child," was Mama's smiling response. Nadira would kiss her grandmother on the cheek, feeling the softening, loosening skin yield cool beneath her lips. Then she would enter the house, always dark, the bits of muted sunlight glancing off the brass flower and plant pots. This is how she imagined it would be in a museum, but she had never visited one and could not be sure.

"Come and eat before we begin your lessons." And Nadira would eat two pancakes, golden and smooth and hot, butter melting and sliding over its surface in an overlay of yellow. Noone made pancakes like her Mama.

But her joy at this simple meal of pancakes and tea would evaporate when she thought of what was to come. And she could not help but think of what was to come. For in a corner were two slender switches, erect like two forefingers in warning or admonishment. They were tamarind whips of about two and a half feet each, the thick skin torn off to reveal a white suppleness, much like the initial shock of white from a deep wound before the blood wells up. The skin at the top remained for her grandmother's grip.

The plate and teacup would be cleared. Then the books, clean and covered with crisp brown paper, would be brought before her. She would pray that she remembered the last lesson, for she read from memory, not understanding in the least the meaning of what she read. And when she failed to mouth correctly a sound, the switch would descend sharply on her back or her arm, and she would guess frantically at the correct sound. Each mistake would bring sharper and more frequent blows. After three hours or so, depending on her progress, she and Mama would have a lunch break. This was the best part of the lesson, when they would talk about different religions, her grandmother drawing innumerable comparisons between disparate faiths. At times, Mama would bring out the Christian Bible, and they would read and analyse and even debate in the animated manner of friends. If only she could be taught the Koran like this, she would love it: the arguments, even the humour, especially the humour. But then real lessons would begin again and last until late afternoon.

Then they would sit quietly and await the sunset, and the gloom in the house would gather greater force. She wished for words, for conversation, for that would keep this sense of dread at bay. But with the gathering gloom, the town seemed to enter the house, curling in the

corners, smiling, mocking, waiting. But her Mama would not speak, and Nadira was too fearful or respectful to break into her reverie.

The town creaked to life at night, as if the darkness were the oil that loosened its limbs. The crickets would begin-first one, then two, then several, then a raw chorus. On rainy nights, the frogs would call their raucous song. But these sounds, loud in themselves, seemed in the most strange way to intensify the menacing quiet of New Amsterdam. She could feel the presence of the town, clammy and close like the film of sweat that covered her skin.

Sometimes, the two would go for a walk in the night. The streetlights waged a hopeless battle against the dark of the town. And beneath these lights, weak from effort, instead of a shallow pool of light, there would be a black sea of beetles. So many that she could not avoid stepping on them, the sickening crunch of their shells raising to her ear like the cracking of a hundred knuckles. They would beat against her face, some as large as two inches; sometimes they would fly down the back of her dress, and she would squirm in quiet horror. The crunch of shells, the horn of frogs, the creak of crickets: the music of New Amsterdam.

She had heard that some famous novelist who had gone to England and come back to New Amsterdam, his place of birth, had gone into a field just outside the town, poured kerosene over himself, and lit a match. She understood that. New Amsterdam could drive the sane to suicide. She wondered how her father had survived this place where he was born and where he grew up.

The time of greatest comfort for Nadira came when the men from public works would arrive in the evening and spray for mosquitoes. There they were in their masks, huge tanks of insecticide on their backs, in their hands thin rubber hoses which ended in a metal device for spraying. And from these would come enormous plumes of smoke, as thick and as white as cotton wool. And from the time she was seven until six months ago, she would run deep into the fumes and be engulfed by them, swaddled in them. At last, just for a few seconds, she would be safe from New Amsterdam- away from the sounds that

deepened the silence, from the lights that thickened the darkness. If only it could be like this always in this town, she would think. Then she would stop, for to think of the town would be to bring it into her brief haven. And she would concentrate only on the white clouds in which she sailed or swam. And if sometimes she edged too close to the fringe of the cloud, she would move again into the centre, like a moon too shy to shed its cloak of clouds. She and these waves of smoke, the moon and her clouds. The same, all the same. And she would be happy, breathing freely in the fumes.

But for the last few months, Nadira did not need to hide in the latrine to avoid going to New Amsterdam. And she did not fear too much the sting of the tamarind whip. Even the spectre of this town held less menace for her now. It was not so much that she was almost seventeen and a woman. Nadira was in love.

She had first seen him on her way to school. He passed by on a three-speed "ticker" Raleigh bicycle. Tick, tick, tick came the sound, far off, then closer, closer. She had turned back just as he was riding pass, his face like burnished gold from a slight sweat, his tie fluttering over his shoulder, caught in a current of breeze. Her heart contracted violently within her breast. She had felt her heart do this on many occasions- trip with fear. And there was fear here too, but not a simple fear such as the fear of the whip. The motivation was alien to Nadira. She pulled her school hat over her eyes, as if to hide from herself her own bewilderment. And she thought hard about schoolwork. She was in the middle of some thought about the Tudor period in English history when she entered the schoolyard. And the Tudor dynasty crashed to insignificance, for there he was-her golden knight. He was the new biology teacher at the school, older than he had seemed at first, and shorter, but beautiful beyond belief. Nadira noticed the razor-sharp creases in his trousers and his shirt sleeves, as sharp as the razor grass that cut her calves when she fell off balance in New Amsterdam. She was in love with Mr. Rohan Armogum. Finally, desperately in love. Now, at last, she felt what Juliet must have felt; how stupid and

insensitive she had been to mock the young girl's quick falling in love with Romeo, to mock her willingness to die for and with him.

She decided almost immediately that she would let her feelings be known to him. Yet it took her weeks to act on her feelings, courage coming and leaving like some inviolate current. Then, riding one of the waves of passion, Nadira wrote a note to Mr. Rohan Armogum:

Dear Sir,

I am very glad that you are teaching at our school. You are the best teacher, and I admire you very much, Sir. I am not very good in biology, Sir, and I hope that you can help me a little bit with this subject. Please forgive the errors in this note, Sir.

Yours sincerely,

Nadira

Form Five B

She was going to say that she loved him, but the pen was stricken to silence above the paper. And she did not have to, for Mr. Rohan Armogum knew, from reading between the lines, that he had a student who was very much in love with him. And so he sought her out during one recess period, and they talked about staying in after school so that he could teach her biology. They met for three sessions after school. He taught her about the reproductive techniques of the simplest living creatures, like the amoeba and the spirogyra; then they moved on to the reptiles, then to the more difficult, larger animals. But they steered clear of the reproductive techniques of human beings.

It was during the third session that he told her that they should meet in New Amsterdam-Far away from prying eyes, and there was a library there besides. Did she know New Amsterdam? Was she familiar with Pitt Street? Did she know Chung's pastry shop? Beautiful patties and creamy milkshake. How about next Saturday? No, for she had to go to her grandmother's on Saturday. But she did not speak of this at the time. Friday then? Yes. But she must not wear her uniform.

Nadira knew the meaning of the trip to New Amsterdam. And she shook like a tremulous bird in anticipation of their meeting. But she had to plan: she had to appear as if she were coming to school as usual; she had to bring a change of clothes and arrange with a friend to change at her place. And each step seemed like some giant barrier that had to be jumped or circumvented, but once passed, seemed such a small sacrifice. How she longed to go to New Amsterdam. That name, that town once loathed, now loved. For now, it was linked to her beloved Rohan.

The date was kept, and even the shock of the sordid hotel room did not distract from her joy. Even the initial agony of lovemaking did not dampen her thrill; did not prevent her from noticing, with surprise, her own body's suppleness.

In the months that followed, there were several meetings, the joy of each exceeding that of the previous one. But her heart could have known no greater fullness than when he told her that he loved her. She had touched his lips as if to warn him against rash words, but he had insisted. And there was talk of togetherness, of engagement and marriage. Even as he said this, he had warned that the time was not right for all to know. She had to finish school, pass her exams. After all, how would it seem if their love were known while she was a student and he a teacher in the same school? No. The time was not yet right. But soon, soon.

And now, six months after their first meeting in New Amsterdam, her love had grown stronger. How difficult it was not to run to him and embrace him when she saw him at school. But soon, soon, she would declare her love for him for all to hear. And he would proclaim her his. She understood his reserve, even his harshness, when they saw each other at school. And she understood when he explained that when he appeared to be flirting with other girls, it was just to avoid suspicion of his real love. He explained that he was more worried for her reputation than for his, and this, too she understood. And she understood that they could no longer meet in New Amsterdam as frequently as before.

Would they not have the rest of their lives to be with each other? Yes. She understood. They had met only once in the last month, but he had agreed that she could write to him. And so, she poured out her love in letter after letter, each stained by tears of love and by the heart-shape of lipstick where she had pressed her pursed lips against the paper.

This was why Nadira did not mind going to the ghostly town on weekends. This was why she no longer needed to seek comfort in the swirling clouds of white smoke that billowed from the hoses carried by the masked men from the public works department. And soon her grandmother would treat her as a married woman ought to be treated, with respect. Nadira would continue to learn, for it was proper to learn to read the Koran, but it would be done differently. No more tamarind whips. Now, when the tamarind switch struck, she would think with a smile that when she became pregnant with their children, she would refuse to crave the sourness of the tamarind fruit. Green mangoes with salt and pepper would be her choice of craving. And she could actually feel the pleasurable small pain in her cheeks at the thought of the sourness of the green mangoes.

The town was less menacing, for she was accompanied always by thoughts of her Rohan. She even offered to go to the market for her grandmother. This would give her time to think, to plan, to wash his image in her heart's blood. And on this Saturday, her grandmother actually agreed that she could go to the market on her own. She bathed hurriedly, dressed in her pink frock with tiny blue flowers. She liked that dress because Rohan had loved it, because she had worn it on their first date. She grabbed the list that her grandmother had made in her neat script.

It was two o'clock, and the sun beat down in waves of heat; the road returned the heat in waves of equal intensity. And where the two met, she seemed to see violent pools of air. But Nadira hardly paid attention to this, her head cool from the dampness of her hair. She walked the brisk, purposeful walk of the young, up Essex Street, down Main

Street, her heart quickening as she neared Pitt Street, the usual place of their meeting.

Then her heart leaped up violently in her breast and choked the cry that sprang to her lips: Rohan. What luck! Rejoice, heart, for there walks your life's companion. It was as if the image in her mind had taken fleshly form. He was still some distance away down Pitt Street, and she quickened her steps, too afraid and shy to call out. It took several minutes for her to realise that he was actually on Pitt Street, and that he was walking with a young girl. His sister, her heart protested at the dread that took hold of her mind. No. A friend. Yes, a friend. Were men not allowed to have female friends? Then she saw them turn into the doorway of the same hotel that she and Rohan had frequented in recent months. She wanted to break into a run, but her feet were ankle-deep in the black pool of the road.

New Amsterdam came alive; the doors of buildings were large mouths that consumed her hopes like raw flesh. The peeled paint from the faces of houses now fell off in the extreme of disease. The town poured its vile laughter like acid into her ears, corroding her brain, leaving her empty-headed. She was flung this way and that in the whirlpool of air where the heat of the sun met the blaze from the land. Unknowingly, she had turned back and had arrived at the spot where her uncle's bus would deposit her each Saturday morning. She saw the thin planks but waded into the sea of razor grass. The blood from her calves and shins was already running in small lines to her sandals, like thick red lines on a map.

She must have knocked for her grandmother was at the door. Wordlessly, without even a sob that would betray her ruptured heart, she fell into her Mama's arms. Try as she might, her grandmother could not get her to say what was wrong. And Nadira was only vaguely aware of being taken back home to her town in a taxi, folded like a child in her Mama's arms. She listened intently to the insane cackle of New Amsterdam, saw her own skin peel like the paint from the town's buildings, as if she were taking with her not the hurt of betrayal, but

the disease of the town itself. She seemed to hold in her right palm the buildings of the mental asylum in the north of the town; in the left palm rose up the gravestones from the cemetery in the south. Between the twin demons of insanity and death, she seemed to suffocate.

It was not until Thursday that Nadira could have stirred herself to go to school. And as she enacted the familiar ritual of preparing for school, new life crept back into her limbs. Yet on her way to class, she could hear the crunch of her feet on the shells of beetles; the sun, for all its heat, was a weak pool of light, she heard the croak of frogs, the creak of crickets- the music of New Amsterdam at night. But she was not in New Amsterdam, and it was day.

She arrived at school like a ghost. She went straight to Mr. Rohan Armogum's classroom, paused at the door, and glided on. Then Nadira stopped at a window and looked in through the class; she saw him see her, then saw him turn away. It was curious that she felt no pain, no tears, no anger. She saw the entire class turn to look at her, saw his mouth open as if he would tear a piece of flesh from her face, and then a riot of laughter from the students. Mr. Rohan Armogum laughed loudly too, his shoulder heaving lopsidedly. The music of frogs and crickets, the crunch of beetles, reached a crescendo. "Soon, soon," she said, her mouth pursed as when she would press kisses onto those pages she filled with her love. She saw her skin peel in the glass of the window.

Nadira walked out of the school compound without going to her class. She passed the street that would have taken her home, heading instead for the main road. She waved a cab and got in, the other passengers looking curiously at her since she was in uniform. The long journey passed in a rush of telegraph poles, sheep, cows, houses; yet each seemed frozen in frame. She got off at the *stelling* where New Amsterdam's western shoulder drooped precipitously into the Berbice River. She bought a ticket to board the *Torani* to go to Vreed-en-Hoop on the other side of the river. Nadira leaned over the side and saw the golden rush of the river go by. She could see the current below the film

of silt suspended in the water. And for the first time in days, the sounds and sights of New Amsterdam receded in her mind. And she saw clearly the face of Rohan Armogum -his face a grotesque mask of loosening flesh, his eyes hollow like empty graves. And for the first time since she had witnessed his crucifixion of her life and hopes, she wept. A rain had begun, gentle, and Nadira smiled her first smile in days. She leaned over the steel railing of the ferry; the splash was drowned out by the engines of the *Torani*.

The river was like that dense and swaddling smoke in which she found comfort in New Amsterdam. But the smoke in which she swam or sailed now was golden, and it did not disappear.

IMMORTAL LONGINGS IN HIM

The scalpel trembled slightly before the doctor brought it down onto the sheet of gold that was Ram's skin. The skin rippled like poured honey; then the thick sinew yielded beneath the blade, and the doctor probed under the muscles, hard as plates. When he was finished, he walked out of the room, his brow beaded with sweat, his eyes misted over with tears.

"How can such a thing happen to a man like that? Why?" he mumbled. And with an effort of will, he gathered about him his learned medical attitude of objective analysis and observation. He shook his head in sympathy at Ram's mother, Janie who sat crumpled in a chair, her hair falling like grey wires down her temples and over her forehead.

Close to her stood Sita, Ram's wife, as rigid and brittle as a leaf burnt by the sun. Her eyes were unnaturally wide and dry and unblinking, as if staring at some horrific thing suspended before her face. Two cousins stood on either side of Sita. The four were as still as an island, set in their grief of sheer blue, the colour of the hospital wall.

Ram and Sita had been married for just over three years. They and their two children lived in Janie's house, built by Ram's father. The laughter that echoed in the house and rushed through the open windows and doors seemed to defy the dark cloud that covered the lives of the family like some sinister umbrella. Bright laughter rose up, and tragedy rained down to meet it. Janie's husband had died too young, when their two children were still infants. He was a truck driver of formidable strength, but even his strength could not match the force of the lorry that overturned and crushed the life out of him. Janie was too young to be a widow, but she gained strength from the support of friends and family. Soon she learned the fine art of survival, bringing up her two boys, Ram and Latchman. And by the grace of God, and with the help of those around her, the boys grew to be fine men.

Ram and Latchman were two remarkable athletes: both were bodybuilders. Ram, the eldest, was squat and of a golden complexion, like his mother. Latchman was tall, more proportioned, and dark, like his father. There was a restlessness to the two boys which led them to excel at whatever they chose to do. Latch chose to box. He was a southpaw in the middleweight division. When the mood moved him, he demonstrated to the family the manner in which to fight an orthodox, or right-handed, fighter.

"You must place you right foot outside the left foot of the right-hand fighter," he would say, planting his right foot forward firmly, knees bent, chin tucked into his right shoulder, clenched left hand up to the side of his face, right hand whipping out twice into a powerful double jab, then snapping back into position.

"Then you move to you right, like this," and he would move smoothly to his right, "You double jab -bang, bang -then move to the right. Straight left to the body or head, bang; left hook, down and up, body and head. Then back with a right hook." Everyone was amazed at the speed and grace of Latchman. It was as if he became someone else, quite unknown to them - a stranger with whom they all grew up.

"When you keep you foot outside he foot, you stop he from moving to the left and into range with he right hand, which is he power hand. And when you move to you right, you moving to he left, which is away from he right hand. Got it?"

No one did, because his movements were too fast, too complicated. But it was enough to watch his display. Sometimes he would use Ram, much stronger than him but much less skilful, as his demonstration partner. After three minutes, Ram would rush at him in mock frustration, grab him around the waist, and lift him off the ground. And the air shook with laughter as Latchman screamed, "Help, Ma!! Help!"

Janie would look on with interest at this display of brotherly love between her two boys. She was proud of her sons, but seldom showed that pride to them. Even when the display was in full swing, she would

appear busy, picking the black or broken grains from the rice which was to be cooked for the day. She would pick up the broad, shovel-like "fan," made of plaited bamboo, shifting the rice to the right and left in waves, and throw the rice slightly into the air. The grains would fall again into the fan, a cascade of pearls, and she would continue to pick the bad rice from the good.

And the boys, grown men by now, would always protest, men acting like boys:

"You not lookin, Ma!"

"Look, if I watch you all, when I gon cook, eh?" But she was as attentive as anyone, and sometimes her lips would move into something like a smile. This was the pride she chose not to show, for she knew that pride angered heaven.

Latchman was different from Ram in another way: he was less outwardly friendly. And while the children would rush up to Ram and try to wrestle him to the ground, they tended to keep away from Latchman. He spoke much less than Ram did, so it was a special treat when he gave one of his displays of boxing. Latchman fought his way up the ladder of the middleweight division, and eventually fought for the championship of the county. He won by a fifth-round knockout against a fellow from another town. To celebrate, he went out with a group of friends for dinner and drinks. The losing boxer and his friends went along with him, in a show of good sportsmanship. Latchman never returned from this dinner. Someone poisoned him, and the culprit was never found out.

This was only a few months after Ram had married Sita, and a great gloom hovered over the house for a long time. When Sita gave birth to their first son, they named him Latchman, after the child's dead uncle. It was this birth that relieved the family of their sadness. Slowly, almost furtively, laughter found its way into the house again. But things were never the same: Janie would weep at the mention of her dead son's name, and so everyone started to refer to the child simply as "boy".

Ram was less friendly than he was before. He had also started drinking. He had won the county's muscle-building contest for three consecutive years. But this year, unable to will himself to train, he did not enter.

Janie and Sita looked at him with pity and worry, but whenever they spoke, he grew agitated and sullen. The drinking became more frequent, the silence more prolonged. It was during this period of drinking and depression that Ram started doing tricks. He would go into the oil drum full of rainwater that he and Latchman used for baths after exercise and sit in a foetal position beneath the water for impossibly long periods. It was a strange ritual of birth and death enacted within the close space of the drum. And he would choose life as of necessity, his head emerging from under the water with a most peculiar unwillingness, as if he wanted to die, but could not; as if he did not want to be born, but had to.

This ritual he would perform with regularity, insisting that everyone watch. It frightened Janie and Sita to dumbness. And the little child, Latchman, would sense the fear and cry. One of the fears that tied their tongues was that Ram might be driven to even greater extremes should they protest.

But this ritual drowning did not terrify them as did Ram's other favourite trick. He would take a length of rope, throw it over a beam, and tie it into a noose. Then he would stand on a chair, put his head within the noose, draw it tight around his neck, then kick the chair from under him. His arms would be outstretched in the posture of one crucified. He would hang like this until the vein in his forehead stood out as thick as the rope from which he hung, his face a mask of pain upon which was painted a grotesque smile. Then he would let his arms fall to his side and feign death. His face now burgundy, he would reach up with his right hand, grab the rope above his head, pull himself up, and disengage the noose with his left.

It was a show of will and physical power, but it entertained no one except Ram. These stunts were done with such frequency that everyone

became complacent about them, ceasing to see them as dangerous. And so, bit by bit, Ram's death wish became entertainment.

After one session of particularly heavy drinking, when he was too drunk even to walk properly, too drunk to hoist himself into the oil drum filled with rainwater or to throw the rope over the beam, Sita exploded at him:

"What's the matter with you, eh? You're a man, not a boy! What happened to all this pride you had? Your body is going to shambles! You make me, and your mother and your child miserable. Now another child on the way -what we gon do if something happens to you? You tell me, Ram? What? You drink like fish, you don't exercise, you don't work!"

But Ram just sat looking into his hands, calloused from lifting heavy weights. His eyes were bloodshot from drink, his skin blotchy. Janie looked on in silent agreement with Sita, shaking her head from side to side.

Sita went on, but her tone was softer: "Ram. Latchman dead, Ram. Why you want to kill yself too? Why-

Ram thrust himself up from the chair and slapped her hard on the side of the face. Her head spun round, and her body spun with it, her dress and hair moving round her like disconnected parasols. She hit the ground hard, her face already beginning to swell and discolour.

Ram stood still, shocked at his own violence. He had never hit her before, and the blow had somehow separated him from himself. His heart contracted with horror and remorse, but another part wished that she would get up, that she would start to berate him again. That would offer him the excuse to hit her again, and again, until she was nothing but a mass of raw flesh. He trembled with desire and horror, paralysed by the battle that raged within him, which he could neither articulate nor understand.

Only seconds had elapsed -seconds as long as hours. In those long seconds, Janie had rushed across to him and delivered as hard a blow to his face as she could. He raised his hand in instinct to return the blow, but she held her ground. She stood, an unlikely sentinel, between Ram and his fallen wife. Her son was so much bigger than her, but he seemed to have shrunk in the pure heat of her rage.

She looked at him, deep into his eyes, and pity replaced her rage. His lips quivered, his arms fell to his sides, and his eyes tore themselves away from hers in shame -Shame because beneath the film of anger and pity in her eyes, there was love, as pure as a light by which he could read his own torment.

Ram bent over to pick up his stricken wife, but crumbled to the floor, his heavily muscled body shuddering in anguish, in anger. Sita held him as if he were a child. The shudders came in waves, and the sounds were those of a drowning man coming up for air, then being dragged down again by some inexplicable force.

"Shhh....Shhhh...It aright, Ram. Shhh, now. It okay."

But the shudders continued, grew closer like the pangs of birth. Then his misery, grown to such violent proportions, broke the walls of his heart, and he wept - softly at first, then more loudly. And he cried for a long time, hugged by his wife and by his mother. And Janie and Sita cried with him, and for him.

"Why they had to do that to Latch, Ma? Why? He never hurt nobody. Why, Ma?"

And the tears came again, as if they would cleanse him of the grief and wrath and bewilderment that he had kept bottled up for these past months.

That night, he applied ice to Sita's face. He kissed the wounds that he had inflicted on her swollen cheek. Then he kissed her belly, already beginning to swell with their second child.

He did not awaken early the next day, as was his custom. Instead, he just lay in bed, his hands clasped behind his head, deep in thought. He neither ate nor slept. And as night fell, just as Janie and Sita were thinking that he was working himself into another fit of anger or torment, he got up, showered, then went into his "gym", a makeshift affair of wood and hard-packed earth, to organise his weights. It was the first time that he had gone in there since Latchman's death.

The next day, Ram got a job as a truck driver, but it was understood that the job was only to put bread and rice on the table while he trained for the upcoming bodybuilding championships. Ram trained for months with an intensity, with a singlemindedness, that ensured his fourth title. The only break taken was to celebrate the birth of the second child, whom Sita and Janie agreed to call Krishna. And everyone was ecstatic when he won. Janie and Sita were even more pleased when he refused to go out to drink in celebration of his victory. Instead, he invited a few friends and cousins to come home with his family for dinner and drinks.

And laughter filled the house and poured through the open windows and doors. There was much talk and argument about the West Indies and how badly they would beat England at cricket, about the excellence of Gary Sobers and Rohan Kanhai. When the talk shifted to boxing and a young upstart called Cassius Clay, whom most of the men present thought would be beaten to death by Sonny Liston, Ram became quiet. And when Sita saw this, she went quietly to his side and placed her hand, small, upon his shoulder. The massive bulk beneath his shirt grew strong from the tenderness and reassurance of her touch. It was a move that took courage, because it was not the custom of women to enter into the circle of men, especially when they were drinking. But Ram was thankful for this act of compassion and untraditional attention.

"Cassius Clay gon beat him," he said, with a peculiar finality.

"You jokin' or what, Ram? You see that man size? Liston is a monster, man. They gon carry Clay out on a stretcher if he lucky."

"And I telling you that Clay will knock him out. If you willing to put you money where you mouth is, just let me know," Ram said in the same tone of certainty.

The conversation continued into the night, and when the rum was finished, the friends went home. Ram sat alone with Sita and Janie.

"You know, Ma, Latch would have gone far in boxing. I know I shouldn't bring it up, but I still wonder why this thing had to happen."

"Leave it alone, Ram. Let he rest in peace and let God judge them who responsible for taking the life of a good man," said Sita.

And Janie agreed: "Sita right, Ram. Let Latch sleep. He with God now, and when you with God, this life don't mean too much. Sita, you're right, girl."

"Alright, Ma. But I still think, you know..."

"I know. We know," said his mother.

"But look at all that stupidity that I used to do, eh?" He said, referring to the stunts that he pulled.

"You're right," Sita said, smiling, "You were really stupid." And the three laughed.

"But was only a joke," Ram said without convincing anyone, "Was just a joke."

"Look! Let me show you. Is a trick, you see."

And, in spite of the protests of the two women, he went to get the rope.

"Ram, come, boy. Is time to sleep. The time for joke gone. The sun coming up already." His mother said, getting up.

"Wait, Ma, let me show you."

He got the rope, threw it over the beam, climbed on the chair, and fastened the noose around his neck, kicking free the chair. The same pose of crucifixion, the same swelling of the vein in his forehead, the same face turned a shade of burgundy, a smile more pronounced than

the pain on that face. Then, Ram's arms fell to his sides as if he were again feigning death, and his feet quivered. Then he was still.

The two women watched, waiting for him to pull himself up, remove the noose from around his neck, and let himself down.

"Alright, Ram, enough now. Time to sleep now, boy," said Janie.

"Yes, Ram," agreed Sita, "Time to go to bed."

But Ram did not move. And in the slight light of the almost-born day, they saw that he had become blue, that his tongue was caught, swollen between his teeth. It was seconds before realisation dawned. Sita ran to her husband, grabbed him around the knees, and lifted him up.

When the neighbours came to take the body down, she refused to let go of his knees, as if she could force air and life back into the body from the pressure of her embrace. When they laid him face up on the floor, she still held on to her husband, and the men could not prise her away.

Then Sita laid herself upon the prostrate body of her husband, her left cheek on his still-warm right cheek, her legs and feet together with his. Then she took Ram's arms from his sides and spread them, her arms above his, as if she would have them both take flight as one. And in this posture of crucifixion and resurrection upon the floor, Sita stayed with her husband for a long while. The men stood back in awe or puzzlement, and some looked away in embarrassment.

It was only when Janie came to her and clasped her face in her hands, worn and wrinkled now from work, and lifted her head with the tenderness of one who has known loss, and placed her cheek upon her cheek, that Sita's grip loosened. Then she took Sita's hands from Ram's, and lifted her to her feet, and led her away.

KAN-KAN: The Story of a Dog

Randolph was our neighbour. He lived with his mother in a run-down shack. He was an instinctively generous young man, but his gift for giving was circumscribed by his poverty, his joblessness, the meanness of his circumstances. When he came into possession of two very young pups, it did not surprise anyone that he was willing to give one away.

He offered one of the pups to me. Not that he gave me a choice of the pups; he chose for himself the wire-haired one-black-and-grey, pretty, graceful. Randolph attached that almost magical term to it:

"Is a mix-bred dog, you know."

Mixed breed! Mixed with what and what was irrelevant. That it could be called "mixed breed" was enough to establish its superiority to any of the local mongrels.

Randolph continued: "I gon call she 'Beauty'. You know, like Sleepin' Beauty!"

Beauty's twin was given to me: it was an ugly thing, thin, almost hairless, awkward, ill-tempered. But she was mine. My very first dog. I named her Kan-Kan, after a racehorse in Trinidad.

Over a few months, as Kan-Kan grew, several things became clear. Kan-Kan would never become a pretty dog. She would never be anything but a small, unattractive, dirty-brown mongrel. From the beginning, she was the ugly sister; that, she continued to be. Also, her temperament did not improve with age. However, she was prized because she was fierce, both to people and to other dogs.

It gave me great pleasure when Randolph brought over Kan-Kan's pretty sister for a visit, and she was given a thorough beating by my dog. Randolph kept bringing his dog across in the vain hope that she

too would become fierce; but with each defeat at the teeth and claws of Kan-Kan, she seemed to withdraw further and further into her hair-covered, mixed-breed self. She became so timid that the mere sight of her sister would cause her to put her tail between her legs, arch her back, and whimper in fear.

Kan-Kan grew in notoriety even as Randolph's dog sank into obscurity. She was too fierce to be liked by anyone but me and, somewhat grudgingly, by my family; but she seemed to revel in the fear she generated in the neighbourhood. My father said that Kan-Kan was named perfectly since she was so cantankerous.

