

LOVE AFTER LOVE

A Novel

INGRID PERSAUD



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PART ONE



BETTY

—Bet-tee! Bet-tee!

He didn't need to shout. I was already behind the car opening the trunk to find the lunch cooler. I took it out carefully along with his newspaper and jacket. Sunil stood waiting as I walked past the driver's door. His swift sharp kick in my shin was half expected.

—Slow coach. You can't come when I call you? What, you ugly and you deaf?

Upstairs, I rushed to heat up his food. He was already stinking of rum but the first thing he did was get a fat glass and open a bottle of White Oak. Solo was in front the TV.

—Eh, boy. Your father reach home and you can't say good evening?

—Hello.

—Run and bring my slippers, boy. A man work hard whole week and I come home and have to ask people for my fucking slippers? I have a good mind to beat your ass today.

Before Solo could get up I ran for the slippers.

—I ask you for any slippers? Make the boy get up for a change. All he does do is sit down in front the TV.

Solo continued staring at the TV but I knew my baby was frightened.

—Solo. What you waiting for? Come here.

Solo walked over slowly and carefully as if stepping on mossy rocks.

—Take off my shoes. And make sure they shine up good and proper before you put them away.

The boy undid the laces, his short, stubby fingers trembling. But he made a mistake. As he pulled off the socks he couldn't help it. He's only little. He twisted up his nose and the father saw.

—You find my foot smelling bad?

Sunil shoved his toes right up in the boy's nostrils then pulled back but only to gain speed to kick his nose. If you see blood. Solo burst into tears and ran to the bathroom.

—Don't cry and run away! Come here!

I froze right there. If he saw my tears that would only make him more crazy.

—Solo, bring your ass here. Come. I didn't mean for your nose to bleed. Come, boy.

He waited. I was counting the seconds hoping he would cool off. His voice softened.

—Solo. I'm calling you. Come here.

Solo appeared wiping away snot and tears. Toilet paper was pushed up both nostrils.

—Sit down. What you learn in school today?

—Yes.

—I'm right here and I can't hear you. Open your mouth when you're talking. When a person talking soft soft so, I know is something they're hiding.

—Yes.

—Speak up!

—I'm speaking up.

He grabbed Solo's T-shirt and before you could say Jack Robinson the child was on the floor.

—Kneel down!

—Yes.

—Yes, please.

—What you learn in school today?

—I don't know.

—You.

The slap hit the top of the child's bent head.

—Don't.

His foot rammed into the boy's stomach.

—Know?

He grabbed his hair. Solo was screaming. I was screaming.

—Leave the child! Sunil! Leave the child alone. He ain't do nothing.

—All I want is to find out what he learn in school today. That so unreasonable?

I ran to Solo's bedroom for his backpack, returned breathless and shook it empty on the kitchen counter.

—Solo, show Daddy what you do in kindergarten today.

The child was crouched down behind the kitchen counter, crying. I found his letters book and pushed it in front Sunil.

—Look how the boy gone and write all his letters so neat neat between the lines. And the teacher told me Solo's best in the class.

Sunil flung the book like a frisbee towards Solo then rocked back and drained his glass. I didn't move a muscle.

—Where my food?

In two-twos I dished out the stew chicken, vegetable rice, and green salad. Sunil used the fork like it was a shovel.

When he's like this anything can become an argument and any argument can become a fight.

—Like salt cheap?

—But I hardly put salt in the food.

He rocked back in his chair. If looks could kill.

—You telling me you cook this chicken and didn't put one set of salt in the pot?

Silence.

—So, what I tasting? Something must be wrong with my mouth. How I tasting salt so? You know my pressure high and you giving me salt? Like you want to kill me? Eh?

I was careless. I'd left the rolling pin on the drain board. Easy reach of Sunil's chair. That rolling pin might have hit the wall, or the bed, or the chair. But it found me. Doctor said the ulna and the radius snapped in two. My arm was in a cast when we buried Sunil a week later.

At the funeral, I told people it was no big deal. I must stop being so careless with ladders. But I talk half and left half. People used to look at me and

Sunil and say, Betty girl, you real lucky. In my head, I wanted to ask if they making joke. Lucky? That man only gave love you could feel. He cuff you down? Honeymoon. He give you a black eye? True love in your tail. He break your hand? A love letter. He put you in hospital for a week? Love will stay the course. He take a knife and stab your leg? Until death do us part.

MR. CHETAN

Water lock off since last night. Not a