Kan-Kan was too ill-tempered and too strong-willed to be trained. However, she knew better than to disturb a game of cricket, even when there were complete strangers in the yard, drawn irresistibly to the sound of bat upon ball and the shouts of "Howzatt!!" as we appealed against batsman after batsman. She would not run after the ball, preferring to lie there snapping at flies or imaginary foes. And she never barked at the cricketers.

Kan-Kan was about nine months old when Christmas Eve came. Of all the festivals or holidays, this was the most anticipated. It meant gifts, visits, Father Christmas, apples, grapes and pears, specially imported for the festive season. It was tradition for everyone to walk to the string of shops which lined both sides of the road in Rose Hall town. Kan-Kan insisted on following the family, running around the heels of family members. Leashes were the only things used by people in movies. She ran free, yapping, round and round, and into the path of a car.

There was the tell-tale muted thump, a thin whine, then silence. We all froze, horror-struck, as Kan-Kan lay there, blood oozing from a deep wound in her head, a broad black stain widening thickly on the road. There could have been no doubt that she was dead. I burst into tears, and only a strong reprimand from my father made me continue on the trip to the town. My father reassured me that we would collect her on our way back and give her a good burial.

I trailed miserably behind my family, looking back, hoping that she would not be crushed further by cars, that she would not have to suffer the ignominy of having her body busted open, her entrails exposed for all to see. This was a spectacle seen often on our roads. Then would come the sickening sight of the bloated body and the smell of rotting flesh.

On our way back, we expected to pick up Kan-Kan's corpse, take it home and bury it. However, the only evidence of the dog was the large smear of blood on the road. There was much discussion that someone would have picked her up and thrown her into a ditch. When we arrived home, Kan-Kan was sitting on the lowest rung of the stairs, an ugly gash on her head, which was bowed between her outstretched front legs. She managed an intrepid, weak wag of the tail. Everyone was surprised and happy. We learned later that a neighbour, Mutt, had noticed the dog on the road, had picked it up, and had deposited it in the yard. Mutt never liked Kan-Kan, and Kan-Kan never liked Mutt.

To take the dog to a veterinarian was out of the question. There were no vets in Berbice county where we lived. Even people could ill afford doctors. Kan-Kan was left to heal herself, as she had been left for dead. The wound became infected. As the weeks went by, it got worse. A thick cream pus oozed from the wound. It started to smell-a stench so unbearable that you'd know of Kan-Kan's presence long before you could see her. And the smell would linger, thick and putrid, long after she had left. To feed her became a chore. We all withdrew from her, as she withdrew from us. She seemed defeated, and everyone began to wish that she had died.

It was decided that we should get rid of her. But there were no merciful lethal injections here, no kind talk of "putting her to sleep," no nice talk of "putting her down". Just getting rid of her. This meant drowning or straying. We decided that the former would be more judicious and more final. Therefore, Randolph and another neighbour were assigned the task of putting Kan-Kan into a thick sack, filling it with huge rocks and drowning her. I had to see her put into the bag because she was

more manageable when I was around. We held our breaths to avoid Kan-Kan's awful stink; I attracted her attention with something to eat, then Randolph and the other boy pulled the sack over her head and small body. The bag was tied by Randolph because he could hold his breath longer than any of us. The rest of us fled to a place where Kan-Kan's stench could not reach our nostrils.

The sack, Kan-Kan and rocks secured within it were thrown into a deep "trench," a canal where one could see alligators rising to the surface on hot days. School children would feed biscuits to the alligators. Now, the alligators could feed on Kan-Kan. That night, I could not sleep for the guilt. But what had to be done had to be done, I persuaded myself.

The next morning, I arose to the stink of Kan-Kan, to her now familiar pitiful whine. Somehow, she had managed to break free from the sack and swim to safety. Then she returned to what she felt was home. She was wet, and the stink was overwhelming. Lack of bathing had caused her to be overtaken by fleas. The soft leathery flea pods that stuck to the insides of her ears were too many to count. They had also attached themselves to the spaces between her paws. Kan-Kan had never looked uglier. I hated her for living. I hated her for her devotion to me and for not being able to see that she was not wanted. Yet I hated all of us for wanting to drown her.

"Deh gat only one way foh kill dis blasted daag!!" declared Randolph. "Tek a piece a wood and bust he head open in two!"

I wished that Randolph would do it, and I hated him for suggesting such a thing. My father decided on what he thought was a more humane way of getting rid of her: Straying. Kan-Kan, once again, was placed in a thick bag, once again with my help. This time, however, she was coated with Johnson's Baby powder so that she would not leave her awful odour in the boot of my father's car. This was the one time that I did not want to accompany my father for a drive. My father and Randolph set off on their mission to rid us of Kan-Kan, our unbearable and smelly burden.

They were gone for hours, and when they returned, they reported that the dog had been taken to a place we called Number Nineteen, a long stretch of road with enormous empty pastures and swamps on both sides, more than twelve miles from our town. So that was that. Kan-Kan was gone, and we could get back to some kind of normal existence. The air was fresher and our hearts lighter for her absence. But there was no celebration, no commentary, no customary analysis, no habitual post-mortem.

One month passed, and already there was talk of getting another dog. They were useful things for alerting us to the presence of strangers, and food left over from meals would not go to waste. Besides, taking care of an animal would teach us children about responsibility, about caring for a creature that depended on us for its very survival. The search was on, therefore, for a new dog.

These well-laid plans were spoiled one week later. I was awakened by a familiar bark, and as I gazed out, eyes still heavy from late Sunday sleep, there was Kan-Kan, jumping, wheeling, as she chased in mock viciousness after her own tail. She had returned, once again against the odds, from the gate of death. Her fidelity had once again thwarted our attempts at abandonment. What was even more spectacular was that she was her old self: she was clean, and she did not smell. The wound had healed, I discovered upon closer examination of my dog, my sense of guilt returning like a wave of nausea. Kan-Kan butted hard at my shoulders as I stooped to give her a thorough, unnecessary check. She was proud, playful, and she had forgiven me for my betrayal. No one could explain her return after five weeks; no one could explain her return to health.

Soon, another development became apparent: Kan-Kan was pregnant. The months passed, and she swelled out in the firm fashion of the healthily pregnant. Her ill temper returned, but no one objected too much. She had, after all, achieved the level of a folk heroine.

"Man, what a daag, eh?" proclaimed Randolph, "You know, I did always know dat dis daag special. Dat's why I give she to you, man!"

When she born, she puppy dem, you gat to give me one. It only fair: You scratch me back, me scratch you back."

Kan-Kan had a difficult delivery, but she allowed me to help. This was my first experience of the "miracle of birth", and it seemed more like a trial of pain. But she endured, snapping at the air as she shook with the effort of giving life. I put my hand on her tremulous haunches and helped to pull gently at the fragile, dark, wet creatures that came from within her. First one, then a second. The male, even though he was black, we named Red Flame, after a horse my father had owned; the female, the reincarnation of Kan-Kan's long-dead sister, we named Donna Louisa, after a horse in Trinidad whose name I had always admired. I did not give any of them to Randolph.

Kan-Kan was protective of her pups; no one save me was allowed to touch them, and I was grateful to her for this. The pups were quite unlike their mother in looks; they were quite beautiful. In fact, they looked distinctly "mixed-breed". They grew up, and learned from their mother the fine art of loud viciousness.

There were more pregnancies and more pups. Many did not survive, but those that did were in great demand in the neighbourhood. Kan-Kan grew old, but not less tired. Then she contracted a cold and grew thin rapidly. From this ordinary illness, she did not bounce back, as weakened as she was by illness and age. Kan-Kan died of a cold, and we placed her softly in a grave at the back of the yard. She was fourteen.

AT A TIME LIKE THIS

She was resigned to a dreaded and shameful life of spinsterhood; he was reconciled to the idea that he was not wanted by any woman. But they came together like two ships on the darkening sea of uneasy middle age.

Of the five sisters in the family, Auntie Lena was not known as the beauty; nor was she the brightest. But she was fair-skinned, came from a good family, and was blessed with a kind heart, and it was thought that these were qualities enough to win her a good husband. But as time passed, the fair skin began to discolour, in spite of the copious amounts of *Ponds* and *Nivea* and *Noxema* creams that she lavished on herself - Her only self-indulgence, really.

Her looks, already average, began to suffer with the passing years. But her goodness of heart defied time and the temptation of yielding to cynicism or bitterness. It never seemed as if Aunt Lena was seeking desperately, but there were times when a cloud appeared to pass over her eyes as she watched children at play, or a young girl -eyes fixed to the ground in modesty or shyness or coyness -being wooed by a young man. At such times, her conversation would trail off into a painful silence, and she would bite the edges of her lower lip. Yet nothing was said in the manner of sour grapes.

"I like that girl dress; you like she dress?" she would ask one of her sisters.

"No. Why do you like such a dress? It's too loud. God, Lena, you have no taste," would be a typical response from her sisters.

This was another of Auntie Lena's noteworthy features: she did not speak with the affected English of her sisters. But her vowels were always rounded in the most attractive and soft ways, and the children liked to hear her read or speak. She would give sugar cakes, mangoes,

sugar apples, watermelons, or whatever there was to be had to the children of the neighbourhood. Such was her kindness.

But no suitors came of their own volition. All of her sisters, save one, were married already, and all had children, and Grandfather had died, leaving a large house in which Aunt Lena and her other, younger, unmarried sister lived. So the house was a source of comfort, but it also emphasised Aunt Lena's aloneness. And that atmosphere of abandonment in a clean, large house was like a warning of some sort to the eligible bachelors of the village and its surrounding areas.

The married sisters would offer their wisdom: "You should sell this damn house, Lena. It cross, I tell you. That's why nobody would come near to it. That's why you still alone."

"But if I sell the house, what I gon do? Is the only thing I got, you know, for me old age. Who go take care o' me, eh? You all got husband and thing, but me..." and her voice would fade away, and her light brown eyes would go milky, as if she were in some place far away from the panic that was tightening around her throat.

It was not so much that the sisters were cruel or uncaring, for they had sought many a suitor for Auntie Lena. It was just that they seemed to blame their sister for her aloneness. And suitor after suitor, at first carefully sought and cultivated, then with increasing desperation as the years passed, were brought to the house to "see" Auntie Lena. And instead of being pleased at the prospect of inheriting a grand old house, they would flee from the sense of despair or abandonment. One after another, they would leave, defeated by her grave need for simple companionship. Their defeat became hers, and Auntie Lena would wave goodbye from her verandah, much like a person left alone on some remote desert island. Then she would return to her rocking chair by the front windows that looked out upon the main road. She would rock slowly, rhythmically, looking at the road, waiting.

Uncle Shaw had returned from England, having completed a degree in law. And one would have thought that his prospects of getting a wife

would have been high. He was a tall man of some considerable bulk. But Uncle Shaw was dark, and he was not at all a good-looking man. His jaw was too large, and his lower lip was twisted to one side. He was also a harsh man, in the manner of successful men who had returned from abroad after acquiring much knowledge. He drove a large black Humber Hawk, which always shone with the care he lavished upon it.

Uncle Shaw went to "see" many a prospective bride and proclaimed them pleasing and suitable, but after they saw him and after he spoke to them, they were not to be convinced that he was for them. The one or two whom Uncle Shaw had met and who expressed an interest in his offer of marriage were then made to meet with his sisters. There were three of these, of identical bulk as their brother, identical gaudiness: too much make-up on their faces and too much gold around their wrists and necks and fingers. And inevitably, they would proclaim the prospective brides unworthy of their brother. So he grew older, and the prospects of companionship in marriage became more remote.

When Uncle Shaw and Aunt Lena met, then, it was with a sense of futility, the expectation that this was to be yet another defeat. But they were surprised at the comfort they found in each other, comfort from the very first moment. Auntie Lena was pleased at the prospect of marrying this man, whose gruffness she interpreted to be decisiveness; she was willing to be led. And Uncle Shaw was willing to lead, pleased to have found a woman who was malleable. Aunt Lena's sisters sent up heavens of relief and saw his profession and his shiny car as additional blessings. In private and away from Auntie Lena, however, they would poke fun at his looks. Uncle Shaw's sisters were satisfied as well: their brother would have full charge of a considerable property. And what was his was theirs, in part at least.

All being satisfied, the wedding took place quietly at the Registrar's Office, for it was deemed distasteful for a middle-aged couple to have too grand a wedding. Her first public signal of pliability was her willing conversion to Islam from her original Anglican Christian faith. So

Auntie Lena became Yasmin to everyone on Uncle Shaw's side of the family. She remained Lena to the neighbours and to her sisters. After all, Lena may have had to compromise, but they did not have to.

And so, the married life of Lena and Shaw began in calm and meandered from year to year. The serenity, seen by some as terrible boredom, was disrupted by a few events over the years. One of these occurred about three years after they were married: much to the alarm of both sides of the family and to the disappointment of Uncle Shaw and Auntie Lena, there were no children. And since it was presumed that the woman was at fault, Uncle Shaw dispatched Auntie Lena to the best hospitals in the country for several medical examinations. Finally, doctors agreed that her womb had to be "scraped" so that she might conceive. This generated a great deal of anger on the part of Auntie Lena's sisters, who saw it not only as an indignity to their sister's womanhood but as an affront to the family. After all, had not all the other sisters conceived successfully? The question of Uncle Shaw's inability or infertility was never raised. After the efforts to get Auntie Lena impregnated were exhausted, the pair resigned themselves to a life of childlessness.

The other event to disrupt the even calm of their lives occurred when Uncle Shaw was promoted to the position of magistrate. His stature grew with this new power. So did his harshness. For instance, when beggars came to the gate, it was taken for granted that they would be given a penny or else a cup of rice, which would be poured into a cream-coloured flour sack that each of them carried. The full bottom of the bag resembled a bulb that reached the lower back of the beggar. The top was wound tightly, slung over the right shoulder, right arm crooked to hold the end firmly over the right breast. It was an act of bad luck and an uncharitable one to send these poor away without rice or coin. But when the beggars came to his gate, Uncle Shaw, never one to yield to social pressure, would give them, for their pains, a booming lecture on the virtues of work, of independence, on the importance of maintaining dignity. All of which would have been lost on the poor

beggar, but not a word was lost on the neighbours. The beggars, therefore, timed their arrival at Auntie Lena's and Uncle Shaw's gate when they saw the garage empty of the Humber Hawk. Few realised that Uncle Shaw would leave money with his wife for the beggars, but he was too harsh a man to be seen to be generous. Aunt Lena would tell of this in hushed tones, and she would relate other tales about him as well.

"You know, you Uncle Shaw is a soft-soft man. He give plenty money to charity, but nobody know this." Always she would refer to him as "your Uncle Shaw", never "Uncle Shaw" or "my husband" or "Shaw" or simply "your uncle".

"You know, boy," she would say to me, "when we go to see a movie, I got to take three or four kerchief for you Uncle Shaw. You know why?" She would pause for effect, for the true import of what she was saying to register.

"Well, I gon tell you why. Is because he always cry in the cinema. Any sad part, he cry. And he does cry so much that I got to carry all dem kerchief so that he can wipe he eyes and blow he nose." And she would shake her head with the great pity of it, in great admiration of his tenderness.

Then she would fall silent for a while, rocking back and forth in her rocking chair by the front windows that looked out upon the main road. But now she would be keeping an expectant eye out for Uncle Shaw to roll in with his Humber Hawk, waiting for him to take his place in his rocking chair opposite hers.

"You know, you Uncle Shaw is such a funny man. Last night, two o'clock, he wake up. He turn to me and say 'Ahem...Yasmin.' You know how he does cough like that when he want tease me or he want something?

'Yes, Shaw' I say. 'Wha happen, Shaw?'

And he say, 'Ahem. You know, Yasmin, some ice cream would go down nice at a time like this.'

"You believe dat? Two o'clock!!! And you Uncle Shaw want ice cream. So what I gon do, eh? I get up and make ice cream for he." And she would spread her arms in mock despair.

And true to form, Uncle Shaw would arrive, stomp to his rocking chair while tugging his neck tie loose, give a gruff greeting, sit heavily, and "Ahem, Yasmin?"

"Yes Shaw." Always Auntie Lena's tender reply, a hint of a smile on her lips and in her voice as she glanced across at me for confirmation that what she had just related was in fact true.

"Ahem. You know, Yasmin, a cup of tea would go down nice at a time like this." And Auntie Lena would be up to get the tea, which was already brewing. He would look across at me with a twinkle in his eye and with a chuckle at the joke which we shared. It was a strange kind of humour, muted, private. Then he would proceed to give a lecture on education or religion.

The only time that Auntie Lena did not oblige him was on a particularly hot Saturday afternoon when, laying upon his Berbice chair, Auntie Lena, sitting modestly on one of the arms of the chair, he requested: "Ahem. Yasmin, sing for us."

Auntie Lena let out a scream of embarrassment: "Shaaaw!!" And she disappeared with a great flutter into her kitchen while Uncle Shaw chuckled until tears came to his eyes. It was a happy thing that she refused, for Auntie Lena was a very poor singer indeed.

But these were sides of Uncle Shaw that people did not know, and he remained a man who was feared and disliked. The neighbours among whom Auntie Lena grew up would visit only when he was not there, but they would never be quite at ease, lest he return suddenly. To tell the truth, neither was Auntie Lena. It was as if what the two of them shared was found so late that it was precious beyond the ordinary and

had to be guarded jealously. The life they led, then, was in some isolation from the rest of the community: the neighbours were fearful and suspicious of him, and he was fearful and suspicious of them. And in between these twin fears, Auntie Lena was caught; she was quite comfortable with each, but only outside of the presence of the other.

There was only once that the entire community rallied behind Uncle Shaw. He had reprimanded a political bigwig of the ruling party. The man had held himself above the law, as all members of the ruling party were wont to do. Almost invariably, they were indeed above the law. However, when this chap started behaving belligerently in Uncle Shaw's court, he was warned loudly that he would be held in contempt of court and jailed if his behaviour did not change immediately. It did.

The Party Member had been accused of physical assault. Uncle Shaw found him guilty, fined him, and inflicted upon him a lecture of great length and volume. In freer societies, he would have been jailed and stripped of any political influence, but ours was not a free society. And since it was almost suicidal to go against pro-government people, even in private, Uncle Shaw's public reprimand of the Party Member made the former a hero of the people.

"Hey! You hear what that Shaw do, boy?" one neighbour would say.

"What he do, man?"

"The man give Ali hell, man! Hell, I tell you!"

"What Ali gon do 'bout it, you think? You think he gon talk to Comrade Leader to fire Shaw?"

"I ain't know man, but that Shaw ain't 'fraid nobody, you hear. The man might look more like Clint Eastwood horse than Clint Eastwood self, but he brave as raas, you hear."

And the event was of such great significance that it was given a small column at the bottom of the third page of the government-controlled newspaper, the custom being that the front page was kept almost exclusively for the pronouncements of the prime minister, Comrade

Leader. A copy of the newspaper, the only one allowed to be published in the country, was passed from hand to hand in the neighbourhood. Even those who could not read peered intensely into the yellowing page, nodding wisely and grimly. They, too, were part of this history.

It was strange that, rather than bringing him finally into the communal fold, Uncle Shaw's act of heroism served to set him even farther apart from the community. His act of courage had made him a folk hero, but it was also felt that the greater law of the Party could crush him at any point. Therefore, everyone kept their distance from Uncle Shaw, and he moved further and further back into himself. In his retreat, he took Auntie Lena with him.

In their isolation, they became closer than ever. As time passed, Auntie Lena depended ever more on Uncle Shaw to make the most elementary of decisions. He led, she followed; he asked, she gave; he instructed, she obeyed. But she had surrendered herself willingly to him, and it was in the surrender that she seemed to find happiness. She believed implicitly in Uncle Shaw's goodness and in his strength.

One morning, Auntie Lena finished making breakfast for Uncle Shaw. Then she went in to get him up, as was her custom. Uncle Shaw was a heavy sleeper, and Auntie Lena was not above teasing him about that. He would chuckle, as if he had made a joke about himself. But on this morning, she found it particularly difficult to awaken her husband.

"Shaaw! Shaaw! Wake up, Shaaw!" She said, with the vowels rounded and lengthened as if she were savouring some delicious grape in her mouth, not wanting to bite into it, but just to keep it there for the luxury of its texture.

"Shaaw, Come on Shaaw! Time for you to get up." But he did not move.

"What the matter, Shaw? You sick? You don't feel well? You got fever? You want me to get the doctor?" Moved by an increasing concern, she shook him quite violently.

Uncle Shaw's eyes flew open, alert, puzzled. He could not move at all. He could hear, and see and understand, but he could not move or make a sound. He could not even raise his head from off the pillow. He could not speak to Auntie Lena-no words of instruction or love.

"Shaw? What happen, Shaw?" Her voice softening with the onset of panic. He could hear and see her, and she could see the desperation in his eyes-The fear. And she cupped his face, dark and not at all handsome, in her hands, made soft and sweet-smelling by those creams she still used.

"Don't worry, Shaw. Don't do anything. I go tell the neighbour to get the doctor to come right away. Don't worry."

She left hurriedly, calmly, to instruct the neighbour to get the doctor, then returned promptly to his side.

"He gone to get the doctor. Only a couple of minutes, Shaw. Just hold on lil' bit. Everything gon be alright. You been working too hard, Shaw. How many times I tell you that, eh? Now, look, you gone and get sick."

Only five minutes had elapsed from the time that Uncle Shaw had opened his eyes. Five minutes and eternity. From him and from her had been taken away the simple gift of speech and response -Simple Yes, Simple No.

Uncle Shaw's only response to her attempts at reassurance and comfort, his only statement of love were two large teardrops that formed at the corners of his eyes and rolled down the side of his inert face. And when she saw the tears, she knew that Shaw would not live. She caught the tears, one on each side of his face, on the tips of her forefingers. And she pressed them between forefingers and thumbs as one would press the softest petal, so as to be assured of its softness.

Only five minutes had elapsed from the time he had opened his eyes to the time he died. An eternity.

The doctor explained to Auntie Lena, who was sitting in her rocking chair by the front windows overlooking the main road, that her husband

had suffered a severe stroke. She never looked at the doctor while he spoke. She never looked at the road. Her gaze was fixed only on the empty rocking chair opposite hers, in which Uncle Shaw should have been sitting.

AND THE FIRE LIGHT

It was a time when they declare war against conscience. Patrick Obeng Khan had conscience. Therefore, they wage war against Patrick Obeng Khan and those like he. The thing was that Patrick didn't know that he at war, and that he was the enemy. He know in he mind that King Kong and he Party want to make man and woman into machine. Machine don't think, they follow instruction: put a car in first gear, it go forward; put it in reverse, it go backward. Mash the brakes, it stop.

But people think; and people with conscience think thoughts that King Kong and he apes ain't like one lil' bit. So blows did comin down like rain 'pon the people wid conscience, even while Kong and he Queen talking revolutionary words against Tarzan, who was king of the apes before Kong take over.

But as things turn out, the black ruler worse than the white, because white man not betray he own kind. And so many people start to know that King Kong just a worse version of Tarzan; at least when Tarzan was King, people had food to eat. People go from frying pan into fire. They run from the coffin and butt up with the dead.

Patrick Obeng Khan wasn't no noisy man. He didn't like fuh talk 'bout politics, and he didn't like talk 'bout religion, but when he talk, everybody know that he had conscience. Patrick heself didn't frighten too much -not because he was brave or nothing, but just because he feel that he too small a fish for King Kong them to try and fry. They had a big frying pan, and he too small for them to fry. That's all. He not no university person who could use words sweet like sugar, no big union leader wid big office in the city. Just a small fish.

He just a simple man, with a simple lil' one- bedroom shack that he build wid he own hand in Better Hope village. He never fight wid he neighbour them, never argues too much. Just a mechanic trying to earn a living from day to day, bringing back people car from the dead. He

never cheat nobody, never overcharge no costumer. He only vice was to have a few beer with the boys on a Saturday night. Just a small man trying to put bread and rice 'pon he table for he wife Irene, and they three children.

He lef' home in the morning after he eat two roti and drink some water down coffee that Irene make. Walk half mile to he workshop, a lil' place that he rent from Mr. Bobb. He work the whole morning, take a break, walk back home fuh some dhall and rice, and some salt fish when he and Irene can afford it. Then back to work till the sun go down and he can't tell bolt from nut.

He joy was to get a potato or two fuh the children, once every six month or so, when some customer give he. And at Christmas time, to buy one apple fuh each of the children -Maybe even a bunch of grapes, bunch small like the baby hand. Every Christmas eve since they married, he and Irene and the children sit down at Christmas eve, turn on the little transister radio to listen to Christmas music, cut one apple at a time into lil' lil' piece so that they can't waste.

"Waste not, want not," Irene tell the children.

But even that joy they take away, because King Kong say that apple and grape and potato and all tin goods was white man food-Food that Tarzan teach the people to eat so they can get poor and stupid. So King Kong ban even that lil' pleasure. King Kong also ban the Phantom and Andy Capp. He ban Lone Ranger too. Time was when all black was bad; now all white no good.

Sometimes Patrick Obeng Khan does watch Irene and wonder where that beautiful girl he married gone. She getting old before she time. Too much worries. One day he go take she to the city and buy she a new dress, maybe take in a movie. But everything so expensive now. And the money got fuh stretch like rubber band. School uniform fuh the two children, milk fuh the baby. Even chicken come a once-a-month luxury.

It does break he heart fuh see Irene going wid a rusty bucket to the trench to get mud. Then she go 'bout the neighbourhood to collect cow dung. Then she mix the two wid water, and stir it wid she hand. Then she plaster the whole bottom house. When she done, it smooth and clean and cool. Plus it keep way mosquita.

How Irene does keep the place so clean wid them children running round, he don't know. Sometimes he heart swell up wid love for she. And he does feel the tired fall off like dirty clothes when she watch he wid them bright black eyes. Sometimes, when he see she in the morning, just bathe, she hair damp pon she head, he don't even feel like going to work.

But work mean money and money mean food. And you can't make love on hungry belly, as the calypso say. Day in, day out, work. But two ends never meet.

One day, when Patrick Obeng Khan coming back from he workshop, tired like dog, he notice a big crowd gather in the cricket field. They had more police and soldier there than grains of rice on he and he family plate. From just the way they stand up make Patrick know that the speaker was a government chap, one of King Kong boys. In fact, just because they had a big crowd there show that it was a gathering called by the Kong. They don't give permission to hold gatherings to nobody who talk out against Comrade Leader.

Man, to look at the stage you could think was the Queen of England self come to talk. Lights bright bright, and police and soldier wid gun. Patrick Obeng Khan skirt round the crowd, then he move slow to the front and centre. The man in front the mike was a big man, fat with good food, he forehead shiny with sweat. He voice boom big and loud from the loudspeaker:

"Comrades, Comrades! You know and I know that only one man has brought freedom to our beloved native land! You know that is because of him that we, you and I, have tasted the sweet elixir of freedom!"

---Sweet what of freedom? He really mean the bitterness of me children belly that calbalai wid hunger.

"You know very well comrades, that is our own Comrade Leader who has chased the imperialist dog from our backyard!"

--Chase, me foot. Is they who put King Kong in power! They ain't chase out Tarzan. Tarzan resign and put Kong in he place! And he become a dog that gat more sore on he skin than the dog they say he chase out.

"I put it to you, comrades, that our Leader should be made president for life. That he should be free to act for the good of the people."

---Free to drink we blood, you mean!

"Our illustrious Leader, whom the West cannot and will not defeat, he should be free from trial for any crime past or present. We need to be politically free, culturally free, economically free. We need to establish our own values of freedom, comrades."

--Free to kill, free to thief money, free to have fat Swiss bank account!

Patrick Obeng Khan was thinking all of this in response to King Kong henchman, the Minister of Home Affairs. He only realise that he was talking out very loud when somebody elbow he ribs and say: "Hey, Patrick, man. Shut you mouth, man. What the matter wid you, eh? You gone mad!?"

"Leave me alone! They gat to know that they ain't fooling we! We not fools, you know!" Patrick shout even louder to the man at the mike.

"We don't want they sweet word, we want--"

Then he feel the club 'pon he head, and the ground of the lovely native land rush up to hit he face. He look up to see a whole sea of soldier and police, then he see nothing.

Patrick Obeng Khan wake up late that night wid the taste of blood in he mouth. Salty and raw.

"Irene," he call out to he wife, "Irene. You there?"

"Yes, Patrick. I here. What you want, Patrick?"

"Give me some water, nuh, Irene."

She get he some water in the enamel cup they does keep by the mattress. She put she hand under he head, lift it up real gentle, and put the cup to he lip that swell up like a mango.

"What you gone and do, Patrick? What get in to you, eh? You gone mad? What about you children, Patrick? What about me Patrick? You don't care 'bout we, Patrick? Answer me, Patrick. Answer me!"

"I ain't know, Irene. I ain't even know I did talk out loud. I aint know why I do dat, Irene. God know that I ain't know how this thing happen. Was like some madness come over me."

"Look, you sleep, eh. Try and recover quick. When you get better, you gon go to the Party Headquarters and beg pardon. You gat to talk to somebody, Patrick, or we in real trouble in this place, you hear."

For two days Patrick can't go to work. And Irene keep the two children home from school, just in case. The baby crying all the time. But lil' bit by lil' bit, Patrick begin to recover. Then he start to walk strong again, but with a lil' limp. So Irene say, "Patrick, let we go to Party Headquarters and explain to them, Patrick. Let we go and beg pardon."

"But Irene, what I gon say, eh? What I say is the truth, Irene. Everybody know that. Sometimes we conscience can't keep quiet."

"Patrick, you is a good man. But truth don't put food 'pon the table, you know. Conscience don't buy rice, man Patrick. Just say that you was drunk, that you didn't know what you was doing. Do it for you children sake, Patrick. And for me. You know I's a woman don't ask for much, but now I ask you to let we go and explain. Even if we got fuh bribe somebody, Patrick, is worth it."

So the next day, Patrick and Irene dress up in they best clothes, catch a taxi, go to the bank to take out one hundred dollar from the one twenty they save up. Then they go to the Party Headquarters. When they walk in the building, Irene start to shake, and was only when he hold she hand that he realise that he own hand also trembling like leaf.

"Mornin', Comrade," Patrick Obeng Khan greet the man at the desk. "We come to see Comrade Green. Is a important matter, comrade, and we hope that you can help we out."

"You realise, comrade, that you should make an appointment. People can't just walk off the street and ask to see Comrade Green, you know," the man at the desk say.

"I know, comrade. And you right. But you can't help we, Comrade? We begging you, comrade," plead Irene, she eyes starting to water.

"Maybe, but it not easy, you know. Comrade Green can get vex with me fuh this, so..."

"Suppose I give you a lil' thing for you trouble, Comrade. It only fair since you doing we this favour." And Patrick Obeng Khan take out the one hundred dollar, which the man grab before Patrick can count out forty or sixty fuh give to he.

"Wait here. I coming back just now." And he left to go in to the office.

The two of them stand up there like two bird, shaking in the breeze. Then the comrade come back.

"Look, Comrade Green too busy, but he say that I can let you write out the matter and he will look into it. You got my personal guarantee that he will see your report. Here is paper and a pen. Go over there and write out the case. Make sure you write neatly, and make sure you put your name and address."

So Irene and Patrick sit down and write out them story, begging pardon many times, explaining to Comrade Green that Patrick was drunk and he do what stupid drunk people do. But he really don't mean nothing- That he is a poor man who struggling to make ends meet. After they finish, Irene and Patrick sign the letter with small, small handwriting. Then they take it back to the comrade at the desk. He check it to see that everything okay, then he tell them okay, they can go home.

Patrick Obeng Khan and Irene Khan lef' feeling a lil' better that they do this thing. They savings gone down the drain, but at least they safe.

Now they can go back to they simple life of work, and try and keep they conscience quiet.

"Patrick, I warning you, don't let this happen again, you hear. Or else me and you going up the road-it gon be war in Korea wid me and you, you hear."

Patrick shake he head: "Yes, Irene, I hear you." He smile to heself at Irene words, because Irene not really a quarrelsome woman.

At ten o'clock that night, a small army truck drive up to Patrick Obeng Khan house. Nine soldier jump out the truck, quiet quiet. They knock on the door, and when Patrick open the door a crack, they force they way in.

Before he could say a word, one soldier put a gun to he head.

"You Patrick Khan?"

"Ye-es. What-"

One soldier hit he hard across the face, and he fall to he knee.

"One sound, and I blow you head off, you hear me- one sound!"

Another soldier get Irene from the bedroom, dragging she by she hair, and two soldier take the children to the truck. Irene start to cry, she breast swelling up and going down wid how she frighten. She face wet, wet from sweat and tears, she lip quiver so much that she can't talk, even if they did allow she to talk. The soldier still hold the gun to Patrick head, rubbing it 'pon he temple. Patrick watch she, and he eye start to run water like a tap. But he ain't make no sound.

Then one soldier bring a rice bag and wrap it round Patrick foot and leg, so he look like a tree wid brown root. Then another one come wid a can of kerosene and pour it 'pon the bag till it soak. Another soldier light a match and play like he gon throw it 'pon the rice bag, soak with kerosene, that wrap round Patrick foot and leg.

"You want to play man, eh Patrick? You want to be so much man that you can challenge even Comrade Leader, eh Patrick? Then you run like

a dog wid it tail between it leg and beg Comrade Green for pardon! Well leh we see what kind a man you is!"

Another match strike, and Patrick frighten so bad that he feel weak. He knee feel like water, and he feel the pee run down he leg. The soldier dem smile. But they didn't light the bag round he foot and leg-just keep lighting match after match, playing as if they gon light the bag.

"Lie down!" Two soldier push Irene 'pon the floor. Two hold down she hand and two hold down she leg. Then they tear off she nightie. Patrick turn way he head, but the soldier take the gun and smash it in he face.

"Turn and look, big man, or else we set she 'pon fire, you hear. Watch, you anti-man you. See how big man does act. When we done wid she, she go want nothing to do wid you."

Patrick watch. He eyes meet Irene eyes only one time, and he remember how she eyes did look when they did first married -Like two black marble, shiny wid love. Now they look dull, dull, like dead coal. And Irene shake she head as if she was shame for what these people doing to she. She lip form he name, but no sound come out.

All nine soldier take turn with Irene. And plenty time, one of them take he gun and smash it 'pon Patrick head so he must watch. And when they done they job with Irene, they laugh. They take out cigarette and smoke. When they done with Irene, they push she in a corner like a piece of old cloth, and she hug she knee to hide she nakedness. She make a small, small sound like a lil' puppy when it cold and frighten. But she eye look dead.

But Irene eye bright up when they throw the match 'pon the rice bag soak wid kerosene that wrap round Patrick foot and leg. She eye open wide, like she wake up again from a dream that make she frighten even more than the one she just gone through. The fire that burning she husband was in she eye. Then she eye gone dead again, and she ain't even hear Patrick Obeng scream like they tearing he soul from he body.

That night King Kong boys them burn Patrick Obeng Khan, and they lef' he a cripple for life. And they rape Irene, he wife, and lef' she a cripple for life. But they was just simple people with conscience who work hard to make two ends meet in Better Hope village.

Patrick Obeng Khan live in the asylum now. He can't even feed heself, can't even wipe heself, can't walk, and he never say a single word. He just lay down there wid he eyes wide open. Irene now beggar-woman in the city, with she children sleeping round she on a piece of newspaper, half-dead from starvation, fly crawling all over them. Plenty people go by, and some drop a coin in the enamel cup that she did use to give water to Patrick Obeng Khan when he wake up thirsty in the middle of the night. It old and rusty now, that enamel cup that they use to keep by the mattress. Sometimes King Kong or some big shot drive by in shiny car, and sometimes King Kong boys pass by in army truck. But Irene don't see nothing now.

TARZAN, WEST INDIAN

Tarzan was mixed visibly: First Nation, Afro-Guyanese, and Indo-Guyanese. His skin was bronze; his hair curly, soft and long. His hair and fearlessness caused him to be called Tarzan. It was a name that he accepted with pride. He was not known for violence, particularly; in fact, there was talk in the village that Tarzan was kept in line by his wife, a woman of formidable proportions, quite unlike the svelte, blond Jane of Tarzan movies. But the rumour spread that our Tarzan could swim faster than Johnny Weismuller, and he could hold his breath underwater for more than five minutes. Our Tarzan had four children by his Jane, and his gentle nature was apparent when he was with them.

Tarzan earned a reputation for kindness to all children, myself included. I'd visit his house -a ramshackle, one-bedroom place that allowed no privacy, and only little movement -and there would always be a fruit, a sweet, something for the eating. I learned later that each time I went and was given a sweet or so, one of Tarzan's children went without.

Tarzan's place was separated from the only cinema in the village by a narrow dirt street; cinema patrons from the "pit" section of the cinema would range up along the side of the street during the intervals to urinate. Tarzan's house itself smelled always of burned sugar in defiance of the stench that surrounded it. The burnt sugar smell was cloying, but it was not unpleasant for the first few minutes, because it was a relief from the pervasive smell of pee coming from the side of the cinema on the other side of the street, five feet away. The house was furnished with a small table with two cushionless, rickety chairs. A small transistor radio was the centrepiece. It stood with pride on a beautifully woven doily. I could not imagine the thick hands of Tarzan's wife weaving such a thing of intricate beauty.

Tarzan's children would be in the yard, dirty but hardy. And his wife was stationed always at the door, her massive legs covering the two wooden stairs that led into the living room, that was all other rooms. Cooking was done outside, on a "fire-side", a box-like structure of about twenty-four inches across, made of baked mud. There were two holes on top for pots and one large hole in front through which was poked wood. Few of the poor at this time could afford the two-burner gas cookers that were now on sale. Most of the villagers would say that these cookers were dangerous: the poor need not proclaim their poverty. Their appeal to safety was in defence of their dignity.

"The fire-side cheaper, and it cook the food faster and sweeter," proclaimed Tarzan.

I envied his family, cooking in this fashion, eating "sweet" food.

When I visited, I'd have to squeeze pass Mrs. Tarzan to get into the house. Tarzan would bellow to one of his boys to get a Pepsi or Vimto and ice from the shop. I'd sit nursing my soft drink; he'd sit gulping his rum, wincing from the strength of the liquor, then swallowing water as "chaser". He'd tell me about cricket-legendary stories of Sobers, Kanhai, the three W's (Worrell, Walcott and Weeks), of Ramadin and Valentine, "fiery" Freddie Trueman, and Don Bradman. He'd utter the names with a familiarity that suggested friendship. Then the rum would take hold, and I'd hear of the latest fight or near-fight in which he was involved. I was thrilled, excited by these stories for their tales of heroism. Moreover, I'd have a tale of gripping interest to relate to my friends in primary school. My proximity to Tarzan made me the source of great envy and admiration. It also protected me from the school bullies.

"You better don' touch me, you hear," I would say at the least sign that I was about to be slapped, "I'se Tarzan good-good friend! If you want trouble, you just touch me." And the bully would back off. I took to walking the way Tarzan walked, with that slight swagger, shoulders drawn back, head held high.

But as time passed, Tarzan started to change. The man started to fit the shell, which the name implied. Tarzan started beating his children, got into more and more fights, and earned himself a reputation for being a "Bad John". One knife fight earned him an ugly scar across his right chest. This darkened, raised, smooth, six-inch scar, he wore like a badge of badness. Like his namesake, Tarzan stopped wearing shirts.

It was at about this time that Tarzan decided to set up a gambling table in front of the cinema. The Apollo cinema showed movies twice per day during week days-one at 4:45 in the afternoon, and the other at 8:15 in the evening. Tarzan's roulette board was crowded especially before these shows, and the air would ring with "Black eight" or "Red thirteen". Tarzan would deftly collect the notes and coins of the losers and reward the winners, his forearm veined, muscular, tattooed, glistening in the afternoon sunlight or in the light from the flambeau. The board itself was of two parts, connected by hinges, so that it could be folded after the night's work was done. On the board were painted large heads of kings and queens and jacks, red and black, as well as odd and even numbers, done with curling flourish. I let it be known that it was "Tarzan self who paint dat board, wid he own hands". And many of my school friends would gape at my insider's knowledge.

Gambling always brought quarrels, but Tarzan's board was trouble-free: Tarzan was a feared man, and even other bad Johns avoided confrontation with him. The air was always tense with expectation and dread as the wire pointer clicked, at first quickly, on the nails of the roulette wheel; then the sound would slow down, the clicks becoming farther and farther apart, and the pointer would stop at a number. Tarzan was the most tense, but no one would know it. He could not afford to pay a big win; and the public humiliation of this would have been a terrible blow indeed. When he was at his board, Tarzan assumed the face of a nonchalant James Bond; but his eyes would narrow in dreadful concentration, never meeting those of the bigger investors.

Tarzan's artistic side became known through his painting of the gambling board, and my father got several of the local businessmen to

pay Tarzan to decorate their shop windows during the Christmas season. Tarzan would do this late at night, after the gambling, and the morning would witness a new decoration, a new addition to the splendour of the village -Frosty the Snowman, Santa Clause, Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer, Christmas trees. These images, so foreign to us were yet so intimate to us. Tarzan would draw these on the inside of the glass windows using shaving cream. This artistic side, far from distracting from his image as a Bad John, added yet another dimension to the fighter and the gambler, shirtless, fearless, tattooed, long-haired. He was an artist.

After my father had got him the decorating jobs, Tarzan took to coming to our house quite frequently. He'd have long conversations with my father about "deep" topics like history and religion, especially about Christianity and Islam. Talk of cricket and fights receded, replaced by comparisons between Lent and Ramadan, the Christian and Islamic seasons of fasting, respectively. Soon, Tarzan became known as a philosopher, and not too long after, he converted to Islam.

The change was astonishing. The swearing stopped. The fighting and gambling stopped. Tarzan went to mosque religiously, cut his hair, and took to wearing a shirt. I was disappointed, but the conversion served to add to the mystery, the mystique. And since my father was seen to be the one responsible for the conversion, I was still regarded as a primary source of information about Tarzan. Each day, on my way to school, I would rack my brain for a new twist to the story of Tarzan. My friends at school were the most demanding and critical of audiences, looking for inconsistencies, contradictions, any weaknesses in the storyline. I had to give them new information about the development of the personality, but I also had to keep alive the legend of the fighter.

Tarzan took a decent job as a watchman for an Islamic businessman, earning twenty dollars a month, an amount that he would have made in one hour at his gambling board. But Tarzan and his family were also the recipients of Islamic generosity during Muslim festivals. He was

still a popular man, but in a different way. The fear with which people regarded him became awe. He was equally untouchable.

Then, one day, Cuffy showed up in the village. Cuffy had been to jail for a few years, having maimed some fellow. He had had one altercation with Tarzan and, though he was a bigger and more intimidating man, he was beaten by Tarzan, and he chose not to cross Tarzan's path again. Even the police steered clear of Cuffy, so that he would take whatsoever he wanted from whomsoever he wanted. There was no doubt in anybody's mind that Cuffy still feared Tarzan, but the jail term had placed him on a higher scale of badness than Tarzan. Who would win in a new battle was the cause of much speculation among the citizens of the village. Confrontation seemed inevitable.

Cuffy challenged Tarzan. They met on the road, and Cuffy swore at and pushed Tarzan. Tarzan did not respond, and people, disappointed, said they saw fear in Tarzan's eyes. The pushing grew harder, the swearing more vile as Cuffy grew in courage. Cuffy pulled a knife, and Tarzan started to turn away. Cuffy knifed him, sideways, in the throat. The people watched. The blood gushed from Tarzan's throat, soaking the front of his white, long-sleeved shirt. This was the shirt Tarzan wore to the mosque. It was Friday, and he was on his way to prayers.

Tarzan spent weeks in the hospital. The wound left him with a voice that was a hoarse whisper. In the weeks that followed, Tarzan did not go to his job, did not go to the mosque, received no visitors. Soon after, Tarzan took his wife and children and left the village. He said no goodbyes. The people stood by. No one in the village heard from Tarzan again.

A STAY AT INNOCENCE

(For Wong Phui Nam, Poet, Friend)

Wong could hardly explain how he found himself in this canoe that rocked and rolled on the hard surface of the river's white water. Why had history or fickle fortune placed him in this place, this narrow peninsular vessel, with such inept companions as Kumar and Mokhtar? Wong's eyes were dark stones placed perfectly in the centre of a leaf in Autumn. "A black pearl on a yellow leaf," he thought fancifully, "but yellow leaves have little business in this landscape." The snow of the surf flashed into his shark's eye, like dust, in mockery. His eyes watered.

Wong grasped the oar and dug it into the white meat of the water. He was in front of the boat; his companions could not see his face or mask, rearranged involuntarily with each jolt as the boat lifted and fell. He was inscrutable to Kumar and Mokhtar because they could not look into the mirror of his face. And so, the body which sat at the front of the racing canoe became that of a foreign entity. His veined arms, muscled from endless days of lifting and packing in his shop, were all they could see, like a movie running fast forward, as the canoe raced to a vision. Kumar and Mokhtar resented the supple power of those arms, as if they represented success at their expense. But it was the deftness of those arms, the quickness of those sharks' eyes which saved the canoe from rocks hidden in the boiling water. Wong gave the boat direction. Survival was uppermost in his mind as his heart pulsed in the palms gripping the oar.

At the back of the boat sat Mokhtar, his face set in panic, like the rock that rose up on either side of the rapids. He did not question his fate at being in this predicament. It was the way things were, God's will. But hope for survival and fear of extinction gnawed simultaneously at his

bleeding heart with sharp teeth. This was a paradox which his brain could only process as confusion.

Mokhtar came to know the paddle he held in his hand as if it was shaped by his own hands, as if he had shaped it from a tree he owned in a yard that was his by deed. His feeling for the oar made it seem an extension of his arm. Mokhtar provided the power, when it was needed, to slow the canoe from rushing onto rocks, giving Wong time to veer the fragile craft away from certain disaster. Or he would quicken its pace to have it surge past the rocks. But Mokhtar wanted to be in front, resenting Wong's saving competence, remembering only now and then that his role was important to their collective survival. Sometimes Mokhtar would sense dangers buried beneath the water even before they were caught by Wong's grasping eye, and he would shout a warning, but the wind broke his words, which reached the back of Wong's neck as if he were speaking an unfamiliar language. It was as if he were screaming too loudly into a megaphone that was not working too well, or which he had not yet mastered, his mouth always too close to or too far from the megaphone.

Mokhtar wanted to escape from the confined space of his civil service office, to be back in his own village, his own soil planted firmly beneath his rooted feet, in a time and place where people knew his thoughts before his words became fractured by the technology of the wind. To return to a place was not enough, for the place had changed; he wanted to return in time as well, to a time before steel and concrete, before bulldozers and foreigners and different wagging tongues. His face softened with longing, then returned to rock face when the boat bucked like some untamed animal. "If only I could see their faces," he thought, "I would know what Wong and Kumar are thinking. I could enter into their minds like smoke into lungs."

Kumar was sandwiched between them, disbelieving that his survival or destruction depended on these two, so unlike himself. His passion was padlocked firmly within the castle of his dark skin. But once in a while, that passion would break its chains and run howling into the

night. Kumar wanted badly to play the role of intermediary between Wong before him and Mokhtar behind. But mediation meant words, and words were enemies in this situation. There was no time to talk. Yet there was more: Kumar was haunted by a sense of his own irrelevance. He neither steered the boat nor provided power, was neither land nor water, so that the fire within him raged and was quenched in rapid succession. He wanted to be in charge of his own self-destruction, his own defeat.

Kumar, a bank clerk, was blind to his own importance in the enterprise of life, to his role in balancing the boat. It was his instinct for life rather than his commitment to live that made him take his cue from Wong and Mokhtar. He saw and felt their positions as certainties, not reading their fears but the dramatic indices of their hostility. Kumar's heart was carried in his head, and the movement of the boat made it slosh around in the milky cranial fluid, so that he did not know his brain from his heart.

The boat bucked madly and fled upon a new landscape of time and space. No longer was there a sheer rock face on either side pressing upon the bruised cheek of the boat. Now there was an impenetrable green wall, although they could not identify a single familiar tree. The boat raced on, and the river howled like a crazed animal. There was danger in the boat and in the water, foaming like a rabid dog.

Wong and Kumar saw, and Mokhtar sensed, the rock - a grey fist rushing towards the forehead of the boat - at the same moment. They all called warnings to each other, the instinct of the cry at birth or at death. But they seemed to speak in different languages. Mokhtar's warning came out like bones breaking upon the teeth of the wind. Wong's sounded like the hiss of a serpent, the hiss of the bow breaking through the dunes of water. Kumar's astonished cry was like the unintelligible rattle of machine-gun fire, a suicide note scrawled upon the wind.

The three had met each other, as in a novel, as in rewritten history, at the local university. They were pursuing the same course and, like the

young, were concerned with separate futures. Each consumed the facts they were fed with the kind of gluttony that made their lecturers happy. Mr. Wright, an Englishman who was a linguistics lecturer and who had spent many years in the country, was especially happy with the lads.

Mr. Wright had a way with languages and had learned to function in all of the local tongues. He practised the languages separately when speaking to each of the three. Mr. Wright saw that there was no love lost among the students, but to him, this was to be expected of such people. They were to him as fledglings into whose beaks he placed nutritious insects or worms. He fancied himself a kind of foster mother, flying from nest to separate nest, to these forlorn chicks who would waste away from starvation save for him. And he was proud when they grew full-feathered on his scrupulous diet of insects and worms. They inhabited the same land and water, and sky, but they lived separate existences.

Kumar, Wong and Mokhtar hated Mr. Wright's smiling condescension. They became allies of sorts, an alliance that overrode temporarily the distrust they bore for each other. Mokhtar resented what he thought to be Wong's wealth, obtained at the expense of the former's people. Wong resented Mokhtar's belief that all were foreigners, irrespective of sacrifice, hard work, and the passage of time. And Kumar resented them both for what he saw as strengths beyond his muscles and ethnic possession. These were open secrets, like open wounds, bandaged by newspaper. So, the wounds' mouths were muzzled, and infection set in over time. Yet the common loathing and fear they had for Mr. Wright made their togetherness possible, even tolerable. They even told each other that they were friends, countrymen, all in the same boat.

It was under this blanket of newsprint or censorship, this delusion, that they came together five years after graduation. They had arranged to meet at a resort to relive what time had told them were happy memories of university days. On the first day, there was much laughter, much glee at recalling the antics of Mr. Wright -now happily retired to the good life in the motherland -and the local lecturers who envied his

knowledge and accent. They laughed at the absent object of their common hate. What they felt for each other was hidden beneath the mirth and the words.

It was on the second day of their stay at the resort that they were told by a gardener, a man of rags and weeds, of a mythical village downriver - a village where one may rest and be at peace, a place where innocence lived. But the man of weeds and rags, with a large straw hat covering his face, was vague about the exact location of the village, vague about how it remained such a secret, vague about the people there. But, grown men, they wanted to go to Innocence. Besides, it made for good adventure.

The shadowed old man (he appeared old and bent, although his hands and voice were young) had told them that there were no highways or secondary roads leading to the village. Therefore, they set out in a canoe, each carrying in his disbelieving heart a separate vision of Innocence, a distinct idea of the purity of the people who lived there in tranquillity. Each created the village after his own idea, and each peopled that village with his own race, religion, language; each saw himself as the Chief of the village, since their urban sophistication would set them apart and above the locals. Already, they had corrupted the village, without even a belief of its existence. They were chasing one vision in their hearts' chambers, but with separate dreams painted in one sleep.

One split second before the boat met a rock, the three froze, as in a still photograph or a paused movie. And the sentiment they shared, like a bowl of rice, was blame. The boat shattered into pieces, a tree smitten by lightning thrice. The sharp fragments of the boat flew through heaven's window and pierced the hearts of Wong and Mokhtar and Kumar. It was a crucifixion, a bloodletting, that set the eye of the river to a new weeping.

Five years after, the people of Innocence found the three bodies beneath the sands of their beach. The bodies were preserved miraculously, like glass. The people of Innocence, who did not own

but borrowed the land, who were first and last since ancient times, reached into the womb of the beach and withdrew the preserved dead bodies of Kumar, Mokhtar and Wong. They did not claim the bodies, just as they did not claim the land. They were first and last, so there was no need for possession.

Gently, they removed the pieces of the boat that had pierced each embittered heart of the three. The three men came alive in the shaded eye of the sun, claimed their bodies, and learned, like children to use their limbs again. Sometimes they would fall and scrape their skins to a new rawness, but the people of Innocence would place barks and leaves upon the wounds, which then healed without scars. Five years after, older, they found themselves to be brand new. They were happy, although they were somewhat frustrated by the Innocentians' (for so they called them) habit of getting their names mixed up.

With their new eyes and new freedom of movement, and with new words from old tongues, Mokhtar, Wong and Kumar observed and recorded their surroundings. The houses were built of stones from the riverbank, and windows and doors were open spaces in the stone structure. The stone kept out the heat of the day and the chill of the night. Finely woven bamboo mats covered the doors. In the centre of the village, there was one enormous pot from which they all ate.

Gradually, the three lost their habitual constriction of movement and their learned ability to edit experience from the continuing essays of their lives. They learned the new language, one that was strangely familiar, like a song whose words they had forgotten but whose strains they could dance to, or sing to quietly or loudly, with their new movement and words. Some of the words in the new language were like those of the languages of Mokhtar, Kumar and Wong, but they had new and strange meanings spliced into the old. So that the language was fluid and dense with poetry, laden with new experience and old memory. It was a thing they could hold like water in their new hands. There were no words for *my* or *mine*, only *ours*. There was no word to tell the economics of ownership, just those for borrowing and lending,

for generous giving and graceful acceptance, from *us* to *us*. There was no first or second, or third.

It was not that the three lost themselves completely, but they had gained a greater knowledge of themselves as people walking the land, listening to the wind through the leaves, the music of water over pebbles. What they lost was their hostility towards each other, since they had gained a knowledge of having survived together, and it was as if a great stone had been rolled away from the caves of their hearts. They were friends.

Many years later, Wong, and Mokhtar and Kumar, having found parts of their identical geography and having lost parts of their separate elemental histories, knew that they should set out to return to the resort, which was at the beginning and end of their journey. The sun stood high in the cloud-laden sky. It looked like the moon, and there was the cool of night in the breeze of the day. The people of Innocence smiled a tearful farewell, as if they were saying welcome and goodbye to children standing on the threshold of home.

The three friends got into their new boat, a replica of the old, and set off up the river. They had played a part in its making, helped by the people of Innocence. They had chosen a large trunk from the backyard forest, had used passionate fire to burn the inside, and had pushed it to a gentle floating upon the river. Wong sat in front steering; Kumar in the middle, provided balance; and Mokhtar gave power. The boat rode the surf soft as clouds, and the journey was swift. They passed the same dangers but worked in the harmony of a song carried on the breeze. Their calls lost the bruise of warnings and assumed the rhythm of poetry.

From a distance, they could see the people of the resort sitting in clutches, each distinct. They looked old and tired, and the hearts of the three friends ached for them and warmed at seeing them in a new light that made them seem like children and brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers. From a distance, by this new light under the large parasols beneath which they sat, the people on the beach of the resort saw the

three friends. And from this distance, they seemed to the people on the shore as if they were carved from the same wood as the boat, hewn from the same trunk of the Tree of Life - an unbroken and unspliced sculpture.

PEARLIE

Pearlie was a prostitute. She had no teeth, and her ready smile revealed battered, blackened gums where teeth should have been. About forty-eight, running to fat, her breasts were collapsed; the loose skin from the back of her upper arm flapped hopelessly over her elbows. Her one dress was clinging, drab, dirty, and coming apart at the seams. Pearlie's wool of hair was matted and reddish from lack of washing, caked with dirt.

Like the men and women, all the boys in the village spurned Pearlie; they'd speak disparagingly, disgustingly about her. Secretly, however, all the males were titillated by the thought of having secret sex with Pearlie -she was one of the few women in the village to be had easily. Pearlie could be bought or rented for twenty-five cents. From deep within the minds of those boys who were still virgins (they ranged to age thirty-two) bubble fantasies about Pearlie:

"Mek she scream blue murder, man!"

"I give it to she good-good...in she battie, man!"

"Who you t'ink you is, eh? Stud?"

"I can mek she halla fuh gaad self, man! You t'ink is joke!?"

Some of the local boys had already offered up their virginity at Pearlie's twenty-five-cent altar. They had been transformed instantly into experts at sex; they had other fantasies. In their feeble imagination, they transformed the collapsed, immobile, bored body of Pearlie lay beneath them for a minute or two into the firm, responsive suppleness of any one of many village virgins who were beyond their reach. This fantasy became more real with each subsequent visit and fabrication. Time and again, they would return to Pearlie, coin in hand.

In their minds, Pearlie's dilapidated hut became the southern-style residence in some cheap cowboy movie -a white mansion with large,

solid white pillars, not to be found in their actual Rose Hall village experience. Pearlie's semen-stained bed was transposed imaginatively into a four-poster with cool satin sheets. In this way, Pearlie the prostitute became Pearlie the virgin lover, perpetually so.

Corn Joe, one of the leaders of a group of boys, was twenty-six or so. He was initiated, one of the knowledgeable. He never worked, had never left the village; and was never to be seen during the day when the hot Caribbean sun was browbeating the land. His great purpose was to protect at all costs his most cherished property: his light-brown complexion. This, and his sexual expertise (he had gone to Pearlie several times), established him as superior to the darker, younger, uninitiated boys.

We admired Corn Joe, admired his status as stud (he had made Pearlie "Bawl she throat out!"); we envied his colour, his world weariness, and his voracious appetite for books. He had read many Louis L'Amour westerns and could speak with formidable authority on cowboys and dose damn Red Indians. We were convinced that his many unsuccessful attempts at the G.C.E. "O" levels English were the result of the petty jealousy of local school teachers. If only the English people at the University of London knew, all hell would break loose at the injustice.

Corn Joe hated the sun, and even when he had to go to the outhouse, he protected his light-brown skin by wrapping himself in a large blanket and wearing a huge, broad-rimmed straw hat. Corn Joe's greatest fear was blackness, second only to his fear of whiteness. He scorned all that was black. He was also an expert on "dose damm niggers!"

The main victim of Corn Joe's humour was Abel. Time after time, Corn Joe would say of Abel: "Raas, man! He black till he blue! Ugly like sin self! Dat's why he can't find no woman, you know. Too black. Too ugly. Too stupid." Abel was dark, one year older than Corn Joe, and he was a virgin. Secretly, the other boys pitied Abel, but they laughed loudly when Corn Joe said, "He guh stay married to Miss Palmer fuh

he whole life." This reference to masturbation made the boys too uneasy to be quiet. Their laughter grated, but Abel never left the group, never spoke much; but he smoked and squinted Clint Eastwood-style, and that earned him some respect. Abel's feeble counter was "I waitin' till I married, man." But Abel was desperate; yet even his desperation was not enough to overcome his shame or shyness.

The breakthrough came on Abel's birthday. Corn Joe had been uncharacteristically kind to Abel for the entire week, and all the boys knew that something was up. Yet Abel seemed unaware that anything was amiss, and he basked in the attention with which Corn Joe was showering him.

On the birthday, Corn Joe took Abel to the local beer garden; those who could afford to buy drinks for themselves and Corn Joe were free to attend. Corn Joe allowed Abel to drink just enough to lessen his inhibitions; the latter was then informed that his gift was to be "time with Pearlle." Abel was cheered, teased, playfully elbowed, given knowing glances and winks. He was the centre of positive attention, and he revelled in it. With a few more drinks, numerous slaps on the back, and all manner of sexual advice, Abel was sent on his way. Then Corn Joe explained to the boys the second part of the plan, to which Abel was not privy. We were all to go to Pearlle's hut and peer in through the numerous holes in her walls.

By the time the boys had taken up their positions, Abel was already fidgeting nervously with his belt. His shirt was on but pulled upwards; his trousers were down to his knees. Pearlle was already spread-eagled on the dirty, crumpled bed. Abel climbed aboard. Pearlle reached over for a newspaper, spread the pages between her face and Abel's, and read. In a flash, Abel was off - spent, panting. And Pearlle's voice, cool and gentle, her face peering from behind the newspaper:

"You done a'ready, boy?"

The boys fled quietly.

One hour after, Abel returned to the beer garden. He was puffed; the cigarette he was smoking dangled a little more precariously from his lips. the squint was tighter, his smile now a tough leer. He proclaimed through suitably clenched teeth:

"I give it to she, man...good- good."

Corn Joe asked, "You jus' done?"

"Yep! Just-just now. Yep!"

"Man, you tek laang. You good, man!"

"What I gon say, man? Yep!"

Then one of the younger boys laughed, the tears forming in the corner of his eyes:

"You done a'ready, boy?" He mimicked Pearlie.

The group erupted in laughter. Corn Joe slapped the table in glee.

Abel looked crumpled. Tears formed in his eyes. Abel got up tiredly and left. He never joined the group again.

CHILDREN AT PLAY

Old years night, or New Year's eve -Call it what you will, but - it was a time of excitement for the teenagers in our family. The air was clammy with expectation as our parents prepared to go out to private parties, leaving the teenagers in charge of the younger ones. It was a time of responsibility, a time of power. And that power was wielded with the ruthlessness of those unaccustomed to power. Our national leaders showed, by example, their smallness by being ruthless and corrupt in their exercise of power. Everyone else followed. The young followed most closely.

I had come to Georgetown, the capital, for the holidays from a small village in the country. I was, therefore, quite unworldly when compared to my six cousins, all male, all save one older than me. They never let me forget that I was the country bumkin in the group. I was fourteen, the eldest nineteen. And we were in charge of the house for the evening, kings of the castle, for the girls had been put with other girls in the charge of an aunt; kings of the castle, because the house seemed to me like a castle about which I had read in so many books. Not that it was built with towers and a drawbridge - and it was made of wood rather than of stone. But there were shadows in unexpected places; curtains blew in when there was no breeze; there were whispers when no one was speaking. There was a thrill in all of this, mystery; the fear that I felt was not unpleasant, for it set the heart to a quick pace, the blood to a faster rush.

Night fell like a hammer upon the land, hard. And the ringing dark signalled the exchange of power from the adults to the children. A changing of the guard, as it were. We waited anxiously for them to leave; then we waited some more, to make sure that they had indeed left, that they would not return having forgotten something- a purse, a handkerchief, some important instruction that had gone ungiven, anything. We were all tense from the waiting, and I imagined I could

hear the beat of my cousin's heart. All those knowledgeable hearts, beating in unison. Waiting. But waiting for what, specifically, I did not know.

And it was a good thing that we waited. We heard a car grind to a halt in the driveway, the roar of the engine breaking into the night. Uncle Ayoob, being very rich, drove a sports car. He came rushing in, carrying a slim attache case. All the boys crowded around him, greeting him with a kind of relief.

"Look, you chaps, I'm late, so I'll only tell you this once. One time only. You see this case?" He said harshly, pointing to the black case, so sleek that it reminded me of an unopened chocolate bar.

"Yes." We all said.

"I don' want you to touch this case, you hear? Do not even go near it," he warned, stressing each word.

Money, I thought. The case must be filled with money, packed neatly, the way we see it packed in cases in the movies. It must be one million dollars. That magic number: one million.

"If I hear that any one o' you all go *near* it, you all gon be in *big* trouble, you hear? *Big* trouble." he let his voice growl low on the word "big".

"Don' worry, Uncle Ayoob. If anybody go near it I gon break he hand," said Ishmael, the eldest, looking around at us as if daring us to challenge his authority.

"Good." Uncle Ayoob replied approvingly.

Then he took the case into one of the bedrooms, came out again, and left without another word. He did not even look at us as we stood apart to let him leave. Uncle Ayoob was a tall, thin man. He would have been an imposing figure had he been a bit broader, but he was so thin that he leaned over from the waist up. His trousers were bunched up ridiculously by the belt drawn tightly around his thin waist. For all his height, therefore, he seemed to belong in a comedy rather than in an

important mystery. He seemed like one who was acting at being tough, a would-be gangster acting at being a gangster. Yet I vowed in my mind not to go near the case - not so much for fear of Ishmael or of Uncle Ayoob, but for fear of the case itself, of what I may find in it.

We heard the car back out of the driveway, its tyres screeching ominously. Then we all breathed a collective sigh of relief. There were smiles all around. This interruption was welcomed because it made further interruptions unlikely. The worst was over, and now we could begin whatever game the elder boys had planned - that something which made them all tense and made me tense in turn.

I drew Halim, the youngest, aside. He was thirteen, one year younger than me, so that I had the right to question him.

"What dey gon do?"

"I don' know what they going to do." He said in proper English. I was ashamed that he could reprimand me in this way, by emphasising my poor English, the kind used by country people like me.

"What the two o' you all doin' pussur-pussur like two women gossiping 'bout she neighbour?" shouted Ishmael.

"Nuttin," we both said at once.

"Come here. I gon show you all something."

All the boys had gathered into a tight bunch, and I knew some great mystery was about to unfold. Everyone waited for Ishmael to lead the way. He was the eldest, the rightful leader, and we were bound to follow. The idea of not following was one that never arose.

Ishmael led the way into the room where Uncle Ayoob had left the case. He opened a closet as if he knew exactly where our uncle would have hidden the case. He brought it out with care, as if it would explode in his hands if he were not careful.

"You, D -! You see James Bond movie?"

"Yes." I said, trying hard to contain my indignance at being asked such a stupid question.

"Well, this case is like a James Bond case. It can explode if you don' open it right."

"You mean it don' have money in it?"

As soon as I asked the question, I realised that I had exposed my ignorance to the whole group. There was a chorus of laughter. I felt more tiny than I was, and I wanted to go home, back to my country village where at least I was respected. Unexpectedly, Ismael came to my defence.

"What you all laughin' at, eh? At least this boy interested in school. What the rest o' you know? Nothin'. That's what. Nothin'. So lef he alone, you hear. This is not a laughin' matter. We dealin' with something serious here. And if any one of you tell Uncle Ayoob about this, you better get outta town. One word outa you all and I go gun you down myself. What we got here is a secret organisation. Agreed?"

We all nodded solemnly.

"Out the light," he instructed, and someone switched off the fluorescent light. It was dark in the room, the curtains too thick for any moonlight or streetlight to filter through. He waited for a long time - maybe a minute, maybe two. Then he switched on a small pen torch, the small white light seeming bright after the darkness. I was impressed, and so were the others. Ishmael smiled at the effect that the drama had on us. Everyone was wide-eyed, the whites of their eyes large in the semi-dark. Then he took the case carefully and put it on the bed.

"Make a semi-circle around me," he instructed, and we fell into place. He examined the case, front, back, sides.

"What you lookin' for, Ishmael?" Halim asked in a small voice.

"Shut up! You only talk when spoken to. Remember, every chain is as strong as it weakest link! Empty drum make most noise!"

The second brother slapped him at the back of the head; there was a small whimper, and I could see the tears well up in Halim's eyes.

"Enough! You know, you all don' deserve to see what I gon show you. You all to small. Maybe we should just call it off. Abort the mission."

"Please, Brother." Pleaded two of the older boys.

"Yes, pleeease! We gon be good. Show we, Brother."

"Alright then. But no more nonsense, you hear. No more."

Then Ishmael resumed his examination of the case - Front, back, the two sides. His eyes narrowed; his upper lip twitched to one side. We all knew he was something between Clint Eastwood and Elvis Presley. We were all impressed.

"Now, you all take note. Take careful note. Notice that I got the case right side up. If you got it wrong way up, the whole house gon explode. Bang!! Everybody turn to dust! Notice that I check for any thread or hair that Uncle Yacoob put as a booby trap. If the hair or the thread out of place, he done know that we open the case. And we all dead anyway. Okay. It clean."

Then, with a careful forefinger, he snapped open one latch. The sound was loud, and I thought that the entire neighbourhood would have heard it. Yet the thud of my heart was louder. My hands were clammy, and I was afraid to blink. My foot itched, but I dared not bend to scratch it.

"Snap!" went the other latch. Then Ishmael sat back to admire his handywork. There was no sound from anyone, not even the sound of soft breathing.

"Ope -" someone said.

"Quiet -! Patience is virtue! Must I teach you everything?"

We stood around him in a tight semi-circle, around the glow of the pen torch. He shone it upon each face, slowly, one after the other. Each of us squinted at the light. Then, abruptly, he turned the light on the case and opened it.

It was a wondrous sight. It was indeed like being in a James Bond movie. It was more beautiful than one million dollars packed neatly. It was a gun set, the pieces set in red felt. The white light of the pen torch bounced back onto our faces as a blue light. There were three pistols, and various other bits and pieces. But the top gun was the most impressive. It had a handle of deeply polished wood and a long barrel. Before this spectacle, we were all silent.

I had never seen real guns before, and I was dazzled by the clean beauty of the things - by the hard lines, the colour, the potency. To have such things in his possession, Uncle Ayoob must not only be a man of power, but also a hero. Maybe he was using these weapons against people who spoke ill of the country, people like the colonisers which our politicians always spoke so intensely about. After all, ordinary people like my father, like my neighbours and my friends did not have weapons like these. We were the people of the lowly cutlass. And Ishmael was a hero also (although a lesser hero), for he put himself at grave risk to show us this wonderful sight. I wanted to be a leader like him: a man of fine words and brave deeds.

Just as abruptly as he had opened it, Ishmael closed the case. He latched it and said:

"Turn on the light!" And the light came on as if by magic. The feeling was like coming out of a darkened cinema into the daylight, and we were all disoriented for a while. Ishmael placed the case back into the closet and shut the door.

Then we all went out of the room. Ishmael was the last to leave, making sure that we left no trace of our presence.

"Remember, men, one word and we're all finished. Kaput! Clear?" He made his voice sound like Uncle Ayoob's.

"You all hungry?" Ishmael asked. How wonderful it was that everything he said sounded like a challenge or an order. He asked a question, but knew the answer before it came. We all looked at each other to see whether we were hungry or not.

"Good. We'll have a snack," said Ishmael. Then he instructed his second brother:

"You! You go and wake up Veronica, if she sleep that is. If she ain't sleep, tell she to prepare some snacks for us. Tell her I say."

And off went the second brother to get the maid to do as Ishmael had commanded.

We spent the next half of an hour talking about movies and about music. As usual, Ishmael showed his prodigious knowledge. He spoke of Sean Connery and the scar that made him suitable to play the role of James Bond; about Elvis Presley, who was the greatest musician of all time. He told us of how Presley had started playing the guitar by stretching rubber bands along the length of a wooded ruler, making music by strumming the rubber bands.

To redeem myself for the one million dollar mistake, I decided to ask a question - one which showed that I was not entirely stupid, and that I was willing to learn from my superiors:

"Brother Ishmael, what you think of Nat King Cole?"

He replied: "Now the rest o' you hear that question? You all hear it?"

"Yes, Brudda," they replied.

"Ask it again, in case they ain't hear it. Sometimes they hard of hearing. you know."

With pride, I repeated the question: "Brother Ishmael, what you think of Nat King Cole?"

"Now that's an excellent question! That is the result of schooling. The rest o' you all too stupid to ask a question like that! Nat King Cole is a great singer -not as great as Elvis though -but he is a great actor too.

Not many people know this, you know. You see him in a picture called *China Gate*. Man, he was something else!"

Our discussion was interrupted by the maid, Veronica. She was a pretty girl, clearly mixed with Indian and Black -a *douglah* girl, as we would say. She was about nineteen. Her soft curly hair was somewhat dishevelled, but this made her prettier, if anything. She wore a simple dress a gift from one of my aunts who thought it too shabby to wear any longer. But on Veronica, it looked lovely.

She did not seem artificial like all of my aunts and female cousins, who were starched, their hair looking like candy floss made of wire because of too much hair spray. Veronica was beautifully shaped, not too big, not too thin. The dress showed her upright breasts to advantage, but did not reveal any skin. My aunts or uncles would have disapproved of such an immodest display, for they were devout Islamic people who read the Holy Koran each day and went to mosque each and every Friday.

I remember, on one of those rare occasions when they visited us in the country, Uncle Ayoob's wife, Mary, being very upset that I had a piggy bank in the shape of a pig. She was offended so deeply that she took my piggy bank and threw it out the window. It landed on the concrete and shattered into a million pieces; my coins -saved to buy things at Christmas -flew in all directions. Uncle Ayoob smiled his approval: the convert had arrived. I made no move to retrieve my coins. My father, who had never objected to the piggy bank, was quiet. The next day, he gave me money to me to make up for my loss. It was his way of saying that he disapproved of the rash action of Uncle Ayoob and Aunt Mary.

I wondered how Veronica could stand it living here with the likes of Aunt Mary. She was such an attractive and nice girl that she could have found another job, or even the same job, but with people nicer than Aunt Mary. It was little wonder that I had never seen Veronica

smile - Not once. Uncle Ayoob would say the funniest things in her presence, but she would not smile.

Sometimes, between her endless chores, when there was a slight break, she would stand still before a window, a vacant look in her light brown eyes. It was then that my heart hurt for her. I imagined that she yearned for home or for better people for whom to work; and I thought that when I return to the country, I would ask my father to bring her to our house.

She served the snacks, cakes mostly, in small white saucers. Then she moved around the table, pouring soft drinks into the glasses which she had set before each of the boys. She served Ishmael first, since he had assumed his position at the head of the table. When we were finished devouring the cakes and the drinks, she cleared the table. She took Ishmael's glass and saucer last. When she bent over him to remove the small plate, he put his arm around her waist.

No one said a word, but I could see the surprise in the other boys' eyes. And I could see fear in Veronica's. But she ignored his grasp and continued in a single-minded way to clear the table.

"Did you eat, Veronica?" Asked Ishmael, his voice taking on a tone of concern.

"Yes."

"Veronica?"

"Yes?"

"You should say 'yes, thanks'. That's what civilised people say." Ishmael's voice had taken on a threatening tone that made him seem ugly. I felt that he was taking advantage of the poor girl. The other boys were quiet. Veronica just nodded and continued her way to the adjoining kitchen.

Suddenly, the second brother asked: "Brother Ishmael, you ever...you know, with Veronica?"

"You remember what Uncle Ayoob say 'bout that set in the bedroom? Well, Veronica is the same as that set. Only Uncle Ayoob can touch and do."

"What 'bout Mary?"

"Don' be stupid. He only does it when she ain't home. Sometimes Ayoob would phone to make sure that Mary not here, then he would come back from work and do he business."

It was only now that I began to understand Veronica's real plight. It wasn't Mary who was the real threat. It was Ayoob. Ishmael continued:

"But tonight, tonight is we night. Understand?"

"But -" started one of the other brothers.

"-Quiet! I not gon talk again." It was beginning to dawn on me why there was this air of expectancy in the boys. The elder boys knew the plan; the younger ones knew the tension without the specifics.

When Ishmael left the table, the rest of us followed. No one spoke, and that made the night seem even darker, the air more thick. The shadows in the house seemed more ominous, but I knew by instinct that the danger that lurked in the night was not directed at us - not at the boys. The grandfather clock struck ten: bong! bong! bong! It went on and on. I always hated these clocks, always dreaded the noise they made, as if the sound were a signal for awful things to begin.

Ishmael said that it was time for us to play games: "What you all want to play? Cards or monopoly?"

"Cards!" I replied quickly, since I never understood monopoly.

"Well, cards it is, then!" Ishmael said, to my relief. He reached to the top of a cabinet where the family kept their prize crystal and brought down a pack of cards. It was brand new.

"Now you younger fellows will begin the game. The four senior people will follow me. We got some important business to attend to."

I was pleased at this, for I knew that the other two boys could not beat me at cards. And I was anxious to take hold of the new cards. I liked the stiffness of the cards, the new smell, the way they moved easily when shuffled.

"What game you all gon play?" asked the second brother.

"Trumps!" I said.

"You can't play trumps wid three people, stupid. Country people gat no brain, you know. I--" said the youngest brother, but his lecture was stopped by a hard smack on the head, compliments of the second brother. Again the yelp, again the tears settling into his eyes. Through the tears, he looked at me accusingly.

"You all play trumps, then. Play the three-man version. that even better than the regular version. Only grown-ups get to play the three-man version, you know. And tonight you all is grown-ups." Ishmael said, settling the debate. "And remember. You play and keep score, because when we come back, I want to know who win and who lose, right?"

"Right!" the three of us said.

Ishmael gave me the pack, and I smiled at the compliment. This seemed to indicate that I was in charge in his absence. I removed the cards from the pack, making sure to take the jokers out from the top and bottom of the pack. I did this with a flourish, then started shuffling the cards at a rate that set the eyes of my two cousins blinking with disbelief.

When I turned to see whether Ismael and the other three brothers had noticed my dexterity, they were gone. The three of us were alone, one cousin one year older than me, another one year younger. I did not dare ask where the other four had gone. That would have been betrayal, and it would surely have been reported by the youngest brother. He would have been happy if I were to get into trouble with Brother Ishmael.

Then it occurred to me that we could not keep the score without pen and paper:

"Go, get pen and paper for we to keep score," I said to my younger cousin, making my voice like Ishmael's. He did not move, but looked at his elder brother. He wanted him to repeat the order or to negate it by virtue of the authority vested in him by age. But he said nothing. So the youngest cousin got up slowly enough so that his displeasure may be registered, went to one of the drawers in the cabinet and got a pen and paper.

When he sat again, we started the game in earnest. We played for about half of an hour -I know because the grandfather clock gave one loud "BONG!" to indicate that the long hand had reached six. I was way ahead in the score, and the other two were becoming restless.

"You want shuffle?" I asked them.

"Yes." said the older cousin.

"You didn' hear what Brother Ishmael say to Veronica? Is 'yes, thanks'" I said.

"Yes, me ass!" he said, "Now give me the card before I slap you stupid head," and he held his hand over my head as if he would hit me.

"You tell he! He trying to play big boss here, and he ain't even belong here!"

"Shut up!" said the elder cousin, sounding exactly like Ishmael.

"If you hit me, I gon tell -" but before I could finish the sentence, his hand descended hard on my head. There was a loud ringing in my ears, and my eyes welled up with tears. The youngest cousin giggled. I sat there on the floor, my head down, for a long while. Then I got up and walked away, bent on finding Brother Ishmael and lodging a complaint. But I knew that no amount of complaining could relieve the hurt that I felt.

My legs took me to the kitchen, but there was no one there. Neither was there anyone in the dining room. I opened the door of one of the bedrooms, but the room was dark. I tried the door of another, and as soon as I opened the door, I heard scuffling, as if people were fighting.

But there was no sound of blows; it was as if everything was hushed, as if people were fighting but unwilling to let anyone know that they were. The door had shut behind me, or maybe I had dragged it shut as I entered the room. I stepped away from the frame of the door, into the deeper shadows. It took some time for my eyes to grow accustomed to the dim light in the room, and it took me even more time to realise that the smear of light on the carpeted floor was that of the pen-torch that Ishmael had used earlier. There was a strange knot or arrangement of bodies on the floor.

Then I saw clearly the scene that was laid out before me: Two of the boys had grabbed hold of each of Veronica's legs; they had her legs pinned apart. Another was holding her hands by the wrists above her head, his own legs spread, so that her head was in the crook of his pants. She was struggling to come loose, but the boys were much stronger. Her dress, the same one which she was wearing earlier, was raised to her neck, and her underwear lay in tatters at the side of her struggling hips. Ishmael lay above her, panting and grunting. His teeth shone in the slight light, as if he wore some grotesque mask. His pants were drawn down, showing his moving buttocks. Yet she struggled wordlessly, her head turning wildly from side to side. I curled deeper into the shadows, more from fear at being discovered than from abhorrence at what was being done to her.

Ishmael got off, and moved to her head. He grabbed at her wrist, but it slipped from his grasp, and she flayed wildly with her one free arm. He grabbed hold of her forearm, and worked his grip up to the wrist. The second brother took up where his eldest had left off. When he got on top of her, Veronica stopped struggling. She was defeated.

It was only then that I realised why she had stopped struggling: she had seen me in the shadows, her eyes seeming to burn a path through the darkness and into mine. I was crying. I felt in the dark for the doorknob and backed out of the room through the smallest of cracks. Her eyes followed me. What surprised me was that I did not see accusation in her wide stare; what I saw was guilt.

I ran to the kitchen, stood at the window where she would gaze with her vacant look. I looked out for what seemed a long time into the dark night. It was then that I realised, to my shame and horror, that I was aroused.

When I went back to my tiny village in the country where I belonged, I did not ask my father to bring Veronica to work for us. When I was asked how my holiday went, I did not even mention her name.

FRED SINGH, PRINCIPAL SHOEMAKER

In his belief in the prophesying quality of dreams, Fred Singh, the village shoemaker, was identical to my high school principal, Mr. Chandaball. Chandaball was a man who was much feared and revered in the community, a man of standing who dressed and behaved like a man who was to be feared and a man of standing. He was perpetually harsh, never smiled, and he was never to be seen without a suit and tie. And he never mixed with the rabble. For instance, although he was an inveterate gambler, Mr. Chandaball was not to be caught dead inside a racing booth. Instead, he came to my father's house, and they sent me to place their bets.

Mr. Chandaball, like most of the men in the village, was quite taken by horse racing in Trinidad. These races were held mostly on Saturdays; but, sometimes, when the races in Trinidad were held on a weekday when we were in school, he would send a teacher or a student to get me from my classroom.

As was his custom, he sat at a small desk outside of his office. He sat there in his suit -usually black -and tie in the sweltering heat. His white shirt shone bright in the sun. The sleeves of the shirt, jutting out from beneath the sleeves of the suit, were crisp from starch and proper ironing. His skinny wrists stuck out from both sleeves like bare bones, brown and shrunken as if they were withered from being in the sun too long. The fingers of his hands were equally shrunken, rather like distended dried prawns. The index and middle fingers of his right hand were stained a deep yellow from the nicotine of cigarettes; Mr. Chandaball was like a human chimney, it seemed to me, although I knew nothing of chimneys save what I read of them in books.

I walked up to Mr. Chandaball, and though fully aware of my presence, he ignored me for the longest while, his eyes squinting into the large sheets of paper spread out before him like an enormous meal he was

examining before devouring it. His shrivelled right hand, with its stained fingers, pinched a cigarette and moved at regular intervals up and down, from his lips to the desk, then back again. In between, the smoke came streaming from his mouth and nostrils, which would flare to a third more of their normal size, then twitch. The smoke hung almost solid in the air, then dissipated to nothingness with a slight breeze, his right upper lip twitching in unison with the nostrils. The skin on his face was drawn tightly across the bones of his face, as if there was no flesh in between bone and skin. There was a small glow from his head where the light bounced off. Mr Chandaball was bald, except for a few grey hairs at the side. He brushed these few hairs across his head, and they sat there in thin wisps, calling attention to his baldness rather than hiding it. As he sat there in smoking contemplation of his sheets, I stood at attention.

The general impression in the school, held by students and teachers, was that these sheets held some great mystery regarding examination results. They all felt that he was plotting and planning endlessly for better success, that he was reviewing old records so that the students of the school may establish new ones. But no one had come close enough to know what those sheets contained, what mystery those handwritten names and numbers held. Mr. Chandaball guarded this secret from everyone but my father and me; the two were fellow conspirators, and I was a necessary accessory. Chandaball's sons were not to be trusted with secrets nor with money.

The sheets contained many entries in pencil; there were numerous columns, complexly arranged, rather like a taxonomy. But the entries had nothing at all to do with the school or with students. They were entries of past performances by scores of horses running in Trinidad. At a glance, Mr Chandaball could tell you when a horse won or was second, third or fourth; what weight it carried; at what distance it won or placed; who was the jockey and who the trainer; and who was the sire and the dame. There was a column for track conditions: firm, soft, sloppy. All of this at a glance, a complete and complex record going

back as many as seven years. These records were constantly updated. They represented painstaking record keeping, testimony of the man's thoroughness and scruple.

And while he examined these records, I stood there. Finally, he looked up and regarded me as if I were a stranger:

"Yes, boy. What do you want?"

"You sent for me, Sir."

"Mmmm. Oh, yes. Yes, indeed." And he returned for a few minutes to his records. This was a kind of ritual, a kind of game. I never minded the wait or the game. I was only too happy to be there at his beck and call, and the longer he spent, the better it was for me. These moments represented escape from the drudgery of class work; it also set me apart from the other students, made me one of the inner circle, someone with access to the inaccessible, aloof Mr. Chandaball. I could return to my fellow students and say with pride:

"The Chief called me again, man."

Each time he summoned me, I knew the question that was coming:

"So, boy!

"Yes, Sir?"

"What did you dream last night?"

It never failed, never varied. Mr. Chandaball liked routine, and I was happy to participate. In the beginning of this arrangement, I used to tell him what I remembered of my dreams, or that I did not remember, or that I did not dream last night. But I soon discovered that he expected me to dream, and that I had to dream in something other than in unintelligible fragments. My dreams had to make sense in order to expedite the job at hand: finding a winner.

To facilitate the execution of the job, I spent hours going through the racing programme the night before the races, selecting the horses I thought would win. Then I either contrived an incoherent dream with

a number in it, or I wove a tale, a narrative, which contained clues about which horse would win. For instance, if I thought that the horse Ferry Boat was going to win in the fifth, I told him that I dreamt that I was travelling aboard the *Torani*, the boat that plied the Berbice river. I was with five people, or I crossed the river in the boat five times. If there were other horses that I thought stood a good chance of winning, I would invent in the dream an incident or a name or number around their names. All of this was a considerable challenge to my youthful and unsophisticated imagination, and I do not imagine that Mr. Chandaball was fooled by my stories. Yet, he placed a considerable amount of money on the horse or horses for which I had fashioned the tale. This was my game, and he played along.

After we had had our earnest discussion of dreams and their interpretations

-he would write his bets for races one and two on a piece of paper, then he would give me money to cover the bets. It was the best time I had adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing. In class, I hated math above all other subjects. With Mr Chandaball's instructions and money safe in my pocket, I would set off for "Punters' Paradise", a racing booth in the middle of our town, about a mile away from our school.

Usually, I took my own Raleigh three-speed bicycle. I rode like the wind, my navy blue and silver-striped school tie flying and flapping pleasantly over my shoulder, measuring by the rapidity of the flaps the rate at which I was riding. But at other times, when my tyre was punctured or when I claimed that my bike was broken, he would allow me to take his. This was a singular honour, for his bicycle was his pride and joy; no one but Mr. Chandaball rode that bicycle, a big-framed, shiny Humber that rode as smooth as milk, even over the bumpy dirt road that led to the school. I was sure to let my schoolmates know of my privilege, the only person allowed to ride the red-tired thing.

Once I got to "Punters' Paradise", I placed the bets Mr. Chandaball had written on the piece of paper, sat and chatted for as long as I could with

Fred Singh, the shoemaker, and listened to race one. Then I returned to school, straight to my anxious principal. If his bet was a winning one, Mr. Chandaball would affect something that passed for a smile. His two thin lips, pasted firmly together, flicked up and to the right. And that was it. No yelling, no shouting, no words of praise for the horse or the jockey or for me, no joy. Just that movement of his lips, which seemed to mock the whole world. I admired what I thought was the dignity of the man. He was not my hero, but I admired and feared him. On those occasions when the races fell on weekdays, my entire afternoon session was spent going to and from the betting shop. I appreciated Mr. Chandaball's trust, but more than that I appreciated his discretion at not mentioning the school work I was missing.

I looked forward to these trips to the racing booth or racing shop for several reasons other than that they gave me a reprieve from Geography or Math or French classes. My missions for Mr. Chandaball gave me the chance to listen to some of the races and to observe the antics of the punters. But, most of all, I looked forward to sitting and talking with Fred Singh.

Fred Singh plied his trade in front of a rickety old building, which housed the "racing booth". This was a place where people came and placed bets on horse racing in England or Trinidad or Barbados. Since horse racing was said by the government to be an evil that would contaminate the morals of the people and had banned live horse racing in the country, people flocked to these betting shops or betting booths. They seemed bent on corrupting their morals, in spite of the government's noble attempts to keep them pure. The government taxed these betting shops some fifty thousand dollars per year to discourage the practise of gambling. But nothing seemed to work, and the government collected the taxes and parcelled out the proceeds among the ministers and permanent secretaries with sadness.

There were scores of these shops around the country. The people, it would seem, would gladly have exchanged their government with that

of Trinidad or Barbados or England. In spite of the best efforts of the government, they would have sold their souls to the devil.

On weekdays, there was usually English racing in "Punters' Paradise"; but Saturday was the big day, for it was the day for racing in Trinidad. During the weekdays, the traffic of punters was pretty meagre, and this gave Fred Singh time to examine and comment on each pair of shoes or bare feet or rubber slippers that clopped or scuffed pass his little box. These days were slow because people worked, and they could only get their bets by sending someone to place them on their behalf. This, after all, was a Co-operative Republic. But on Saturday afternoons, from about twelve thirty, the crowd came. Fishermen, teachers, businessmen, cane-cutters, farmers, butchers, taxi drivers -they came from all corners of the little area in search of instant wealth. "Punters' Paradise" was the great social equaliser. Only Mr. Chandaball was exempt from this levelling.

Punters turned out on Saturdays, as well, because they felt closer somehow to the horses in Trinidad. They told stories of past bets won and lost, about the horses, jockeys, trainers and owners, as if they knew them intimately. Also, the races were broadcast over the radio in Trinidad; and the owner of the betting shop picked up the Trinidadian station on his powerful set. This was kept within the enclosed area but turned outwards to the customers. There were several speakers -taken from disembodied radios and hooked up by numerous wires to the radio set in the cage -scattered around the shop. The men told tales of the radio commentator as if they were their close relatives, and there were camps which preferred one announcer over another. Trinidadian announcers were preferred over Barbadian announcers, the latter being too "englishfied". But the announcers regarded as the very best in the world were British announcers. Mr. Chandaball was one who held this sentiment most vehemently.

As the time for each race drew near, there was a rush to the counters. Many people took their time to consider the horses, to check their records, to ponder upon the state of the track, to discuss the distance,

to wait for the odds and for the commentators' advice or comments. Then the call came: "One minute to post time!!" And a whole wave of them surged forward to place their bets. Somehow, most of them seemed able to get their bets in on time.

The bets placed, they returned to their rough wooden benches, their handwritten tickets grasped tightly in their sweaty palms. The seconds ticked by, and the rumble of voices came to a unanimous halt, as if someone had switched off a noisy machine. But the transformation from rumbling noise to dead silence was not the only change that came over them. Their entire postures changed: they became rigid with expectation, their eyes glazed over with concentration, frowns cutting deeply into their brows, as if they themselves were astride the horses, waiting for the gates to fly or the boxes to open, letting out a flood of horses.

Then came the magical shout from the racing commentator, all the way from Trinidad, but as close to them as their ambitions:

"AND THERE THEY GO!" This was the trademark beginning of one announcer.

Or, "AND THEY'RE OFF AND RUNNING!" The by-line of another announcer. And then the man on the radio continued in an endless stream of commentary. And the silence of the punters, the unbreathing rigidity, continued throughout the race until the horses hit the three-furlong pole. Then, like in the thick fluidity of a dream, came a most astonishing shifting of positions.

One punter moved forward on the bench, his buttocks barely touching the edge of the bench, legs pulled beneath him wide apart, feet curled, his hands clenched tightly against his chest. The man next to him bowed his head so that it almost touched the table, then jerked it up in the most painfully rapid fashion, his arms stretched out before him, palm outward and upward, as if in some ritual of prayer. This bow-and-upward-jerk movement continued unabated until the horses passed the finish line.

Another, on the opposite of these two, shifted from a normal sitting position and sat astride the bench, his buttocks high up in the air, as if he were riding a horse. His hands, slightly apart, were clasped in two fists, pumping back and forth, scrubbing the imaginary neck of the horse in Trinidad, tugging back and forth at the imaginary reins. This was called hand-riding.

Some punters, while favouring the same jockey's position astride the bench, preferred the whip, so that their left hands grasped imaginary reins and their right hands worked in the furious movement of beating the horse for greater momentum. There was the sound of whipping, as the fingers of the right hands were held together, with the index fingers snapping against the rest. Many right hands, slightly to the rear, moved up and down in the furious manner of whipping the horses' haunches.

These men, all engaged in the same intense activity of riding their benches, were careful to glance over to see the position of the opponent. Strategy was everything. All of this took great coordination, of course, and it was wondrous to see the left hands pumping in and out, right hands flaying up and down, buttocks moving with the rhythms of the horses, eyes glancing to right and left. These men had rhythm.

There were other punters, of course, who were much more in control of themselves. These were quite satisfied to make sucking sounds through pursed lips, meant to urge their horse on. Others, usually the more educated group, were so much in control of their faculties that they actually spoke to the horses:

"That's it boy! Stretch out now! Stretch! Stretch!"

"Easy boy! That's right - don't fade!"

"Stride out, Fidel! Fly Fidel! You is wind self!!"

The man next to him, a school teacher, was not betting on the horse named Fidel, but on Maiden Fleece; hearing the exhortation of the other who would have Fidel fly, he rebutted:

"Go, Maiden! Go! You is wind *papa*!!!"

Another teacher who had placed a bet on King's Bounty, a very popular horse, shouted: "Go Bounty! Go! Show dem who's King!"

At the end of the race, as the horses streamed past the post, there was a chorus of reactions - one from the small camp of winners, and one from the large body of losers. The noise drowned out the commentator's voice. The former, panting from the effort of riding their benches, would say to their fellow winners:

"You see!? I tell you! Dat horse gat heart! Heart, I tell you!! Heart! Dat horse is all heart, man!!"

And there would be hugs and general good fellowship within the ranks of the winners.

The losers' reactions, understandably, were different. Out would come four-letter words of abuse. Or, simply, "Shit!!" "Raas!"

Others would heap insults on the horse: "Dat horse is a goat, I tell you! A real goat, man!" Or, "Dat animal is a jackass! Why he runnin' in a horse race, me nah know!" Or "Dey should put dat donkey out to pasture! He can't win even if he run by heself!! Is the last time I put one black cent pon he ass, leh me tell you!! One black cent!"

That is another thing Fred Singh and I noticed: statements were always repeated for effect.

Yet others, in fits of anger against the trainer or jockey, would rail against Trinidadians:

"I tell you 'bout dem Trini, man! dey kyaan' do nothin' right. Nothin'!! Dey gat plenty dollars and no sense! No sense!"

And by the time the race was over, there would be a sea of sweating, panting punters, swearing or praising the horse upon which they had bet. They would check and re-check their tickets, just in case there was a mistake to a winning ticket which would make it useless, or just in

case there was some mistake to a losing bet that changed it by some miracle, into a winning enterprise.

This checking and re-checking of tickets brought an uneasy rustling to the shop; the sound of winning tickets being folded neatly and tucked away into shirt pockets, or losing tickets being crumpled and thrown on the floor. This was accompanied by an endless muttering, a sound like a restless sea. Always, there would be the extremes of jollification or depression; always, these would evaporate as the next race drew near.

After each race, the owner of the betting shop poured over the carbon-papered receipts of the tickets sold to see how many people had won. Of course, he knew how well he fared from the reaction of the crowd; but if there was an upset, and even if there was one shout of victory, it meant a big pay-off. The owner of the shop would sweat as much from the worry of having to make a big payment as from the heat. He was a man like the men outside the wire-meshed enclosure, but his dreams of riches were beyond the mark of ordinary men. He was separated from the crowd by something more formidable than the wire-mesh enclosure or height of ambition: he had actually been to Trinidad.

After each race, Fred Singh's solitary comment was:

"Wastrels!" This was but a mutter, meant for our ears only. Fred usually kept his own council, never offended anyone, and it would not do anyone any good if the punters were to hear his assessment of them. But even though he condemned them in concise fashion, Fred Singh was not beyond placing a less-than-modest fifty-cent bet on a horse. This, however, was rare, and it usually done on the strength of something we were saying or had said - something which coincided with the name of a horse. If he had had a dream, or if I had told him one of mine, and if the dream seemed to portend victory by a certain horse, Fred would place his fifty-cent bet. I would venture a bet of two dollars. If we won, we proclaimed the power of the dream; if we lost, we blamed it on a poor interpretation of that dream. We seldom won; the dream never lost.

In that lonely and restless period between having written the GCE University of London examinations and awaiting the results which determined the course of each young life in the country, I spent many hours with Fred Singh. He was the only man I knew who was on time, every time. At precisely eight in the morning, he appeared at the front of the shop. His shirt was always clean and pressed, his trousers seamed to razor-sharp perfection, his leather shoes gleaming. He was dressed better than most of my teachers, except for Mr. Chandaball. Well dressed, he waited until the owner of the betting shop chose to turn up and open the shop, sometime between nine and ten. Fred had to wait because his small wooden box with some of his tools and all of the shoes on which he was working were locked in the shop, and the owner refused to give Fred a key to the place. The more valuable shoemaker's knives Fred took with him in a small leather case which he had made himself.

Fred Singh came at eight sharp, and I learned from him to be there at eight as well. I do not know why I bothered to get up and go out to wait with him, but I did. He never reprimanded me, never asked or expected me to show up; but somehow, after having shown up twice, I felt obliged to do so again and again. Fred sat on a small ledge of one of the wooden windows, took a packet of cigarettes from his shirt pocket, shook one of the white sticks from the pack straight between his lips. Then he took a box of matches, carefully choosing one of the wooden sticks, and struck it deliberately along the edge of the box. The flame hissed into life. Fred lit the cigarette and breathed deeply. Then he let out a stream of smoke through his mouth and nostrils, and it disappeared into the air. He did this every morning, as if it were a ritual that made endurance possible, as if it kept impatience at bay. In most people, I would have found this to be an exercise in self-consciousness, showing off; but in Fred Singh, it was simply something he did.

He never spoke while he waited, not even a word of greeting. I waited with him, assuming his posture and his silence, but I never smoked. Once the shop was opened, Fred and I dragged the wooden box outside.

He took a small key from his pocket and opened the small lock. Then he took out a pair of frayed sneakers and his apron from the box, removed his shoes, then put on the sneakers and the apron. He sat on a small wooden stool and got to work. Work always began with the waxing of several lengths of string, then the sharpening of knives on a slab of leather. I liked the swooshing sound of blade on leather as much as I liked the smell of the dried hide. Once the work began, Fred started talking - slowly and quietly - choosing his words deliberately, as if they cost him money.

"You see, my friend, you always prepare you tools. If is a knife, you sharpen it. If is a pen, you make sure it gat ink. Dat is one of the secret of good work -good tools. You look after them, and they look after you. Tools is like spirits: if you treat them good, they treat you good. If you treat them bad, they let loose hell pon you head."

I perched on the window ledge and looked over his left shoulder at his deft movements. Most people, rather than buy new pairs of shoes, wanted to have new soles put on their old shoes, and Fred put those soles on with care. Fred said:

"Shoes become like old friends to people, as if they understand people feet, and the feet understand the shoes. But this happen only after a while, the friendship form after a period. Gloves like that too, you know, but I ain't know too much 'bout gloves." He smiled at his joke, for no one in his right mind would wear gloves in this climate.

When Fred repaired shoes, they were meant to last, and Fred Singh was jealous of his reputation as a craftsman. He took the worn shoe and prised open the bad sole; then he took a pair of plyers and removed the sole one stitch at a time, so as not to rip the upper part of the shoe. The shoes, without soles, looked quite unlike shoes, as if they had lost their identity. He took a piece of leather and measured out the shape of each shoe with a pencil. He looked over the piece of marked leather and placed the pencil between his ear and his skull. There it would remain until needed again.

He cut the leather with his incredibly sharp shoemaker's knife, and it always amazed me to see the shark fin of the blade cut into and through the thick, supple, wet hide. He attached the shaped and beaten skin onto the upper part of the shoe with small nails. Then he cut a small rib into the sole and then stitched the sole firmly onto the shoe. Then he began the next side. It was a ritual of care and pride.

Sometimes he looked up from his work and pointed to a passer-by:

"That one is me own, you know. I make dat three years ago. And see how it still going strong? People don' realise that if they not going to do something right in the first place, then they shouldn't do it at all. If you not going to do your school work good, then don't do it at all. See what I mean? "

"Yes."

"People say dat pride is a bad thing, but they forget dat there is good pride and bad pride. Is good to do your work with pride. Is like a circle, see. If you do good work, then you proud of dat work; and because you proud of dat work, you do better work."

All the while he talked, he worked. The work fed the words, and the words gave reason to the work.

One day, Mr. Chandaball, much to my astonishment, rode in on his big, red-tyred Humber bicycle. He was dressed, as usual, in a dark suit, tie and white shirt. He dismounted with a flourish, then took a brown paper bag from the back of the bicycle, leaned it on its stand, and walked over to Fred Singh. Without thinking, I jumped down from my perch and stood at attention. I could sense Fred stiffen as well, but he did not stand.

"Good morning, boys." It surprised me to hear Mr. Chandaball call Fred a boy, the same way he referred to me. This placed Fred in the same rank with me, and I was uncomfortable with that. But we both answered:

"Good morning, Sir."

Before Fred could speak again, Mr. Chandaball said:

"I brought some work for you to do. I need new soles on these shoes, and I want you to do an excellent job."

"Well, you come to the right man, Sir. I-"

"-We'll see about that, hmmm. I'll be the judge of that!" Mr. Chandaball cut him off:

"Of course, Sir. Of course."

"How much do you charge?"

"I charge everybody reasonable, Sir. Five dollars for two brand new soles and new heels."

"Okay. I'll give you four dollars, if the work is good. Clear?"

"But -Yes, Sir," said Fred.

Mr. Chandaball wheeled around even before the respectful "sir" was out of Fred Singh's mouth, kicked up the bicycle stand, and rode off, his black jacket billowing in the wind. For the longest while, Fred said nothing; he just went about his business. The brown paper bag which contained Mr. Chandaball's shoes was left untouched on the small wooden box. Only his silence made me know that Fred was upset; and he worked in silence for more than two hours. People passing into the racing booth said hello to Fred, but he did not reply. I said nothing.

Then, as time drew near for putting away the tools and closing up the box, Fred said:

"So, my friend, that's your headmaster, eh?"

"Yes," I replied, "That's Mr. Chandaball. We call him Cassius. You know what Caesar said to Antony: Let me have men about me that are fat, sleek-headed and such as sleep o' night. Yon Cassius has a lean and hungry look. He thinks too much...such men are dangerous."

"Dat man respect nobody not even heself. You wrong to call he Cassius. Cassius know when to use respectful words and when to drive

home he point. Chandaball don' know when. And, my friend, he ain't dangerous. Just stupid, just arrogant because he feel he superior to everybody, especially some shoemaker like me. You don' know what dangerous mean, my friend."

I was surprised by Fred, for in all these weeks that I sat with him, I never knew that he knew of such important characters as Cassius.

"You mean you read Julius Caesar, Fred?"

"Yes. Not only people who wear suit and tie gat some education, you know. Even simple people gat some kind of education. Even me. I don' know all kinda big word and thing, but I know some things. And one thing I know is dat you gat to respect people, even people with dirty fingernails and tear-up shirt and pants, even people with mud pon they feet."

"He stay like dat, Fred. Is he habit," I said. "He don' even know he does hurt people feelings. He stay like dat."

Fred thought for a while, then he took a cigarette from the pack.

"Yes, I read *Julius Caesar*. And I read Coleridge poem too, "Rime of the Ancient Mariner". I always like the sea, you know. I read when I gat time. I buy a whole set of books when me son was to go to school, but the boy not interested in school. You know what they say: 'you can lead a horse to water, but you can' mek he drink.' So all dem books at me house, so I read. Some things I understand, some things I can't understand, no matter if I read dem four or five times. I ain't gat schooling like you, and now is too late." He spoke more slowly than usual, drawing hard on the cigarette in between the sentences.

"Look after me shop while I gone. I just going to buy some candle."

"Why?" I asked.

"Patience, me young friend. Patience. Remember what Shakespeare say? "Lowliness is young ambition ladder". Wait. You gon see."

And he strolled across to the shop a few buildings away and bought three candles. I waited for the explanation.

"What you going to do, Fred?"

"I gon work through the night. Well, until I finish Chandaball shoe. This gon be the best job I ever do -even though he gon underpay me. This is what I mean by pride. The right kinda pride."

"I gat to go home for dinner, Fred. You want me to bring something for you to eat?" I asked.

"No, thanks," he said, making a point to stress the thanks. He was no Chandaball. He showed me respect, and I was grateful to him. In my mind, I started comparing Fred Singh with Mr. Chandaball, something that I would not have done if this exchange had not occurred. I liked Fred Singh; I feared Mr. Chandaball. I felt that I respected the latter more than the former.

Fred Singh worked through the night by candlelight on Mr. Chandaball's shoes. In the morning, when I went to the betting shop, Fred was there. There was stubble on his face, his eyes looked tired, his shirt was dirty and crumpled, but he wore a smile of great satisfaction, the kind we reserve for those moments of singular accomplishment. With a flourish, Fred pointed to the gleaming pair of shoes on the wooden box, and it was indeed the best pair of shoes that I'd seen him repair. It gleamed. A pinpoint of light reflected the sun of this new day from each shoe tip. I picked up one of the shoes and turned it over. The leather was smooth and lustrous. There was no sign of workmanship - a sure sign of great craft, that which makes something very difficult seem so very easy.

"Wow! This, this like new, Fred. Like brand new," I said.

And the tiredness seemed to lift from his eyes, as if my words had worked some magic.

"When Chandaball does go to work?"

"I don' know. Eight fifteen or so. Maybe eight thirty," I answered.

"Well, dat mean dat he should pass by here soon, right?"

"Yes."

"So we gon keep an eye out for he. I gon give he he shoe today."

The completion of the job and the care with which it was done seemed to have given Fred back his lost dignity, and I was glad for it. The beauty of the work had refreshed him, even though he had not slept for the night. We waited, keeping an eye out for Mr. Chandaball.

We did not have long to wait. Soon, we could see in the distance the unmistakable spread of the black suit; he approached like a bat growing larger as it came nearer. Fred got off his stool, took three quick steps to the road, and waved him to stop. Mr Chandaball brought the bicycle to a gradual halt, going slightly pass Fred Singh. He swung his right leg over the saddle, his right foot coming around and down, scraping the ground slightly, left foot still on the pedal. I could see by his face that he was displeased at being hailed in this manner.

"What do you want?"

"Good morning, Sir."

"Mmmhmm -Well -?" Responded Mr Chandaball.

"I done you shoe, Sir. Is all ready for years of hard work," Fred said, his voice raising slightly from pride and nervousness.

At this point, the owner of the betting shop showed up, much earlier than usual.

"Good Morning, Mr. Chandaball. Mornin', Fred. How you, boy?" He said to each of us in rapid turn.

"Good morning," I said to all of them.

Mr. Chandaball said nothing in reply; he was looking at Fred Singh. Fred Singh said nothing; he was looking past Mr. Chandaball, at nothing.

"Look," said Mr. Chandaball, "I do not have time to waste. Let me see the shoes. Come on, man! Look sharp!"

Fred walked quickly back to the box. I stood by the side, a discreet distance away. The owner of the betting shop stood by, pretending to fumble with the lock. Mr. Chandaball moved only slightly to the side of the road. Fred picked up the shoes and the paper bag in which they were brought and took them to Mr. Chandaball. He had the shoes in the palm of one hand and was clutching the bag in the other. He did not pinch the shoes together with thumb and fingers as is usually the case; he did not want to make the least scratch on the shoes. It seemed as if Fred were making a holy offering to the headmaster, and I half expected to see the shoemaker bow. But his back was straight as a ramrod, his right palm stretched out before him.

Mr. Chandaball seized the shoes, grasped the bag, put the shoes in it, and made to ride off.

"Sir! Mr. Chandaball, Sir. You not even look at the shoes, Sir? Look at the shoes, Sir. See what a nice job I do for you, Sir. Especially for you, Sir." His voice was tremulous. It was the first time I had seen Fred Singh like this. He was afraid. Like me, like most people in the village, he feared Mr. Chandaball.

"So, you want your money now? Okay. Business is business," said Mr. Chandaball, fishing into his back pocket for his wallet.

"No, Sir. I would never be dat rude, Sir. Never, Mr. Chandaball, Sir. I just want you to look at the shoes, Sir. See what a nice, nice job I do for you, Sir. Es -"

I saw the imperceptible smile flick on and off the face of Mr. Chandaball; and even in the split second when the flick happened and disappeared, he cut Fred off:

"-you said that already, man. Why do you people repeat yourselves so much? The English have tried so hard to educate you all on the proper

use of language, but you people are too stupid to learn. It was all in vain, all their effort gone to waste!"

He peered into his wallet, extricated three one-dollar bills, felt each one individually to make sure that two were not stuck together, Then pushed the notes into the pocket of Fred Singh's wrinkled shirt. Fred stood still as Mr. Chandaball rode off. He stood there for a long time, just looking at the spot where Mr. Chandaball had stood. I wanted to walk up to Fred and take his hand and lead him back to what he was and where he belonged -a shoemaker like no other, sitting on his backless stool, telling me about craft, about the importance of good work as if it were a religion. But I stood where I was, unable to act on what I was feeling; Fred kept standing there, like an island; and the owner of the betting shop melted into the dark interior of the betting shop.

The sun was hot by the time Fred moved. He did not look back, but just walked away, leaving me and the box unattended.

I waited the entire day for Fred to return. When he didn't show up at closing time, I packed up the tools and shoes in the box, taking care to put the more valuable tools in the leather case. I locked the box, dragged it inside the betting shop, and I went home to dinner, the leather case under my arm.

The next day, I turned up at eight, but Fred was not there. Nor did he come the day after that, nor the day after. After a week, I did not bother to go to the betting shop either. After two months, the owner of the betting shop left the box outside. That same night, someone broke into the box and stole what tools and shoes were worth taking. The betting shop man threw the box to the side of the road, its worthless insides of unrepaired shoes and unused leather spilling onto the grass.

THE FUNERAL

It is two in the day, and the tropical sun boils the land to a slow simmer. Small snakes of heat rise up in protest from the roads, and even the rusted zinc sheets that cover buildings reflect a glare that defies sunglasses. The full blast of the air-conditioning in my car keeps the heat at bay, barely. The car moves forward into the bright white teeth of the heat.

There are a series of curves on this narrow, two-lane road that leads me to and from work. There are trees, thick with foliage, on each side. Even on the hottest days, it is a pleasure to drive into the shade of these trees, even though it hurts to emerge on the other side of the open tunnel they offer. Just before these curves, there is a line of shops beside the road: photocopying shops where students go to copy whole books at a time, at two cents per page; eating places three, according to the major races here -one Indian, one Malay, one Chinese. The first two boast of being halal, food prepared to Islamic demands, but they are almost always empty. The last always seems to be crowded, a pleasant raucous spilling from the open shed, dogs and cats always at the ready to pounce on a fallen or thrown morsel or bone. One car repair shop, where once I took my car and was sold a battery for twice the normal price -the price I pay for having a foreign accent. One motorcycle repair shop, parts of machinery hanging off hooks like bones from which has been stripped all meat. All of these buildings have the look of the impermanent, as if the owners are always at the ready to vacate at some disaster. This look of dilapidated impermanence afflicts all the buildings, cutting across all the races like a hot but rusty knife.

On this day, a large crowd is gathered in one of the shops. People spill onto the road, walking across it slowly, indifferent to the traffic, slowed to cinematic slow motion by the heat. Through the liquid-looking haze that arises from the road, they seem as if they are walking through

water. But there is something different about this crowd today. The people seem more guarded, more angular, the bright sun and the slim shadows make them into *papier-mache* cut to tiny ribbons.

Funeral, My wife says. I was thinking wedding. I insist in my mind on my interpretation, being an expert on self-delusion or self-deception. I ease the car past the *papier-mache* people. It would be easier to drive through them than it is to drive through the thick heat. They seem as insubstantial, as impermanent, as the building into which they are crushed, from which they overflow. The car eases through the crowd, and comes out just feet away from the back of a small truck -one of these half-ton things that go around selling everything from mattresses to bread and pastry, to propane gas, to potted plants. The drivers of these trucks are among the most aggressive of the deadly, aggressive drivers in this country. More than six thousand people died last year on the roads of Malaysia. This truck, behind which we find ourselves, is white. It has been washed recently. It is conspicuous more for the slowness with which it is being driven than for the hazard lights that blink against the glare.

There are three men sitting in the open back of the small truck, and I can tell from their dress (or from their state of ceremonial undress) that they are Hindu priests. One is seated on the right, one on the left, and one faces us. The pundit on the right is clearly senior: he is talking to the younger one that faces us. The senior pundit's hair is grey; he is balding. He talks and smiles, while the other listens with obvious deference, nodding, smiling in agreement. They both have holy ash rubbed across their foreheads -Grey paste on dark brown skin. The eldest priest has a garland of white flowers around his neck; it reaches almost to his lap. He continues his talk, his smile spreading over a clean-shaven face, his gestures demonstrating seniority. There is no shine on his bare upper body, no revolt against the heat; and he does not squint against the glare. He is comfortable, important. He could have been in his airy living room, holding forth on some subtle point made in the *Bhagavatgita* or the *Ramayana* to his apprentices, they

sipping cool drinks, sitting at his holy feet. He is perfectly at home in this heat, in this glare, sitting in the back of an open truck. The third fellow has his head bowed, gazing between his dhoti-clad legs. I follow his gaze to the small coffin that rests between them. This is the senior pundit's secret. It is the coffin, the dead, that gives him his importance.

The coffin commands my attention, even though I try to focus on the road, on the pundits, on the tyres of the slow-moving truck. The coffin is shockingly small, of wood, burnished to a yellow brightness. A child, I think. Or an adult shrunk to the size of a child. How the old return to childhood -the size, the demeanour, the petulance. Having captured my gaze, the coffin does not release my attention. It seems cool against the heat, I think, fancifully, stupidly. It is given no decoration of flowers. It is bare, stark, commanding, even for its size. It is less painful to think of an old person lying in there - face up, ash-gray, shrunk by time to smallness - than it is to think of a child, cut down in its youth. It must be a woman, shrivelled by age from Asian smallness to the further smallness of a child. I think like this because I am not a child, and I am not a woman. On both counts, I am objective, uninvolved. These are tricks we, the living, play upon ourselves to distance ourselves from the dead, from our own destiny. It cannot be us -me - lying in there, face up, ash-grey, cold, even in the heat, eyeballs, milky grey, unseeing, beginning already to collapse into themselves from soft decay.

I try to tug my gaze away from the recognition, the mirror that lies at the feet of three pundits, two of whom are made comfortable in their belief that this death is but a prelude to another life. I have no such certainty to which I may clutch. I tug at the steering of the car to move past. The car stays its course, behind the truck, behind the pundits, behind the burnished coffin with its new-old dead. I feel the sweat drip from my upper lip, from my brow. The still dead driving the still living to a panic. For I know, I know. The dead are my kin. My eyes look at the black at the back of my lids. The sweat is not so much sweat as it is condensation, the effect of heat and humidity on a thawing body. It

is cold in this enclosed space; the heat beats like a drum outside; I can sense it more than feel it. I look to my right to see my wife, to feel assured, but just then a glare flashes, and I am blinded back to an old darkness.

When the darkness passes, it occurs to me that I shall miss the blue of the sky and the soft whiteness of clouds. God, I shall miss this planet, dappled and fragile and full of life. This is something that I have told my wife often. And I shall miss her and my sons. I shall miss her softness, the Pleiades of brown moles just above her knees, her perfectly formed ears -like seashells, she says her Grandma says. I shall miss her talking in her sleep, even composing songs, the willing smile that runs over her face when she awakens to find me still awake, missing her as though I were already dead.

My eldest son, now twenty-one, with the bitterness and aggression that only the abandoned child can command. Bitterness and anger, born when I left, when he was thirteen, and nursed to maturity by a mother whose own bitterness could not have been overcome by the love she bore him. She wore her dedication like a funeral scarf, sowed anger, and reaped bitter fruit. His smile, touched with a certain charm and arrogance, was like looking into a mirror that revealed my own past. The peculiar cruelty, or potential for cruelty, that comes from the betrayed; the glint in the eye that is either laughter or hatred. And his brother, six years younger, sensitive, affectionate, whose face I still see, cut by tears like tiny blades. A tear, like a tiny glass bubble, like a dewdrop, hanging off an eyelid, red-rimmed around dark eyes, astonished by grief, looking at his father leave for some far -off, unknown place.

For this place, where I find myself now behind a truck, newly washed, about to enter a darkened tunnel. This place that I will also abandon to its self-destruction. But this place and those sons will not even know of my passing, so little have I done for them.

My third son, closer to me than my own pulse, speaking in a tongue as enchanting to the ear as silk is to the fingertips, whose only heritage is

my poetry, words wrung from my heart. I see even now his six-year-old eyes fixed onto the pages of a book held in his left hand, his right hand grabbing absently at a spoon, moving food -kway teow or mee hoon -into a mouth he hardly opens for his concentration.

His slow walk upstairs to bed, book now in the right hand, left hand grasping at the rails of the stairs: two steps up, stop, read. Two more steps up, stop, read. He would have been asleep had he moved with greater alacrity to the bed -my bed - from which he must be lifted and moved to his own. I shall miss his loving grasp as I lift him, his cheek pressed against my bearded face. I shall miss his smile that comes like dawn when I awaken him for school. If only I can see him grown to manhood, to see his eyes liquid with love, looking at his own children, the way he looks at me or at the way he looks at his youngest brother. A softness slipping into his voice when he coos to the child, wide-eyed in his crib.

The youngest, the only one whose birth I witnessed and at whose birth I wrote thus in an email to my old friend and mentor, John Rickford:

How can I put into words the lessons that I learned over these long and few twenty-four hours? Lessons that I did not give myself the chance to learn, for I chose the cowardly route of distance and objectivity - a posture that befitted neither a father nor an artist nor an academic. But I have been humbled into learning, taught by a child - a slip of flesh - even before it was born.

Although I had already three, this was the first time that I listened to the heartbeat of a child, over a machine -like rapid thunder or the quick thud of horses' hooves as they near the finish line. I listened to this heartbeat, so proud, so valiant, so very precious and so very vulnerable. I listened to the sound beating through the fluid in which the child lay curled, through the skin of its mother, a thin line away from the large world outside, a world away. I listened, and I learned, even before this boy child was startled by the light of day, by the sounds of the world without the safety of the liquid world in which he lay, waiting for the astonishment of birth.

My wife was in labour for eleven hours - from 8:30 a.m. to 7:20 p.m. I have gone through some pain in my time, nothing to talk about really, but I have never gone through pain like this: having to witness this woman I love being in such agony. The anguish I felt could be compared to nothing that I've felt before - A thing as pure as air in autumn, as keen as steel; and it ran quick through the heart, the lungs.

I was there - thanks to her courage (courage to tell me that I was needed) that made me be there. And after eleven hours of this lesson-laden experience, this boy was born.

I looked at everything, never blinking, for the first time, like witnessing a new dawn. I saw the suggestion of his head, then his crown. I saw the scalpel cut a long gash into where the flesh must be at its most tender. The head emerged, and then a life. The startled cry of the newborn - a thing that cannot be imitated by any machine, nor equalled in any form of art.

He looked neither white nor brown nor black, but all of these clothed in a bluish-grey hue. Later, I noted that he had neither his mother's transparent whiteness nor my swarthinness. He is fair of skin, but with a solidity beneath it. He has his mother's perfect ears and head - and my nose and hands and feet. So, he is a child from his parents but of neither of them. Khalil Gibran was right: "Your children are not your children. They are the children of life's longing for itself."

After the birth, I, who have prided myself on the control of my emotions, wept like a man. I wept in public, without shame and without self-consciousness; with the simple honesty of salt and water. It was a thing I neither desired nor could control. Another lesson - that a child could carry a force so powerful yet so unknown both to the child and to the adult. The adult, in crying, becomes again a child; the child, in teaching, becomes the adult. I may be saying all of this in very awkward ways, but there is no other way I can think of at this time to say them. It is 1:30 am, and I am tired beyond belief. The child was 8 lb. 2 oz. at birth, on July 1- Canada Day; the day of the handover of Hong Kong. The significance of the date, like colour, means naught;

but these are observations from one who, though given the opportunity thrice before, through cowardice and stupidity, failed to notice. I have noticed. Truly, God is great! And all praise and gratitude must go to Him!

So these are the things and people I shall miss. As I shall miss this country, with all its flaws and all of its many prejudices; Its defensiveness and puffed - up pride that hides great insecurity and greater fear. This country that is so much mine and that is not mine. I will not lie in its soft earth, this land where the dead are partitioned, going up or down or around separately to meet one God, nameless for His many names. For where would they place my remains - my steaming ash or rotting flesh - into what plot? Christian? Muslim? Hindu? Taoist? Buddhist? Chinese? Indian? Malay? White? Black? Brown? How vile a thing to contemplate beneath this sun, behind this truck, between a birth yesterday and a death today. How cruel is self-betrayal, and how very sad.

This is the third country I will leave, the third country that is mine and not mine. It was when I had a face not lined that I left Guyana for Canada. Betraying a country, I went there to be educated beyond the scars I invited as a younger man. I learned a new hopelessness, a new alienation, a new sense of worthlessness. I do not yearn for a lost paradise in Guyana, for I have enough sense to see that what I left was not what is there, that the people who were there are there no longer - victims of journeys, victims of time, victims of age and death. And I have sense enough to know that I, too, have changed. Home is no longer home when it is an unfamiliar place; the young man who leaves is no longer the son when the man is a stranger. And yet.

And yet, I would give much to know again the simple feel of mud between my toes, to feel the slight give of sand under my now callous feet. And yet, there is sometimes a breeze that raises up in this land in which I now find myself by Fate or by chance. And that breeze caresses my cheek like the cool hand of a mother upon the face of a child stricken by a fever. I know that breeze, for it is the breeze of home - a

breeze from a faraway place and a distant time that is here now, in this time, in this place. There are other things too, that we so take for granted: the sweet scent of fruit, the use of a word in a certain fashion, a tree in blossom, the cool of a bed sheet and the delicious smell of the outdoors in which it was hung out to dry.

There are other less pleasant things that make me stand still or retreat into memory. The distasteful politics of race, the arising of politicians to the levels of gods, the paralysis of a brainwashed electorate, the old political rhetoric that continues to blame others for our failings. So that I do not need to go back in order to return. It is here with me now, as it always was.

It was not this way in Canada. That land that gave refuge to the human being, only to wound his humanity. Canada was new - New weather, new seasons, new trees, new flowers. Weather and seasons and trees and flowers that I knew in books. I learned there of the astonishment of snow, of sunny days during which the sun has no impact on the temperature, of ears and fingers burnt blue from the cold. I saw boughs bent to the ground from the weight of clinging snow, as if in imitative mockery of my spirit.

In some twelve years, I learned new rituals with the eagerness of a newborn or newcomer. A palm upon the trunk of a tree to sense the first flush of sap to signal spring; to squeeze between forefinger and thumb the rigid beginnings of a blossom; to witness that small, hard thing open into something soft and fragrant. I learned to view my estrangement as advantageous objectivity; then I felt the bitterness that only the excluded and irrelevant can feel. I was as unnecessary as a casket for a small mound of ash. So, I left again for this place, Malaysia, where now I find myself riding behind a truck.

My eyes return against my will to the hands that grasp the steering wheel. I am surprised by the back of the hand I am supposed to know so well. I see the slackening of the skin into minute diamonds, the exaggeration of knots, the now ugly knuckles. The truck stays its course, and I stay behind it, the utterances of the pundits almost audible

now. They are speaking in English. I shut my ears to the sound and look up from those stranger's hands. My eyes meet a third eye in the rear-view mirror: it is red from too much use or too little. They are red from tears, from great anger or great sadness. I close my eyes against the red one, against the glare, against the wrinkled skin. I am not worried that I may run into the back of the truck, for I know that this truck will not stop before me. My car might have been a part of the truck, sitting in or lying in it; so safe do I feel, so immune from any danger of this sort.

We enter the tunnel of leaves and boughs, a miraculous place of coolness against the heat of such a day as this. The flesh would decay quickly in this heat. The maggots would have their way. That we should, all of us, come to this, after all the effort and all the pride. I smile at this insight. I turn to my wife that she should see me smile, but I cannot see her for the dark, cool tunnel made by trees, thick with foliage, on each side. Even on the hottest days, it is a pleasure to drive into the shade of these trees, even though it hurts to emerge on the other side of the open tunnel they offer. How clearly I see my past. Yet I cannot see this woman who has given me so much happiness, who sits but inches away from me. It is dark and close and cool. The voice of the Pundit drones on, now in Tamil, now in English. When he speaks in English, it is about the victory of rebirth over death. I hear the truck driver speak, now in Mandarin, now in Malay. When taken all together, there is a curious absence of confusion. It is like the victory of a Creole against the odds. It is like a song whose words I do not know, but the melody of which I am very familiar. A brief fear takes hold of my heart at not being able to see my wife, at having only to

remember my sons. But then my heartbeat slows to an unaccustomed pace, and a calm sets in. A stillness.

The dark tunnel of trees continues forever. In this protracted moment, there is home.

A CONSIDERED ACT

I sit on the third round of these long stairs that lead up from this house, a house that speaks loudly of my prosperity. A large house, even by the most generous standards of prosperity and wealth. I sit here looking down at these many stairs that lead up to where I sit. I am waiting. Sitting and waiting.

Just an ordinary man, dressed in ordinary clothes, involved in this ordinary activity of sitting and waiting. It is 2:30 p.m., and I have thirty minutes to begin to do what I am resolved to do. And what I am to do will make me - an extraordinarily wealthy but ordinary man - finally extraordinary.

I have never had my name or my photograph in the newspapers, rags owned and controlled by a dishonourable government that ruled with deadly cruelty over a people with a dishonourable history and a present made wretched by the poverty and collapse amidst which they lived lives hardly worth living. Yes, I will be featured in the papers, made famous by what I am to do in twenty-nine minutes, finally made one of the greats in a whole legion of dishonourable people.

Of course, they will get it all wrong, as they get everything else wrong. And, of course, the column I will get will have to be placed on page three - a small column at the bottom of the page - the first and second pages being kept for the grandiose pronouncements of the great political and moral leader of this land, someone who has all the civility and compassion of an ape in a suit.

And the little column will say—given the usual perceptiveness of the journalists of this country—that it was a moment of madness that brought about this thing that I am about to do in twenty-seven minutes. But it is not a moment of madness that has brought me here. This thing that I am to do, the preparations that I have made, could only have been undertaken by the frighteningly lucid, the absolutely sane. For these

plans that I have made will save my twin daughters, my wife and my brother from a fate worse than death. But who in this insane land will understand this? Who?

So, it is not insanity that has led me to where I am. And yet, I am not quite sure what workings of the sane have done so. Do I not have everything that is needed, they say, for happiness? Two lovely daughters, a devoted wife, a trustworthy brother? An extended family that are themselves of substance and influence, so that there are no hangers-on that so afflict the rich.

The family from which I came have always been in the lumber business. Even before independence and local rule, to be in the lumber business was to be at least well off. But with freedom from British oppression and exploitation, the dams that held back the muddy waters of fantastical wealth were turned loose to full flood. In the name of nationalism, the corrupt feed ravenously and shamelessly on the rotting meat of the poor and powerless. With the foresight of a prophet, I had seen that all of this would happen. It came to me with the certainty of a revelation; that I needed to cultivate those who would soon don the robes of power. I knew how ill-fitting these robes would be, and I knew that they would be redesigned without much imagination - that they would have kept the general pattern bequeathed by the British, but that the colours would be different and that deep pockets would be added. Large, deep pockets exercise a tyranny upon people: the terrible necessity to be filled; the great compulsion to show that your pockets are full by emptying them for all to see; then the desperate craving to refill them by the quickest means available. Power and money serve one master: hysteria!

I saw all of this, and I knew what was to be done for what was to be had. So, by a quiet process of stroking inflated egos and relieving desperate greed, by quieting hysteria, I made myself rich beyond reason.

Yes, I am guilty of bribery and corruption, but only from the necessity born of insight - or foresight, if you prefer. I financed and organised

loud, drunken parties for government ministers, permanent secretaries and other high officials in the police, army and the judiciary. I selected carefully, and they came and ate and drank and indulged in every form of debauchery known to man. They revelled in the mud and the filth; they bathed in it, then in triumph proclaimed themselves purged. And I fed with the best of them, and we all announced to ourselves that we were purged and full. I led them for I scorned them. These were not people who understood the concept of intellectual dissociation: to be in the middle of chaos but to be still, serene.

I knew when to strike, too. One should never ask or demand when appetites have been fed, but before consumption and satiation. So, the parade, the mere *show* - of food and liquor and women came first, then a small sampling of the dishes to whet the appetite. There is nothing like a sampling to prove to the flesh its own great hunger. The taste must precede the feeding; and in between comes the command in the guise of a respectful request. There was never a “no”, but always a “yes, but...”.

And those buts were brushed away like crumbs on a beard, by percentages or by assurances of cash advances. The talk was always of supply and demand, of diminishing returns, of percentages and profits - Always the talk of the greedy and the simple, the talk of pirates. It was all so very simple, and I made an unimaginable fortune from such simplicities.

I obtained, by these means, the licenses for gold mines and diamond fields, and the sole right to log vast areas of forest. I obtained huge loans from the banks for machinery and new lumber mills. I earned the right to carry firearms. The money came in quickly and furiously. But, in the face of it all, I remained an ordinary man caught up in extraordinary circumstances.

The only ostentation I allowed myself was this house, this structure that is more mansion than house. And this was done for my wife, for my twin daughters, and for my brother Dan. The two girls were sent to the most reputable girls' school in the country; Dan was well looked

after, his every whim satisfied; and my wife was granted most of what she wanted, provided her requests were not unreasonable.

Yet all of this could have been provided by the wealth I possessed before these great riches I have by questionable means acquired. So, really, it was not the impulse to care for my family that has led me to where I am now - to what I am to do in twenty- three minutes.

Was it, then, something as simple as greed? I do not think so. For great wealth may have been—given my fortunate financial position before all of this—acquired by more scrupulous means. It would have taken hard work, of course, but I have never been one to shirk hard work.

Was it something as simple as lust for power? There is something to this, I think. It was the challenge of controlling the powerful, the sheer, beautiful exercise of will. Being myself so ordinary, I have no desire for the further ordinariness of political power. Real power, I thought, resided in the victorious but quiet exercise of the will over the politically powerful. It was the quiet, the stillness in victory, that was important.

So, all through the drunkenness, I was sober; through all the feeding, I fasted; all through the fleshly lust, I was spirit. Pure. I was pure. By virtue of this sublime purity, I was the truly powerful. In that deep quietude, I was supreme. It was this purity that spread the contagion of lies, deceit, theft, treachery and murder. From the still centre came the dreadful, destructive strength of the storm. The noise raged in the newspapers and on the radio. Beneath it all, behind it all -noiseless and invisible—I was there.

It all came to a head, as I knew it would, when Comrade Leader invited me to the presidential palace. I had fed the appetites of too many of his ministers, and on too many occasions, for my name not to have been mentioned to the Great Leader. This was the man in whose safekeeping the British left the country.

And, indeed, the Leader had come up with many ingenious schemes: a road through the jungle to Venezuela, a road that would facilitate trade

and neighbourly relations and that was to be built by the sweat of volunteers; the use of coal-pots instead of propane gas stoves, an idea that would save the country precious foreign exchange; the banning of potatoes (the food of white people, we were told) and the command to eat eddoes and yams instead; the banning of apples and grapes (imported during the Christmas season) in favour of mangoes; the banning of chocolates, sweets and chewing gum, instead of which we would consume locally made hard sugar sweets and gum; the banning of all foreign liquor in preference to local rum.

For the sake of the nation, its people were asked - and made to give up all canned stuff: sardines, corned beef, corned mutton, and the like.

Of course, through no fault of the architect of these ideas, the road to Venezuela was abandoned after nine months of sweat and after millions of dollars had been spent to transport, and feed, and clothe and house the volunteers. Obviously, since roads cannot be built by sweat alone, millions were spent on machinery and on road-building experts. Boredom had set in, apparently, and the Party machinery stopped churning out thrilling stories about the road in the daily reports. Within weeks, the machinery rusted to uselessness. The jungle reclaimed the small slip of road they had built in nine months. Then we all forgot about this. The use of coal-pots, indeed, saved foreign exchange as intended; but the price was that more than a few homes were burned to the ground, and several lives - many of them children - were lost. Such sacrifices, many ministers were quick to point out, were necessary for nation-building.

The fact that potatoes were indigenous to the Americas was overthrown by the fact that they were called "Irish Potatoes"; that they were a staple in imperialistic white countries meant that they were food to be rejected by the truly free. To eat potatoes was to be colonised still, and so they needed to have been banned. The special treat at Christmas of apples, grapes and walnuts led only to the Western commercialisation of a holy event. To ban these was to save the whole nation from the decadence that had taken hold of the Western world.

Apples were the staple food of the Leader's pigs (they were kept in air-conditioned pens), but then pigs were not susceptible to moral corruption by materialism. At any rate, to eat mangoes instead was to have Christmas all year round, since this fruit was available throughout the year.

This was a sugar-producing nation, so it was logical that we make our own sweets and our own gum. No attention was paid to hygiene, however. Did the old people not tell us, "Wha nah kill sah fatten!" - what does not kill fattens? Sugar cane produced rum, so rum was the logical drink. Scotch was the drink of the decadent bourgeoisie and therefore a drink most inappropriate for the people of a socialist state.

Of course, there were exceptions to these rules. At the parties that I sponsored for our ministers and others, Chivas Regal was the drink of choice. This was in emulation of the lofty standard set by the Paramount Leader, he who would drink "only the best in the world". The ministers were enchanted by the silver box in which the scotch came, by the lovely curve of the bottle. After the parties, even in their state of fulfilment, they would insist on taking home with them the empty boxes and bottles.

The Great One who set these standards for us all was with the Minister of Home Affairs when I arrived for an audience. I was not particularly nervous on my way to the Presidential Palace, but a great anxiety set in during my fifteen-minute wait in the plush outer chamber of the conference room where the Leader held court. There were two secretaries, both dressed in navy blue suits, mini-skirted, both very pretty. They were tapping away in friendly rivalry at their respective electric typewriters. The tapping of one raced ahead as the other paused to flip a page or make a note. Then the dual tapping would continue apace. They sat in precisely the same posture, in the manner of the well-trained secretary: straight-backed, knees pressed together, their hair pulled back in the identical fashion to tight buns.

I sat like a child who had been called to the principal's office, uncertain as to whether the summons was for bad news or for reprimand. I sat in

the deep sofa, my knees together, my back too rigid to lean against the back of the seat. I was sweating in spite of the air-conditioning. The secretaries took turns, it seemed, to look up from their work and gaze in my direction. I could not determine whether they were gazing from curiosity or with hostility, or whether I was simply in the range of vision through which their concentration passed.

I kept my knees together, almost in sympathy with their own pressed knees. Tap, tap, tap. Stop. Gaze. I crossed my legs in my discomfort, clasped my hands and placed them on my lap. Tap, tap, tap. Stop. Gaze. I uncrossed my legs, unclasped my hands, and placed my knees together. I felt my bladder fill up by degrees. I tried to get my mind away from this by thinking of the reasons why I had no reason to be nervous or apprehensive. I could think of none. Instead, my eyes focussed themselves on the various photographs of the Leader that were hung on the walls.

There were many, and I recognised some of them from the newspapers or from offices or banks or schools. The most impressive of the photographs was the central, life-sized, guild-framed picture of the Leader in dark-green military uniform. In spite of the considerable paunch, he looked the part of the Commander of the Armed Forces. He had never been in the army, had never seen battle, but his chest was sheathed in medals and ribbons, as befitting the Commander-in-Chief.

In this photo, his hand was raised in salute in the American fashion, palm inward; his index finger just touched below the eyebrows in the British manner. This was before his socialist phase, I surmised. He was quite splendid and, with the pilots' shades, looked every part the military man. Comrade Leader was a lawyer.

The other photos were mostly of the Leader in various other uniforms: white, red, camouflage, light green, khaki. The overall effect was that he was a most accomplished general. Unfairly, I thought of Othello.

A brassy male voice came through one of the secretary's intercoms. She stood up, pulling at her mini-skirt as she did so, came over to me, and announced without emotion:

"You can go in now."

I stood, tugged at the bottom of my shirt-jack, a kind bush jacket that was declared our national dress, much more appropriate to a free people than the colonial dress of collar and tie, the costume of the colonial slave. The mini-skirt walked before me with the mandatory seductive sway, opened the large door, and held it open. The Minister of Home Affairs, a regular at the parties I financed and organised, stood up and greeted me with the kind of exuberance that could only have been for the benefit of the higher power that sat at the head of the table. His arms flung wide open, he bellowed:

"Aaaah Comrade! Come in, Comrade! I was just telling our Comrade Leader how supportive you have been to the Party and to Comrade Leader himself and to his Ministers. I've just finished..."

He cut himself short, as if he just remembered the immense presence that sat there, immobile, quiet. He gulped loudly, and continued, the exuberance now replaced by a tone of hushed awe:

"Comrade Leader, may I present to you a true friend of the Party."

The Presence at the head of the large oval table did not stand, did not smile, did not speak, nor extend his hand in greeting. He just looked, first at the Minister of Home Affairs; then he turned his gaze upon me. It was a tired gaze, almost the gaze of the bored, but it stuck to me like some corrosive adhesive. Even sitting, he was a huge man. He wore a goatee, and above his flared nostrils, the bulging eyes looked. I stood still, uncertain as to whether I should sit or move forward, uncertain as to what I should do with my hands. The Minister of Home Affairs was standing, equally uncertain, almost at attention. The leader kept his gaze fixed on me; I kept my gaze on the goatee. There was an emptiness in his gaze that sought to enter my flesh. There was no

hostility, no sign of curiosity, no like or dislike, no pleasure or displeasure. It was only eyes, looking.

My voice found itself:

“Good morning, Comrade Leader. It’s –“

The Figure spoke:

“Sit there, Comrade,” and it gestured with a grey palm to the third chair from the head of the table. I sat. The Minister made to sit, but a further slight wave of the palm wished him away. I did not regret to see him leave, and I did not turn to witness his departure. I kept my eyes on my own hands, now folded on the table, a beautiful polished thing of purpleheart wood.

“Are you nervous, Comrade?” The Leader asked.

“Nervous, Comrade Leader? Well, a little, Comrade Leader, to be honest.”

Then he laughed. The full-mouthed guffaw shook his large frame. The palm came down hard on the table with the force and sound of a gunshot. He laughed, and the laughter continued in his voice when he gathered himself to speak again:

“Good, good, Comrade!! Excellent!! A *little* nervous, and *honestly* said - or is it *said* with honesty?”

He laughed again at his witty turn of phrase. I looked at the eyes. The laughter had allowed, or encouraged, me to look quickly. It was then that fear took hold of me. It was as if a large, cold fist had reached into my chest and wrapped itself around my heart.

The laughter continued unabated, but the eyes were flat, dead. These were eyes that neither contained nor reflected light. Any light, inner or outer, would have been defeated in that blackness. Around the enlarged black pupils, there was no shade of white, but a deep red. And I was drawn into the deep emptiness of those eyes, their black and red malevolence.

The laughter echoed off the walls and returned to meet the voice that gave it life, such that the voice itself seemed the echo. It was something tangible, the force of this laughter, like red-hot cymbals clashing or a red-hot hammer falling upon a red-hot anvil. It was the contrast between this heat and the cold eyes that savaged my heart. Fire and ice. Mirth and malevolence, both pure. And then purified further by their contact.

Then, as suddenly as it had started, the laughter stopped. In the dreadful silence, I could feel still its force as it continued to ricochet off the wall and bury itself into my flesh. He knew this too, as he knew that I had been rendered hollow by the fear that had taken hold of me. He let the silence continue for a while; then he donned his shades and spoke:

“Word has it, Comrade, that you have done well for my ministers. And that they have done well for you. That you have done well for yourself.”

“I live comfortably, Comrade Leader. And what I have done for the Comrades is hardly worth mentioning.”

“Good! Honest and humble too! We admire such qualities, Comrade. For whom do you do this, Comrade? This service that you give with such honesty and such humility?”

I heard myself say: “I wish to serve only you, Comrade Leader. And the country, of course. And my family, of course.”

“There is such a thing, Comrade, as serving too many masters. One only ends up serving the Devil. You cannot say that you serve only *one* master, then name two others that you serve as well.”

I felt the humiliation rush to my face. He had, by bringing me to my knees, established himself as my Master. He had done so in one sentence. He continued, slowly:

“But I recognise in you, Comrade, something that I find in myself, that I find in only a few others. That is, Comrade, a purity. And a certain pride in that purity.”

It surprised me to hear that word attached to this man who knew no scruple, who held nothing but himself sacred. But then, to be Absolute is to be, in a sense, pure. In putting me alongside himself in this quality, he had embraced me, had made me his own. This was the embrace of a final contagion, the embrace of Hell. I should have felt sick; instead, I felt elated, liberated. I saw my smile reflected in that which played on his lips. I knew that this establishment of communion - the relationship between Master and servant - and this sealing smile signalled the end of my audience. I stood.

“Thank you, Comrade Leader,” I said.

The Presence did not stand, but extended a hand that was to be taken and shook. I was tempted to kiss the hand, but I did as required and left.

That was two weeks ago. In between then and now, between the meeting and my sitting and waiting, there were two parties. I remained in the background, but the word of my audience with the Leader had got around, and the Ministers were freer now with their stories and their plans. Yes, my meeting with the Absolute Leader had stamped me as one of the chosen. To be sure, there was still the talk of pirates, but now they felt free to speak of murder.

Talk of murder goes on everywhere, I suppose, but here there was talk of the shedding of blood in the sort of banter that other people use to speak of ordinary things like movies, books or the weather. Here, it was done with smiles and nods, with the merry chink of glasses, as a kind of parenthesis to the more serious talk of women and profit. Their hearts were of ice even as their hands reeked, red-hot with blood.

Two days after the last party, a leader of an opposition group was blown up in his car. I knew of the plan. I knew of it all – who, where, how, when. The blood was up to my elbows.

That was yesterday, the day before this day that finds me sitting and waiting here on the third round of the long stairs that lead down from my grand house to my courtyard. I sit here, blood up to my elbows, my

heart sickened by the deeds in which I am such a willing, implicit participant. I sit here, seven minutes left by my watch. And this deed that I will perform, this purging deed, will wash the blood from my hands and arms. Pontius Pilate was stupid to have tried washing his bloodied hands with water. Water will not do. Blood must be washed away with blood. Only blood will do it. And I will ride this wave of blood to significance. My very own blood.

These activities that I have sponsored and organised, that have brought me great wealth and into the close company and confidence of the powerful, have also contaminated everything and everyone around me. This house. My wife, my brother, my daughters. They have, through me, eaten rotting bread dipped in blood. We all have been condemned by this grotesque ritual that made evil of good and good of evil. The dresses and jewellery worn by my wife are stained, so much so that I cannot stand the thought of stripping her bare of clothes and costume for comforting sex. Yet, she is guilty only by association and not by knowledge.

I cannot enter the new car that my brother bought. I will only take into its contamination my own great contagion. And my twins: their education, their clothes, their uniforms, their books, their toys and trinkets have all been dirtied by the means by which they were bought. By me, the person who bought them. And me? I have lost my innocence and gained a deadly hunger for significance. I have gained self-importance. My soul has been blackened. My heart has rotted in my chest.

I have prepared well for this deed, this ritual blood-shedding. Far from an act of panic or hysteria, far from a moment of madness, this is all premeditated. The Romans, those conquerors from whom the English gained their system of laws - laws which the English now give to others they have conquered - are all too inadequate. It makes no distinction between murder committed in madness and murder committed as an act of sacrifice. There is no concept of sacrifice by premeditation. Yet, both Roman and English have sacrificed countless numbers. Yet some

good has come from those countless numbers sacrificed. There has been the rebirth of entire peoples, entire cultures.

I have prepared well for this deed. I bought poison - and I can raise a smile even now at the fact that it is rat poison - which was to be got easily. The bottle nestles in the left pocket of my trousers. I have my handgun - a .38 Smith and Wesson model 52, a thing of deadly beauty - tucked into my belt. I spent a good portion of last night cleaning it, an involved ritual if it is to be done well. I field stripped, cleaned and dried all the exposed areas. Then I oiled lightly all the pivot points and moving contact areas. When I was done, the blue steel shone with a dull, menacing gleam. I took a soft cloth to the walnut butt, cleaning even the small crevices on the checkering in the wood. I loaded the handgun with its maximum capacity of five rounds. Now the weapon, clean, loaded, is ready to do my bidding.

Everything and everyone are in place. Dan is in his room; my wife is in hers; I am sitting where I should be, on the third stair of the long flight of stairs that overlooks the courtyard. I have a clear view of the front gate. The maids are off, as is the gardener. The watchman comes to work in the evening, by which time all that I have planned would have been executed. It is he, I imagine, who will discover all. Doubtless, in the telling, he will place himself in the central role.

I await only the arrival of the twins. They are always back from school at three o'clock. They are twelve years old, very pretty girls, inseparable and devoted. I love these children, love them to distraction. They always arrive at three o'clock, their laughter and girlish babble preceding them. They always climb these stairs together, one with the right hand grasping the right rail, the other with the left hand grasping the left rail. Never one before the other, but always together.

I often wonder whether they planned it this way: planned togetherness, planned equality. Or was it a function of being twins? Yet, I have never asked, fearing that it would be too great an intrusion into their shared private world. What I am about to do will ensure that their innocence

is preserved. I will protect their innocence, as I was unable to protect my own.

It is now three o'clock. They are late. There is no laughter or girlish babble. I feel the panic rise up in me as the second-hand slips past the long hand that points to the twelve. My heart races with the tiny red needle as it quickens its way to the short hand stuck on three. I feel the thoughts bunch up in my head, as if they would now unleash themselves with chaotic fury upon my private world. I will this animal madness into its pen. Madness will spoil the purity of this ritual, the cleansing effect of blood. I feel for the bottle in my pocket: it is cool. I place my palm around the butt of the handgun: it is warm. Fire and ice.

With the astonishment of a sudden flight of birds in an empty sky, I hear the laughter and the chatter. My girls. My beloved children. I feel the relief wash over me as they walk through the gate. It is the end of the school day; but, like children, they seem only to gather more energy as the school day closes. As usual, they are holding hands as they approach the stairs. Their laughter tickles my earlobes; the flutter of the words go pass my ears like winged things. The girls reach the bottom of the stairs. Their hands separate as they grasp their respective rails and begin the simultaneous climb. They see me now - sitting on the third stair of the long flight of stairs up which they are now climbing, smiling with pleasure, to embrace their father.

As their feet touch, together, the eight stair, my right palm closes around the butt of the weapon. Their navy-blue uniforms are curiously uncrushed from the day's wear. The ties, navy blue with slanting silver stripes about one inch apart, are knotted still close to the napes of their necks. Their collars are buttoned still, in spite of the heat of the day.

"Daddy -" One of them begins. I aim at her chest and squeeze the trigger. The gun jumps upward, lifting my arm with it, and the child topples backwards, even before I can see the blood. The other twin, my other child, stands frozen in terror. I bring the arm down to the level position, aim at the midway point of the tie, and squeeze the trigger

again. I do not glance down to where they fall, do not look upon their sacrificed bodies.

I stand, turn and walk up the three stairs, and enter the cool of the house. I move unhurriedly, with the calm determination that only the sinner-turned-disciple can possess. He who has known sin in all its heinous forms and who now turns from it with dreadful finality. I head for Dan's room. I hear the door slam shut and the latch turn. I do not bother to call to him, for I am beyond speech, beyond flesh. I am an angel, pure.

I shoot at the lock of the door to Dan's room, aiming at the keyhole. Stupid man, he must have been peering through the keyhole. I hear the scream of anguish, a piercing cry for God's help. And, like God's redeeming angel, I enter the room. Dan is on the floor, half of his face torn away, his right eyeball crushed to a red puss. His other eye is wide, more with terror than with pain. He is sitting against the wall, cowed, already in a pool of blood and urine. Yes, the purgation is taking place. I want his death to be slow, the purifying process protracted and therefore thorough. I leave him to die slowly in his own blood and his own urine.

I turn away again. Now I move to my wife's room. I am flushed from the effort of all of this. To cleanse is always so much more difficult than to sully. My tiredness tempts me to move faster, but I put aside this temptation. I am beyond the ordinariness of temptation. I arrive at her door and try the lock. The door opens noiselessly inward. The room is empty, but a window is open, an unusual thing since the room is air-conditioned. I look out the window.

To someone looking on, I would have been an ordinary man engaged in the ordinary activity of enjoying a view from his window. I look down. Way down, my wife lies sprawled flat on her back, her legs wide apart in an undignified manner, immobile. If she is not dead, she will be soon. The later the death, the more exquisite the sweet blade of pain, the better the purgation. It gives the mind time to reflect, as I now reflect even as I act.

I shut the window, leave the room, shutting the door after me, and walk past Dan's room. I ignore the slight whimpering that comes from the room. A familiar smile comes to my lips, but all I see in my eyes are blood and blackness. But soon, we shall all meet in a better place.

My work within the house done, the house exorcised of the demons that I invited, I return to the third stair of the long flight of stairs at the bottom of which the contorted bodies of my twin daughters lay; those stairs that lead up from the yard where my sprawled wife lay dead or dying; those stairs that lead up to the house where my brother's life-blood is gushing from his eye and his face. And in between low yard and high house, between the dead and the dying, I sit like a sentinel, absolutely composed, serene.

I place the .38 on the stairs and remove the poison from my pocket. The deed, then, that I have been led to perform is almost performed to the full. I have laid to rest the demons that were summoned during those unholy rituals over which I presided with such quiet effectiveness. I have made peace with those many innocent lives taken by those whose every appetite I have fed. With blood, blood has been washed away. And now, the final touch that will place me in the newspapers, in a small column on page three. Yes, I may have been an ordinary man dressed in ordinary clothes, sitting and waiting ordinarily. But now, no more. Finally, significance.

I take the poison and drink it in one bitter gulp. The final wine. It is 3:15 by my watch. I will take the handgun, place it to my temple and squeeze the trigger, even before I can feel the poison tear at my insides.

AN ARM ROSE UP

That she was Irish was of no relevance to anyone but to Moyna herself; that she was white was of importance to everyone. In the school where she taught, the female students saw in her everything they thought they wanted to be, and to sound and look like. She spoke English the way they imagined English should be spoken, with that lovely music. They looked at her, then they turned their eyes with scorn upon their own dark skins; they listened to her accent and wished away the ugly twang their tongues made; they looked at her breezy dresses, and hated the rough fabric of their uniforms.

The boys, too wanted to sound like Miss Moyna Parrot, save in more manly voices. She was what they wanted in a wife or woman, and their young, unpractised loins ached with desire. The male teachers, without the youthful honesty of their lustful male students, contrived ways to satisfy their hidden lust. They would position themselves to see her with the sun behind or before her, such that her legs were shapely shadows under her dress. Their imaginations would invoke the heavenly brush that was between the legs.

The female teachers resented Moyna's monopoly of the male teachers' attention. They would bunch together and spin tales far removed from the truth.

Moyna was aware of the attention she was getting from all quarters, and she rather enjoyed being at the centre of things, and yet untouchable. Even when the male students would stand beneath the stairs and try to peer upward into her dress, she was only mildly annoyed. A secret smile would come to her blue eyes. Moyna was safe in the centre of the storm she created with her whiteness.

There were times when she was wary of too fervent attention from the male teachers, but she knew they were too intimidated by her, or by the skin she wore, to be unmanageable. She was safe too, for her thoughts

were her own, her politics were her own, and she could not share them with these people. She was not affected by the oppression that the government visited upon the people of this sad land. People made their own decisions, and so must live by them. They wanted their own government, and they got their own government.

It was not that she was against independence, or anything as simple as that. After all, she was Irish. And to be Irish was to know all about oppression. The British had oppressed the Irish for centuries too, but no one here would understand that long tyranny. Did the Irish not lose their language, their culture? Did the English not impose their form of religion, born from a king who wanted to rid himself of his wife? Was Anglicanism not born from lust and greed? And was that lust and greed not transposed, with colonising force, to her Ireland? But how would these people of this Caribbean land know this?

Yet, she loved these people. She loved their simplicity and their hospitality. She loved their vitality, their sweat. She sympathised fully with their hardships, their hunger, and their deprivation. But she was helpless in this situation. She would do for them that which was within her power to do. She understood the oppressive politics, the cruel tyranny that the newly empowered could and did wield. She understood the poverty, since she too had grown up in poor circumstances. Moyna understood. Yet they could not understand her, nor could they understand that she understood them. If only they knew that she wept for them on bended knees. If only they knew how fervently she prayed to the Saviour for them, as she prayed for all the hungry and for all the disenfranchised, for all the weak and the lame of this entire world. If only they knew.

But for now, she will help in the only practical way she could: by teaching, by spreading knowledge. She taught with the passion of the missionary, the true believer in the cause of education. She was scrupulous in her preparation, in her notes of lessons, in following the syllabus set by the University of London. She even put in extra hours with the girls to teach them about the basics of hygiene and about their

own sexuality, a logical extension of her job as a teacher of biology. They were quick learners, these girls. They had better be. If only they would not giggle so much when she tried to explain to them the technicalities of menstruation, the parts of the female body. She was aware that their very lives were at stake should they not learn now. Their very lives. She suspected that some of these girls in Form Five were already active, already had boyfriends. She owed them that - to teach them, to warn them, against themselves, against their baser instincts.

Moyna loved her job; she liked being here at this school, in this country. She was all too aware that in this place, she was important, exceptional. Back home, she'd be jobless or else a mere clerk in one of the department stores. She would be what she dreaded most: ordinary! Yet, she missed home, and a real community of folk. And the longer she stayed here, the more ideal the home seemed. And so she missed home even more. But here there was a job to be done, a calling to be obeyed.

She was proud of her punctuality, her professionalism, her perfect attendance record, her sense of organisation. This was not a place where people valued time, and this was yet another thing that had to be inculcated into the students. Most of the other teachers were poor examples. She was careful never to be late in handing in her beautifully written notes of lessons on Monday mornings. She would use colour pencils to make the notes attractive, and she could see the deputy headmaster smile with pleasure when he got to hers.

Moyna was careful about her appearance, careful to set yet another example for the students to follow. She was, indeed, young and attractive. She was twenty-five, five feet four, slim but shapely. The soft curls of her light brown hair reached to the soft pink lobes of her ears. She wore her glasses only when she had to; they distracted from the glass blue of her eyes. Her dresses were always of modest length, to just above her ankles, and she was careful to wear light colours in this heat.

She drew some modest pleasure when students asked her questions about English or about literature. They would always come to her biology lab in groups, knock shyly, and wait until they were given permission to enter. How unlike the way they entered the chemistry lab of Mr. Bernard, a local fellow. They entered his lab as if they were a herd of cattle. He inspired no respect, demanded no discipline, and he got none. The students would come to her with their literature books and ask questions about this or that poem. Or they would come to her with their essays, already marked by one of the teachers of English, and ask her to confirm whether a correction made by the local teacher was, in fact, correct. Moyna never failed to protest, but ever so gently:

"Really, you should check with Mr. Ali or Mr. Sukhram. They are the English teachers, you know. I am just your biology teacher. They would know a little bit more than I do about Wordsworth," and she would smile.

"But Miss, you the one we want— "

"You *are* the one, Esther. You *are* the one, not 'you de one,'" and she tried her imitation of the raw local accent.

"Sorry, Miss, you *are* the one we want to learn from, Miss. And you see, Miss? You see? You see how easy you just teach me to talk real English--"

"*Speak* real English, Esther. Not talk, but speak."

"Sorry, Miss, but you see what we mean?"

And so, under pressure, she would acquiesce to the wishes of the students:

"Okay, girls, what is the problem?" Then she would proceed to solve it there and then, with the greatest of ease.

This was something she adored about the students of the school: they were eager to learn. She had heard that all the students of this country were like this. Education was the only way out of this place. Education offered the only path to elsewhere. How she wished she could multiply

herself so that all of the students of this land would gain from her knowledge. All of them. Every last one of them. She would be as multiplied bread and multiplied fish, and she would feed these multitudes with her own flesh. And with these thoughts, her heart would ache.

Moyna was very professional, though. She was always sure to support the local teachers' corrections. And before she offered her interpretation of lines from a poem or play, she was sure to ask the students about the interpretation offered by the literature teacher. And her interpretations, though couched in different words, never varied from that of the local fellow. She was professional in yet another regard: even though the students sought her out, and even though she adored them and their hunger for knowledge, Moyna never allowed herself to get too close to any of them. This would not do. Distance was essential for discipline.

And her distance was even greater from the other teachers. She avoided being in the staff room for any protracted period, and even when she was there, she did not speak except to exchange a greeting. She did not involve herself with the internal politics of the school, which was but a microcosm of the general national politics. It was all petty, all a wilful rebellion against authority, an internal affair that did not concern her at all. And she found the babble of the female teachers even more intolerable than the constant complaining of the male teachers. The latter, she found, had at least some energy, even though it was misguided and misused energy.

The local teacher who seemed to have the most energy, and who was the most misguided of them all, was the Fifth Form teacher of English Language and English Literature. Mr. Salim Hussein. He was a young man, not too dark of skin, good-looking by local standards, but as changeable as the weather of this country. He would be brooding one moment and then be howling with laughter the next. He was part of the "opposition" group, yet he seemed to be outside of them.

She suspected he had had affairs with two of the female teachers. These were reasons enough to keep her distance from him, an even greater distance than that which she established between herself and the other teachers. Simply, he was not professional. Worse, he was without direction, much like the rest of this country, much like the rest of this region. They used what energy they had against themselves. Their own energy was the steam that drove them to their own destruction. They did not need help from the outside for that.

If only people like Hussein could harness their energies, then, maybe, they can make something of this nation. For now, they must depend on the discipline of those who came from elsewhere. It gave Moyna no pleasure to think these truths. Hussein was a loose cannon, and it was only a matter of time before he came head-to-head with the Headmaster. Moyna saw the confrontation coming long before it did, long before Hussein did, she felt.

The confrontation came in a staff meeting, and from an unexpected issue. The meeting was called after school hours, as was the custom of this Headmaster. He sat by the door of the staff room, his deputy by his side. The desks of the other teachers were ranged along the walls of the large room, but there were some eight desks in the middle. The headmaster coughed, signalling the start of the meeting.

"We have a few things to talk about today, so I want your full attention. First, teachers are still coming to school late. This must stop. And you all must remember to sign the book when you arrive and sign the book when you leave. Second, people still handing in notes of lessons late. These must be handed in on Monday morning to the deputy headmaster. You must also hand in letters when you take a day for urgent private affairs; when you take a day off for sickness, you must give in a letter explaining your sickness."

"But, Mr. Sukhoo, what if the sickness is of a female nature? How do we, lady teachers, put such things down on paper?" asked Miss Batson, the teacher in charge of all the female students.

"That is a good question, Miss Batson. Of course, the lady teachers are not responsible for handing in written explanations about female sickness. This is not proper. But you should explain to the deputy headmaster in words. You know, to his face. Good question."

The Headmaster continued: "Teachers must also remember that the athletics meetings are coming up, and that the house-masters must get their houses in order. You must start practise soon. If you have problems, see Ross, the PE teacher."

There was some discussion about the coming meet, about the preparation of athletes, and about getting a new cricket pitch for the school. Several of the teachers offered suggestions about the smooth running of the meet. But when the discussion did not seem as if it would end, the headmaster coughed again, and there was silence.

"You people can decide these things on your own time, but I want to deal with one other thing before we leave. It has come to my attention that some teachers are getting too close to the female students. This must stop, or else there will be trouble in this place."

The congregation of teachers sat rigid with disbelief at this announcement and at the warning. One or two of the male teachers twitched visibly in their chairs. Mr. Bernard, not known for his diplomatic skills, asked:

"I don't know what you are talking about. Teachers try their best here, male teachers and female teachers. There are some teachers who take just ten minutes of their lunch break to meet with students. The result of this extra effort is that students get close to teachers. Is the important thing not that students improve their performances in their studies, in athletics or whatever field? What do you want them to do?"

The headmaster bristled at this challenge: "Look! All these things are excuses for inappropriate contact! Some of you are guilty!"

"You cannot make a statement like that! You cannot just condemn everyone, including people who are working so hard for the sake of

students and for the school! That, in itself, is inappropriate! " This was Mr. Salim Hussein, from the opposite side of the tense room.

Sweat broke out on the headmaster's forehead; his hands shook as if they had a life of their own. He shouted: "Shut up! Just you shut up, Hussein!"

"You cannot shut me up! I do not even talk to my students like that! You cannot just shut people up because they take exception to what you say!"

"Look, boy! If you don't shut your trap, you will be in big trouble, you hear! Who you think I talking about, eh? People know that you have a whole harem with the students of this school! It's no one else but you!"

Hussein sat stunned. He was one of those who took ten-minute lunch breaks, he was here at seven thirty in the morning to help students with their athletics training, he stayed back, long after the others had left. He stayed back to give extra literature classes to all the students who were to take the Literature paper, and even those who were not. There were so many students that he had to teach in the large auditorium, to shout for two hours, since the microphone was to be used only at general assembly on Monday mornings, and only by the headmaster, and by the deputy headmaster who used it to introduce the headmaster.

He had worked hard in the school, and since he came here one year ago, there was a marked improvement in the standard of English in the fifth forms and a newfound love for literature. The other English and Literature teachers helped, but it was he who did most of the work - each day, every day. Even Saturdays! He had started the school's newsletter, he had started the debating club! He did all of this when he could have been spending time with his one-year-old son, with his wife. And his wife never let him forget that neglect. There was a large separation in this marriage.

Hussein was no fool. He knew his faults, though sometimes he forgave them all too easily, though sometimes he felt helpless in his exuberance. He knew he was sometimes too harsh in his dealings with

would-be student poets, but he felt that this was justified as a kind of initiation into the tough publishing world, the tough world.

He knew, too, that some of the girls had a crush on him, but he was too busy to be bothered with any of it. And he was too impatient to push them off to a respectable distance. He actually enjoyed the closeness with students, their unpretentious regard for him; and he agreed with Bernard that this helped rather than hindered their progress. But he was careful not to let things get out of hand. And after all this effort, this public humiliation! He did not deserve this public humiliation.

These thoughts went through his head like a film out of control. The thoughts were shown to him as on a screen, in a blur, with the edges burnt. And all the rest were there as the audience to this display of burnt film and projector gone wild. The rage welled up in him:

"You bastard! You stupid bastard! I will beat the devil from you, you stupid bastard!" He got up and lifted his desk as he did so. His books went flying. The students' exercise books that were piled high, awaiting correction, flew up, then fluttered down like albatrosses in slow motion. He tried to get over the fallen desk to the headmaster, but there were hands and arms everywhere. He felt his shirt rip, but there was, curiously no sound. There were faces in his face, so that he could not even tell which face was his and which belonged to another body. Large hands closed around his arm, and he felt nails bite deep and painlessly into his flesh. Someone had twisted his arm behind his back, back and up. And he felt himself fall forward, in the manner of an imagined leaf falling in an imagined autumn. He imagined that his whole life was falling with his body.

Then the movement stopped. All movement, as if time were frozen. Yet no sound. Then suddenly the sounds came, as if someone had turned on a radio that had the volume turned up to the maximum.

All the voices came at once, one chorus of dismay, anger and reprimand:

"Stupid-"

"Foolish-"

"What the hell-"

"Right-"

Then the headmaster's voice, loud but retreating above them all, a whole sentence: "He should be fired! Fired!"

And, strangely, he was grateful for the wholeness of a sentence. Grateful, even for the voice of this man who had accused and found him guilty without reason, without evidence.

Hussein got to his knees, then to his feet. He did not yet feel any pain, though he knew that would come soon enough. Pain and fear. He walked back to his desk and tried to set it back on its legs. Bernard, the Chemistry guy, helped. He sat and looked around the room, thrown into chaos. The teachers had gathered in bunches of sympathetic males, unsympathetic males, sympathetic females and unsympathetic females. Clean lines, neat affiliations.

Only Moyna stood alone, her face a white mask. She stood like a white-beached island in a dark sea. Her arms were crossed upon her breast, and, even from this distance, he could see the blond hairs on her arms standing on end. Her blue eyes were liquid and wide with astonishment, as if she had seen a memory, far off and half-forgotten, return in vivid enactment. She was looking at him as if he were a memory; and, for being a memory, somehow now real. For the first time, unreasonably, he thought her desirable.

The male teachers who seemed sympathetic to him, the "opposition" group, were all around him.

"Come, man! Leh we get outta here and go have a beer! C'mon, Salim! You deserve a beer after this!"

The group of ten or twelve male teachers left the staff room, walked along the lower corridor, down a flight of five stairs, through the side door of the school, across a small segment of the cricket field, and then to the beer garden neighbouring the school. As they were entering the

shop, Hussein saw Moyna pass by in a taxi. She still wore that white mask, but now she was irrelevant to him. In the taxi, aware of the group out of the corner of her eyes, she kept looking straight ahead.

Hussein had a beer with the boys. Before his beer was finished, he had grown tired of being hailed a hero for standing up to the Headmaster. He did not point out that not one of them, save Bernard, had come to his defence. Even so, this defence was general. He did not point out to them that there were at least two in the company who had boasted of having had relationships with female students. After an hour, he left what was sure to be an extended session of post-mortem and drinking. He walked back to the school, got his bag, got into his car and drove home.

He did not bother explaining the bruises on his arms and back to his wife. This would only result in more contention and her certainty that the Headmaster would have had some reason for the accusation. After all, she would say, where there is smoke, there is fire.

That night the pain came, as he knew it would; but the pain was all the more severe for the fear he felt. He feared for the reputation that he had only now begun to build in a profession he had always craved. For him, there was no other option: not to teach was to lead a life empty of function. He was fearful that he would lose the reputation for being a good teacher even before such a reputation had taken hold. The fear encased his heart when he realised that he could lose his job. If only he had had the discipline to control his temper. If only he had had the coolness of head to respond with words, with eloquence even. If only...he saw again the slow motion of bodies crushed against his, he heard again the silence defeat the noise, and he saw the sharp reprimand in Moyna's blue eyes.

He dropped off to an uneasy sleep, the fear staying with him in the form of beads of sweat that clung to his body. And the fear came alive in his dream in a strange commingling of sex and violence, death and life. He was making love to a woman. His violence was met by and reinforced by the grey-skinned woman in the dream. The heat of the

sex was strange, for her skin was cold. And as the violent intercourse continued, she seemed to decompose, and he with her. But even as she decomposed, her belly seemed to grow large with child.

Hussein awoke in a panic, his body rigid with fear. He turned to his wife. She had her back to him. He draped an arm over her prone, dark body. She was cold.

The next day, the other teachers pretended as if nothing had happened. Hussein followed their cue, and somewhere during the day, caught up in the throes of teaching, the fear left him. The day passed, then days, and the week drew to a happy close. He avoided the Headmaster as much as he could; and, for some reason, he avoided Moyna.

For Moyna, Hussein's violent outburst simply endorsed what she had known all along: misdirected energy, useless activity that ended up in dreadful self-defeat. But beneath that conscious thought lurked attraction to the sheer physical effort he had exerted, the film of sweat from this dark energy. Repelled, she wanted to know more. Even from a distance, she wanted to get close. Close. But this would never do, for she had her thoughts, and she had her dignity, and she needed that safety that was to be found in distance. No, she would not yield to this temptation of the flesh. She could not yield to this beckoning of dark sweat.

In the days and weeks that followed, she avoided the staff room with grave determination. She came on time, went directly to her biology lab, taught there, ate there, read there, and then left as soon as the dismissal bell rang. More than ever, she hugged her mission to her breasts.

But she was flesh and blood, was she not? And did not flesh and blood betray the spirit with its hunger for flesh and blood? She prayed more fervently than ever before, but her fleshly longings became more and more demanding. After her prayers, she lay on her back and prayed for sleep, for relief from this tyranny. She compelled her thoughts to go back to her old boyfriends. Teenage sex in the back of a car after cheap

sherry took on, from this distance of space and time, the colour of romance. She had had only three boyfriends, all Irish, all lovely, all white. She conjured their images, hoping they would collectively so fill her mind that this dark force would be kept at bay. But slowly, the image of the blond hair of one would be replaced by ominous dark curls; the calm blue eyes of another by dark brown eyes that flashed fire; their pale skins were replaced by a tawny pelt. She ached. She wept. Then she prayed again for relief, for release. In the morning light, the sense of her mission returned like a saving grace; but the shame of the night remained. Working in her lab, she was hiding as much from herself as she was from Hussein, from the whole lot of them, from the awful temptation of closeness. Loathing and self-loathing became as one; the desire to leave this place and the necessity for staying merged into a confused knot in her mind and heart.

Hussein buried himself in his work, proving as much to himself as to everyone else that he was not guilty of that of which he had been accused. At the heart of it lay like a stone, the realisation of his insecurity. He knew that he had the ability to be a great teacher, but to what end? This idea that he must prove himself was an impure motive. An Impure motive contaminates noble intention. Surely, the great teacher must place students first and preoccupations about reputation last. And yet, one's reputation affects greatly the impact of one's teaching.

And there was none to whom he might speak of these matters. He could not speak to the headmaster, who had prejudged him. He could not speak to the opposition group, who would read his self-doubt as unforgivable weakness. His sense of manhood would not allow him to approach any of the female teachers in the school; at any rate, such an approach would bring down even more suspicion upon his head and call into question the reputations of the female teachers themselves.

He could hardly speak to his wife about such matters, especially since there would need to be an explanation of how this self-doubt arose in the first place. Her listening would yield to accusations, and her

accusations would lead to a fight. Another fight, even a verbal one, was the last thing he needed.

He found himself longing for a wife, though he had one already.

Hussein sat in the staff room marking students' exercises. He taught with a kind of manic energy. Yet the more energy he expended, the more withdrawn and morose he became. And the energy seemed to separate him from the material he was trying to convey. For all his scrupulous preparation, his teaching seemed like a reflex. While the energy was there, the passion was missing.

Sitting in the staff room, he had just finished marking an exercise book, recorded the grade, closed it, and placed it on top of the finished pile of books. He leaned back, shut his eyes, then opened them again to see a student standing over him.

"Yes, Esther? What can I do for you?"

"Sir, it's Roxanne, Sir. She wants you to go to the class. She's crying, Sir."

Esther and Roxanne were students of 5D, for which he was the class master as well as the English and literature teacher.

"What's the matter, Esther? Why is she crying?"

"I-I-I don't know, Sir. She just crying so."

"Who is the teacher in the class?"

"Mr. Williams, Sir, is he who send me for you."

"Okay, Esther, let's go."

Esther was two steps behind him as he ran up the stairs, turned right, and headed off down the long corridor. The classroom was the last along this corridor.

The class was quiet, and the teacher in charge stood helplessly by the door.

"What's goin on, Willo?" Hussein addressed the math teacher.

"I aint know, man! She ask fuh you. I tell she that she should send for Miss Batson, then she start crying more loud. So, I send Esther for you."

Hussein went to Roxanne and sat next to her. The girl leaned close to him, and Hussein draped his arm over her shoulder.

"Hey, Roxanne, what's happenin', girl? Why you cryin'?"

The girl opened her eyes and looked at him; then she looked away. Her cheeks were stained by the tears.

"C'mon, Roxanne, you can tell me, right? What the matter?"

She looked at him again, then looked at the rest of the class, then at him, then away. Hussein got the message from her gaze. He stood up and went to the front of the class.

"Okay, people! Everything is fine. Mr. Williams will take you in the schoolyard and teach you all about the wonders of mathematics. Okay, Mr. Williams?" Williams smiled. The students left the room. After the last had filed out, Hussein went back to Roxanne.

"Okay, Roxanne, they're all gone. Now tell me what's the problem." He was as gentle as could be, his voice hardly above a whisper.

"Sir, I-I gat my pe-pe-per - and my uniform is -my uniform is -."

Hussein swallowed hard, trying to keep the sour from reaching his tongue. He had no experience with this. He did not want to have any experience with this. He wanted to help the girl; he wanted to save her any embarrassment, but he did not know about this. But he knew better than to allow his panic to show.

"Okay, Roxanne, this is not really a problem, you know. This is quite natural. Right? Right, Rox?"

She smiled at the silly abbreviation of her name, this sixteen-year-old. She read his panic in an abbreviation.

"Yes, Sir."

"Good! Now, what we will do is go get Miss Batson. Miss Batson is very experienced in this matter. She-

"No, I don't -No!"

"But, Ro -"

"No!" The tears were beginning to come again, and she wiped them away, pressing her hand hard against her stained cheeks.

"Okay, Roxanne. Tell me what you want. Just ask and I shall do it. Okay? Okay?"

"Okay. I need a towel, Sir. My skirt is dirty. Can you get me a towel?"

"Of course I can get you a towel. I'll get you a towel." He got up, walked to the door, stopped. "Ahh, Roxanne, where do I go for a towel?"

The student laughed. "Sir, you get a towel from the Headmaster's office."

"Right! The Headmaster's office," and he headed off down the corridor again, went to the Headmaster's office, got a towel from the secretary, and returned to the classroom. He walked to her desk, gave her the towel, his arm fully extended to maintain distance. Roxanne took the frayed white towel and opened it around the small of her back. She stood, dropping the towel to cover her bottom, and tied it loosely around her waist.

When the girl had got up, Hussein, in spite of himself, looked. The stain was there, a deep burgundy map on the orange skirt of the uniform. He closed his eyes and swallowed hard. He felt his stomach muscles contract in protest at the sight. When he opened his eyes again, Roxanne was looking right into them. Hussein looked away.

"It's okay, Sir. This is natural, right, Sir?"

There was laughter in her voice, and there was deep tenderness in the light brown eyes of this girl. She was handling the situation with much greater maturity than he was. She must have known she would, but then

why did she ask him to come - ask, when she would have known that he would be helpless in this situation? Women, he thought - when would he ever understand them? Then, with a startle, he realised that he was thinking of Roxanne as a woman, and that she was more of a woman at sixteen than he was a man at twenty-five.

They walked up the corridor together, the teacher one step ahead of the student. She stayed one step behind in respect; he stayed one step ahead to avoid looking at the towel around her waist, afraid that he would see again in his imagination that burgundy patch. He entered the Headmaster's office and stopped abruptly. Moyna was there, speaking to the secretary. She was bent forward, leaning on her elbows, looking at some documents. Her round, firm behind was to the door. He took his eyes away from the sight and coughed. Moyna pulled herself upright.

"Good Morning! I have something of an emergency and need the use of the stationery room. Miss Ramdas, you said that you would need to talk to the student - The one who needed the towel?"

The secretary came from behind the desk, greeted Roxanne, took her by the elbow, and led her to the small room where they kept the stationery. Roxanne turned back to look at Hussein. She was displeased, uncomfortable.

"Sir?"

"Yes, Roxanne." His voice was deliberately gruff.

"Sir? Can you wait for me outside the door? Please, Sir?"

"Of course. I'll be here, Roxanne. Don't worry."

Roxanne and the secretary disappeared behind the door; Moyna stood still looking at Hussein, and he moved uneasily to take up his position by the door.

"Did she have her period?"

"What? I mean, I beg your pardon?"

“Did Roxanne have her period?”

He had heard the question the first time it was asked, and he hated himself for being so tongue-tied.

“Yes, she’s sick. She’s not well. She—“

“Mr. Hussein, menstruation is not an illness, you know. It’s natural. It’s an ordinary part of the life of all women.”

He was about to defend himself, about to tell her to go to hell, but then he recognised the same laughter in her voice that was in Roxanne’s. Same laughter, same words. He smiled.

“If her skirt is dirty, she will need another, don’t you think? I’ll go and get one for her, is that okay with you?”

“Thank you, Moy—Miss Parrot. Thanks a lot.”

She left, shaking her head at the stupidity of men. He remained, wondering again at the ways of women. God, they treat us like children.

Moyna walked quickly down the stairs to the lower level of the school and then went quickly to the home economics room. She was smiling at Hussein's awkwardness in the situation. She had glimpsed a side of him that she had not thought he possessed - a shyness, a naivete, even.

“She's sick” he had said. And she saw before her his eyes wide with panic, his brow furrowed with worry, his teeth biting into his bottom lip. And yet there was the bravado of the arms folded across his chest, the posture of the sentinel. She had wanted, with her instinctive compassion, to place her soft hands upon his forehead and smoothen the lines there. She had wanted to put her lips upon his eyes, then press them onto his lips, still whitened by the marks of his teeth. Her lips would send the blood back to where it belonged, back into his lips.

She wanted to place his head upon her breasts. Yes, he would find comfort there. He would find rest, calm. Upon her breasts, he would be

able to weep. For, above all things, he needed to weep, she felt. She had wanted to do this.

Moyna opened one of the closets in the home economics room and stooped to the shelf that held the new orange skirts of the school's uniform. She placed her left hand beneath the top skirt, above it her right palm. Her hands were shaking. Tremulous, she thought. That is the word. Tremulous. Like the dove that descended with that potent message upon the Blessed Mother to tell her that she was to be the Blessed Mother. O, to be both the messenger and the receiver, both heavenly bird and earthly virgin. Breathing out deeply, she stood. She could not allow herself to be so affected. This was not professional behaviour; this was not why she was here in this part of the world, in this school, in this world so far removed from her world. No, she needed to compose herself. By the time she returned to the headmaster's office, she was fully composed.

The door of the stationary room in the Headmaster's office opened, Hussein looked away, and the secretary emerged.

"She's goin' to be fine, Mr. Hussein. You can go now if you want."

"No. I think I'll wait. I told her...and Miss Parrot has gone to get a skirt for her, and..."

The door opened again. Through the crack Roxanne's head appeared.

"Mr. Hussein, can you please take this, and out came a golden forearm with the frayed white towel at the end of it."

Involuntarily, lines came to him from Tennyson, as from afar:

"An arm rose up from out the bosom of the lake

Clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful"

But he was no Bedevere, no bearer of King Arthur's sword. And dear Roxanne was no Lady of the Lake. He took the towel from the arm before the poetry had given way to immediate circumstance. Then,

having thought of the use to which it had been put, he changed it to his left hand, making sure to hold it by an edge.

"Oh, Roxanne, Miss Parrot has gone to get you a skirt, okay? She'll be a minute."

"Okay" The word withdrew halfway between the o and the k as the student shut the door.

Hussein was again uncertain, embarrassed. He folded the towel using his thumbs and forefingers, careful not to touch the middle which he estimated had come into contact with the burgundy patch.

"Where do I put this, Miss Ramdas?"

"Just leave it on the Headmaster's desk..." And she smiled at him.

Hussein broke into almost hysterical laughter. Tears came to his eyes, the breath left his body, and he gasped for air. His laughter took hold of the secretary, and she began to laugh - slowly at first, quietly. Her shoulders jerked up and down in spasms, her chin upon her chest, her hands folded on her lap. Then she brought the hands up and slapped the desk, and laughed a laugh that came from the belly.

Moyna came in, looked at the secretary, then at Hussein, then back at the secretary, and back at the male teacher whom she had disliked so much, whom she had never heard laugh in this manner. And, involuntarily, she too started laughing.

"What? What is it, then?" She gasped.

Which started the secretary and the teacher of literature laughing anew. And Moyna thought of the wonderful sound of his laughter, a sound that seemed to get under her skin and brush against the back of her neck. She still held the skirt as if it were some precious cushion, left palm at the bottom, right palm on top. But she found that she had pressed the palms closer together.

It was only after the laughter had died down, after Hussein had collected himself, that Moyna moved towards the door of the stationary

room in which the student had taken refuge. She knocked. The door opened a crack, and two light brown eyes appeared.

"Hi, Roxanne," Moyna began, but before she could continue, the door slammed shut again.

Moyna, surprised, stepped back. She turned two questioning blue eyes upon Hussein. He thought: Eyes like the sky newly cleared after a downpour of rain. Eyes - sky so pure that they seemed transparent. Eyes that were as pure a blue as that lake in Tennyson's poem must have been. And beneath the pure blue lake, its lady; and behind these pure blue eyes, this woman. He tugged his mind away from the poetry that he saw in her eyes.

"Sorry, Moyna. She's so very shy, you know. Please don't take it the wrong way."

He took the skirt from her and held it in the fashion that she had held it, palm on palm, skirt in between. He took it from her as if it were a gift, a sword, a precious thing. Then he called gently to Roxanne:

"Rox. It's okay. Miss Parrot has got the skirt. I think it should fit. Open the door, and I'll hand it to you. Here, here, open the door."

The door opened; the brown eyes appeared. They smiled. The door opened some more and two hands appeared that took from him the skirt, the orange thing that now appeared to him a gift. Then the door shut itself again.

When he turned towards Moyna again, he saw the suspicion in her eyes as in her posture. But he was too tired to explain to her that any suspicions were unfounded, that he was not having a relationship with the girl in the little room, that it was his instinct for compassion that led his actions, as it was her instinct for compassion that had led her to get the new skirt for the student.

Hussein turned to leave, but then Roxanne called out to him:

"Sir, Sir!"

She rushed up to her teacher, took his hands and shook them, then reached up and kissed him on the cheek. Hussein paid more attention to the secretary's and Moyna's reactions than he did to the girl's act of thanks. Then the girl did the same for the secretary and for Moyna.

"You're welcome," said Moyna, clearly flustered by the student's show of affection towards her. The secretary, whose contact with students was mostly under unpleasant circumstances, beamed.

Hussein, with assumed gruffness, said: "Okay, Roxanne, enough of this soppy stuff. Now go do something constructive...like read Shakespeare." The girl returned to her classroom. Hussein headed down the stairs, the secretary got back to work, and Moyna stood still on the spot where she had been. Before he left, Hussein noticed that the suspicion was gone from her eyes. He was thankful.

There were just two weeks remaining before the long June-July-August break. Hussein had been tired, even somewhat jaded. But after the Roxanne incident, he found himself refreshed. He taught again with passion; he taught with conviction. He thought of the headmaster's accusations rarely and even then with a kind of wry humour.

But he thought of Moyna often, and he found himself wondering if it was she who had caused a return of this belief in himself. Was it the wonder at seeing suspicion leave her eyes after the incident with the female student? Was it enough that one person believed in him that he now believed in himself? Or was it the incident itself, the trust that Roxanne had placed in him?

Of course, it could be simply because there were just two weeks remaining before the break. He dismissed the last explanation, since he had volunteered to return over the break to prepare his students and those of the other teachers, for the English and Literature papers. The examinations were in mid-June, and it was now mid-May.

He dismissed this explanation because it did not contain the thrill of the other two. It did not appeal to his ego as did the other two. The appeal in Roxanne's light brown eyes; the appeal of the glass-blue eyes

of Moyna. Whatever it was that caused this return of passion and related energy, he was thankful. If only he could get his wife to see how important it was for him to have a woman who believed in him, who saw through his faults to his goodness.

Moyna's relationship with the students also underwent a change. She was more relaxed with them now, more tolerant of their local ways, of their language, their lack of refinement. She wished it could have been her that Roxanne trusted. She wished she could get any student to trust her in the manner that that girl had trusted Hussein - anyone to trust her in that manner. But she was different from them, and as long as she remained in this country, she was doomed to remain always the outsider.

And yet, the incident with the girl had drawn Moyna close to Hussein. And since there was a divine purpose behind all things, there must be a divine purpose behind this new respect she bore him. But the picture was not yet clear to her, and she must wait for further revelation.

In the meanwhile, she found herself speaking with Hussein- Not in any extended way, mind you, but just passing salutations, a brief remark on the weather, a casual compliment. And when he responded, she would feel the blood rush to her pink cheeks. She avoided his eyes. She was afraid of what she might see there; she was even more afraid of what he might see in hers. It would be one of the great wonders if the Saviour had chosen this man, this stranger, to help her serve her purpose of doing God's work in this country.

The two weeks passed in a flurry of activity: exams set and marked, the marks recorded and submitted, student reports filled out, signed by each subject teacher, and then submitted to the deputy headmaster for approval. And it was all wonderfully pleasant for Moyna and for Hussein. She came to him and asked his advice about filling in some of the reports, and he responded without condescension. He knew that she was making a special effort to be nice to him, to demonstrate respect for him. And he reciprocated by asking her advice about students who seemed to be performing below their potential.

For the final day of school, the students were sent home at the lunch break. The teachers traditionally held their end-of-term party after the students left, and much planning always went into this. The male teachers seized this as their responsibility. One group was given the task of cooking, another of getting the drinks, and another of arranging the staff room for the occasion. Even the headmaster got into the spirit of things, donating to the food and drink fund.

The female teachers were only too pleased to let the men handle things like cooking and arranging, and organising. It gave them an opportunity to have a laugh at male incompetence. Even Moyna was invited to sit with the females and share in the spectacle and in the laughter. Miss Batson, the senior mistress, headed the team of women.

"You see, girls, how they enjoy this. They're like children at Christmas. It comes once a year, and they are the stars. They love it because they do not have to do it every single day. The only thing is that we gat too many Father Christmases here, and you know what they say about dat...?"

"Not really, Miss Batson. These chaps do this all the time, which is why they have dish-pan hands. Poor little housewives."

"Yeah," added another, "and then many o dem gat that fat that left over from the last pregnancy." And she imitated the walk of one of the fatter male teachers.

"Any of you see Bernard in that apron? He spend more time putting it on than he will to cook in it. The chap will peel onions and get the apron dirtied front and back.

"And don't forget the Deputy HM...in the new role as mother hen. Except he sit down too hard on the eggs."

And they all hooted with laughter.

The men, meanwhile, took turns at going to the bar nearby. In this group, the talk was of a less innocent nature. The men, always ready for a challenge, saw a great challenge in Moyna. To bed a white woman

was to be a hero. This plan had taken shape in each mind ever since Moyna had arrived at the school one year ago. And now, together, they had engendered it with clarity.

With the force of numbers and a few drinks, with the mood of celebration abroad, they had pushed it out into the open. Once out in words, the plan to bed Moyna took on a certain solidity. It was like flesh, newborn; and now they would see it to maturity. They used history to justify the plan.

"The white man has done things to our women since they came here. That's four hundred years of messing with our women. Now, it can be our turn, man." This was the fellow who taught history.

"And even now, you see their arrogance? You think Moyna look pon we like we was human beings? Naaah!! She and her kind still above we, still superior. And one way to end that superiority is to have a level bed, man!"

And they all bellowed with laughter.

"So, gentlemen, what's the plan?" asked one teacher.

The Deputy Headmaster took the lead here: "Okay. I know for a fact that she drinks, so we ply her with liquor. At the end of it, she should be ready for the picking. Ripe fruit, man! Whomsoever she chooses, she chooses, right? Nobody should block anybody else. Let the games begin! And may the best man win!"

Once the party started, the men, given courage by their pre-game drinks, were especially attentive to Moyna. They made sure that her plate was full and her glass was even fuller. The woodwork teacher, a rather thick fellow in his mid-forties, was especially aggressive in his attention. He spoke with Moyna, laughed at whatsoever she said, laughed even louder at his own jokes, filled her glass, and tried to get closer to her. But the others were also attentive. As the drinks took stronger hold of the male teachers, the attention grew more pressing. With each subsequent male teacher, as with the woodwork fellow,

Moyna grew bored very quickly. She scorned them for being so very obvious about their intentions. But beneath the boredom and the loathing - just beneath - she could feel it: the fear. She was afraid that they were getting too close, and in that closeness, they could sense her insecurities, her uncertainties. She was afraid they would smell the loneliness.

She kept glancing over at Hussein, hoping that she would have a chance to speak with him, but Hussein always seemed to be engaged in an animated conversation with some person or the other. The bottle of beer in front of him was hours old, and it was not even half done. She was looking for him to rescue her. How strange, she thought, that she who was sent here for the purpose of saving was herself in need of being saved. But there was a difference - a big difference. She wanted to go over to his side of the room and offer to give him a cool bottle of beer. But she sat there, being attended to by one teacher after the other, immobile for her pride and with the hope that he would notice that she was capable of attracting attention.

The female teachers noticed the undue attention paid to Moyna by their male counterparts, and they thought it inappropriate. But to protest would be to spoil the rare festive atmosphere in the staff room. And, at any rate, what was going on was none of their business. Not really. Moyna had made it clear by her behaviour over the last year that she did not value their friendship nor their advice. She had held herself aloof. Well, if that was the way she wanted it, then that was the way she would have it.

As the afternoon turned into late afternoon, the talk became louder, the drinks flowed more quickly, and the laughter came more easily. There was music in the background; Now, someone had turned up the volume. Red shafts of light from the setting sun shot through the smoke from cigarettes. The sunset painted the staff room walls in various shades of pink.

And in this light and haze, Hussein felt descend upon him an unaccustomed sense of closeness with these people with whom he

worked - a closeness for all the differences in opinions, in class and in colour. In the midst of it all, he was still. He looked across at Moyna in this light and from within the mood that had swathed him. The little brown speckles on her arm were lost in this light, in this mood. There was a lovely glow to her skin, a rich pinkness rested there on her bare arms, her neck. Her cheeks held a deeper pink. Her light brown hair held the promise of gold. The warmth he sensed on her cheeks found its way to his fingertips, and he curled his fingers around the bottle of beer, hoping to extinguish that warmth. The bottle was warm. He wanted to move over to her and engage her in conversation as all the others had done, but pride held him fast to his chair. Pride and fear. These too shall pass, he thought. The mood, the enchantment, the light, the sense of closeness - all shall pass.

And the mood, like the light, did pass. The female teachers, taught by lifetimes of experience, left before the party became louder and more frantic. The male teachers, anxious to show their rhythm and flexibility and having put their inhibitions to sleep with drink, danced before the white woman. One or two actually tugged her by the arm to join in the dance, but Moyna was firm in her refusal.

There was something tragic in this parading, prancing, and frantic dancing, but Moyna could not put her finger on it. Instead, she wore a smile. Hussein sat still, but he could feel a mounting agitation. He knew that the dancing was more a ritual of panic, yet he could hardly find it in himself to forgive the self-humiliation in which these men were involved.

He knew the pattern well: quiet, social talk followed by talk of sports; then, as the drink took hold, dancing; and soon after, frustration and anger; finally arguments, accusations and counter-accusations, and even fights. The mask of the jolly West Indian falls off very quickly.

He despised these men for making themselves such pathetic fools before this white woman. He found himself disliking her smugness, her obvious laughter at the antics of these men. Moyna was right to scorn them as she did, and he hated her for being right to scorn them. But

rather than let the scowl surface on his face, Hussein placed there a smile.

When the woodwork teacher jumped onto a desk to show off his dancing, Hussein decided it was time he left. He did not say goodbye to the fellows, for they would insist that he remain. There would be a big production, a great show of affection. There would be a scene, and he wanted to avoid any more scenes. Resisting the temptation of looking across at Moyna, Hussein moved quickly to the door, went down the short flight of stairs, through the front door of the school, and walked into the night to his car. The air felt good on his skin, and he breathed in a lungful of the pure, fragrant stuff. It was still early, just eight o'clock. He walked slowly, enjoying the simple sensation of his legs in motion. He had been sitting for hours.

He reached the car and reached into his pocket for the keys. Why is it that I always get to the car, then reach into my pocket to get my keys, he thought. It would make more sense if I got the keys from my pockets while walking to the car. And he smiled at his trivial thoughts. He opened the door to his second-hand Datsun.

"Were you going to leave without saying goodbye, then?"

He refused to show his surprise at hearing Moyna's voice right over his shoulder. He refused to show his pleasure. Instead, he turned to her with a frown.

"Hey there, Miss Parrot. Out for some fresh air? Taking a break from the fun and games? It gets better, you know. It -"

"Can we stop this-this -, please? Please."

"Look, I'm sorry. I just feel a bit embarrassed by those chaps in there."

"Can we go somewhere quiet and have a very quiet drink? I did not get a chance to talk to you at all tonight."

"Okay, Moyna. But, tell me, what will we -what do we have to talk about?"

"Anything, everything. We can talk about you and about me. We can get to know each other, even for a little bit."

Hussein moved around to the passenger side of the car and opened the door.

"Okay, then," he said, mimicking her lilt, "get into my red chariot."

"Thank you, kind sir," Moyna returned, and she moved around and got in.

She felt, to her surprise, quite comfortable with the excitement she felt at being close to this man. She felt she could get beyond his hostility to her. She needed to allow him the rest she knew he needed. The frown he wore was a signal of his inner torment, and she must relieve that torment and smoothen that frown. She must show this man what a beautiful and blessed thing life is - life can be. She must save him from this wasted intensity. To embrace him as if he were her child: he the child, she the Madonna.

"There is a small shop nearby where we can go and have this quiet conversation of yours, Moyna. Would it be okay if we went there? They know me, and we'll be fine."

"Of course, Salim."

It was the first time that she had addressed him by his first name, and he found it pleasant that she felt comfortable enough to do that. He liked it that she stressed the last syllable of his name with an "ee". He liked her smell. It is only expensive perfume that stays with you after so many hours and does not burn the nostrils. Her bare arms glowed in the semi-dark of the car. They were softly muscled, those arms, nicely fleshed. But he was uncertain where all of this was going, and he intended to tread carefully. He must let her make the first move, give the first signal.

He pulled off to the side of the road when they reached the shop. It was a small place where he had gone to play pool as an undergraduate student. He had been a good pool player and had got the respect of the

shop owner for his prowess on the tables. He had brought many friends here, both male and female. The shop owner appreciated the business Hussein brought in and paid him more than special attention. Word had got around too, that Hussein was a very, very bright fellow, and that was good enough to earn him respect. To find a bright boy who could also have fun was rare.

The shop itself was little more than an extension of a house. They had placed sheets of zinc as a roof and had placed more zinc to close off the shop from the outside. There were two sections, one for the pool players and another, smaller section for those who wanted to come in and have a drink and a chat. In this smaller section, there was a single light bulb casting a small glow against the dark.

Hussein led the way in, Moyna right behind him. The chatter stopped, as did the click of ball on ball at the entrance of a white woman. The young men gazed at a vision they had seen only on the screen of the cinema. Then they noticed the man, and there were yells of greeting.

"Hey, Salim, how yuh doing, boy?"

"Yuh blind or what? Yuh ain't see how he doin'? He doin' betta than you."

"Where yuh been all this time, boy? America? Look like yuh bring back more than Johnny Walker and Christmas apple."

"Hey Salim, yuh not here fuh pool, boy. Too big shot fuh we small timers, eh?"

"Hey, just remember that woman make yuh knee weak, boy. They make yuh hand shake. They make yuh eye all watery. So no pool tonight fuh de bright boy."

"Alright yuh goons," Hussein replied good-naturedly, "I can still beat anybody in this shop, you know. Don't get me started pon yuh all. I can beat anybody here wid me eye blind and wid me hand tie behin me back, standing pon one foot. So you all can go to hell, man!" And they all laughed loudly.

Hussein greeted the shop owner and asked for two beers.

"Hey, Salim, since when yuh drinking beer, boy? What? No more Pepsi? Hey, boys, Salim finally grow up. See how woman can mek yuh grow up?"

"Hey, Salim, if yuh want help, leh me know, right?"

"Aright, aright. Now lef he alone. The boy here for different business," This was the shop owner, who stopped the good-natured fun by taking one final dig at Hussein.

The couple headed over to a small table on the quiet side, out of earshot and out of sight of the players. The shop owner, for the first time since he opened the shop, came from behind the counter to serve the two beers himself.

"Yuh want a glass, Miss?"

"No, thank you," replied Moyna.

The man lingered uncertainly, then turned round and went back behind the counter. For him, women should have glasses from which to drink. A white lady, especially so.

"Well, you are certainly the favourite son here, Mr. Hussein. I'd have to return to Ireland to hear such friendly greetings."

"Well, you did not do so badly here, you know. I've never seen that old man come from behind his counter to serve beer. And this is your first time here. So we both came off very well, except that this is a place I have frequented in the past. Do you think I would have got such courtesy paid to me back home in Ireland? I doubt it. I'd likely be some fresh nigger trying to make out with one of the daughters of the tribe."

"You really are presuming too much, Salim. We are a friendly people. In fact, Irish hospitality is legendary."

"Yes. I am in no position to doubt their hospitality. I've never been there and would never want to go there. But what I'm saying is that

they are hospitable to things known - things familiar. I would be neither. So do tell me where my presumption is incorrect."

"Why are you people so very defensive? Why do you take offence so quickly?"

"Now you are the one presuming. What do you mean by "you people"? Look, I am not some stereotype. You cannot make me fit into your vision of me, just as I do not make you fit into some vision that I may have of white people."

"But you've just presumed to know how my people would react to the two of us if we were there -"

"I did not deny presuming. I just asked where my presumption was incorrect. Look, you know that I am right about this."

"Okay, you may be right. But just beware of overgeneralizing about us, then."

"Who's 'us', Moyna? White people? I know the history of what white people have done, you know. I am a product of that rape and pillage."

"Tell me something, Salim," her voice softened.

"Mmmhmm..."

"Why is it that the two of us, two fairly educated people, cannot have a civilised conversation? Why is that?"

"Well, I see your point. But, you know, this is quite a civilised conversation. The problem is that you just don't like being challenged, don't you think? You want me to accept what you say. Do you want me to adore you - adoration with acceptance?" He was smiling.

"That would help," Moyna smiled back at him.

"You should smile more, Salim. You are such an attractive man when you smile. Irresistible, really."

"If I had more reason to smile, then I would. Don't you think I like to be pleasant? And, incidentally, that same 'irresistibility' is what gets me into trouble time and time again. You know, like in that staff room fiasco."

"You were most attractive when you were with that girl, that student, when she had her period." She deliberately neglected to mention the girl's name.

"Yes, Roxanne," Salim added.

"Yes. You were so tender with her, so careful and attentive. It was something like love."

"Of course it was, of course I was. She is my student. And I love her for that - for her trust in me, her faith. Apart from which, the girl was in trouble."

"And you need to have someone depend on you for you to be tender. Someone needs to be in trouble, to need you, for you to show that you care, right?"

Hussein did not like the microscope under which she was placing him, but he did not know how to respond to this line of gentle questioning, gentle probing.

"I really do not know. I do not examine myself that much, you know. Anyway, you were not exactly unsympathetic, Moyna."

"Thanks, Salim. Maybe I need that too - the need to be appreciated for what I am trying to do."

"What are you trying to do, Moyna? Why are you here in this godforsaken part of the world?"

"I'll tell you some day, I promise. Right now, I just want to-to -" She reached across the table and kissed him on the mouth.

Hussein's first reaction was to glance across to see if anyone had noticed, and he hated himself for reacting so stupidly. He should pay

her full attention at this point. His surprise came only after his reaction. Then came his pleasure, his knowledge of what was going to happen.

"Listen, Moyna. Let's go somewhere where we can be alone, in private. Do you -"

"Yes. Let's."

"Excuse me, then, please."

He got up, walked around to the counter, and paid for the beers, still half-finished. Then he joined Moyna again, stood over her and removed her chair from beneath her. When she stood, he kissed her.

"Let's go," he said.

Moyna had felt herself tremble after she had kissed him. She had taken herself by surprise when she had done so. She knew where this was leading, but this was not what she wanted, not what she had intended when she left the party to join him. Yet, this was what she wanted, what she needed. This closeness of flesh to flesh, this moist, wonderful closeness. And she was helpless in the embrace of this need, like the virgin who had no choice in the matter of the annunciation. Yes, this must have been how she felt when the winged thing had descended from Heaven to give her the glad tidings. She must have recoiled from the gravity of it all, and she must have been exhilarated by it, by the sacrifice she was being asked to make, to undertake. The intercourse between spirit and flesh was where terror lay, and fulfilment. This was how the world was born anew.

Hussein was surprised by the intensity of this woman. He had always thought that white women were cold, but when he kissed her, he felt beneath her dress the trembling muscles of her lower back. She was like a bird, the dress a light coat of down. And like a wilful child, he wanted to tear at the soft feathers to get to the warmer skin, the flesh. One can hardly get closer to one's own mortality than by holding in one's palm the still-beating heart of a creature freshly captured and killed. It was like being the spectator and the actor at the same time,

like seeing yourself dying while still being alive. And he felt within him a euphoria that he contained only by an exercise of will.

Hussein drove into the yard of a motel. He had gone there several times before and knew the place well. He parked, got out, opened Moyna's door, and locked it. He led the way up the long, covered stairway. It was dark, and he held her hand as he went up, one stair ahead. The top of the dark stairway opened onto a large, empty lobby. The cavernous place was only slightly lit, the dark relieved only by two small yellow light bulbs on the desk. He asked her to wait, guiding her gently to the small single sofa to the right of the stairway. He was grateful for the dark; it would not have done for her to see how frayed was the cheap cloth of the sofa on which she sat. He was grateful that he knew the place well enough so that he could find his way to the desk without stumbling.

Hussein walked to the desk, asked for a room, paid, and got the key. He ignored the knowing wink from the fellow at the desk and walked back to where Moyna was sitting. Her white skin glowed against the dimness. He knew that he would be a hero to the chap at the desk. He was about to bed a white woman.

She watched him return to her and admired his surefootedness in the dark. He was a dark outline with the two feeble bulbs behind him. He could have been anyone. A stranger. She knew this was a place for clandestine meetings, and she knew that it was far from what she would have liked. But this seedy place could have been a manger, and that it was not ostentatious was something of a relief. She was grateful for the slow attention that he was paying her. When he took her by the hand, she felt cared for, comforted. She felt safe, safe in the company of this man. Yet, her heart beat wildly within her breast. She was afraid. How can one feel so safe and so frightened at the same time?

He reached out for her hand, and she gave it to him, cool with the sweat born of her fear and anticipation. He led her to the room, never once letting go of her hand. Hussein did not turn on the light. There was no need, for the louvres were open and the moonlight flowed in like waves

of beaten silver. He led her by the hand to the open window, and they were awash in the bluish silver. She could see the Atlantic just yards, away on the other side of the road. On the other side of that vast expanse was her home, her Ireland. But now, she felt a stranger to that place, as she did to this. And the only country she knew was this tiny room, this space, with this man. And there arose in her this deep tenderness, this grave certainty, that she took her hand from his, and placed her two palms upon his face. The kiss was soft with promise. Then she unbuttoned his shirt.

After they had made love, she lay close to him, her legs draped over his, her head upon his chest. She heard his heart thump wildly, then slow to a steady beat. Like music. And she felt her own slow with his, slow to a steady beat. Like harmony. She shivered.

"Are you cold?" His words were the first spoken since they had got to the room. Such ordinary words, made extraordinary by the tenderness in his voice and by her willingness to receive that tenderness. Made extraordinary by the wash of the Atlantic in the background, for the waves of silver that bathed the room.

"No, no, I'm not. It's just that my body can hardly contain this joy I feel. It's as if I've found a new freedom, as if I did not know what freedom was before this night. This is the most beautiful night of my life. I needed this night with you. I need you, you know."

Hussein was quiet. In the aftermath of the

lovemaking, the image of his son's face had appeared before him. The sweet face of a child, without judgement, without accusation. The judgement and the accusation lay in his heart like a grain of sand. He heard the soft rush of the waves of the ocean upon the seawall. He went there on many nights, to the seawall, to stand before the great body of water. He knew it in its calm, a calm so profound that it was like an immense mirror. He could see, at those times, the clouds float by in the water. It was as if, looking down into the water, he was looking up at

the sky. And at other times, he had seen it rage with a fury so great that it shook the very earth beneath his feet.

During these moments of utter calm and utter fury, he forgot the condemnation in the eyes of his wife. Forgot the thing from which he escaped. He had found relief in the child, in the sheer love he bore it. And now, he found relief lying here with this woman. Moments of relief. His life consisted of moments of relief. And this too - even this - must be a moment.

He looked at her upturned face, at the eyes now dark blue in the moonlight. Then, in a whisper:

"I know. And then, tomorrow's a new day."

Moyna became very still, very tense. Then she shook slowly, slowly, like the great ocean losing its calm. The quiet shaking gave way to soft shudders, then to quick spasms. Her tears ran down his chest and stomach, down his sides. He imagined the tears forming a still lake on the surface of the sheet. And from this lake an arm rose up, clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful.

He held her hard with one arm. The other he placed on her head, gently stroking her damp brown hair:

"Ssssh, Ssssh,"-from his lips came the soft sounds made to comfort a child in distress or pain. He lifted her head from his chest and kissed her, and she could feel him being aroused again. This time, the lovemaking was more intense, as if he wanted to be remembered by it, as if her tears had awakened in him a new and furious hunger.

Afterwards, they lay alongside each other, exhausted, panting for a long time.

They both knew that he would remain in the prison to which he had committed himself, and that she would leave this small space and never know home again - not here in this country and not anywhere else. She knew then that she could never stay here in this country, not now. Hussein knew, as did Moyna, that she would live with the need to

recreate this joy she had felt for a brief moment on this velvet night. They both knew that he would seek moments like these again, with others -Always moments - until he found true courage and a woman with whom to share and complement that courage. Or until he drove himself to quiet and final surrender.

On a bright morning, two weeks later, Moyna Parrot boarded a plane to Ireland. On the same bright morning, Salim Hussein kissed his son goodbye, got into his old Datsun, and headed off to the school.

The staff room was deserted, for they were still on holiday. He put his bag on his desk and sat there listening for some sound that would recall the life of the school. No sound came. He read for a while; then, overcome by restlessness, he walked around the school. He went to the biology lab, tried the door, but it was shut. He leaned against the railing and tried looking into the room. It was dark in there, and all he saw was his own reflection in the windowpane. He thought of Moyna - of her perfume in the car that night, of the lovemaking and the tears that followed.

Then he went back down to the empty staff room, gathered up his books, placed them in his bag, and walked to his car. Driving along the main road, he thought he heard the call of the Ocean. It was a mournful thing, like a sob or a series of sobs. Hussein eased the car off the road, got out, and walked to the sea wall. The great Atlantic Ocean was at rest, a mirror. There were clouds in the water.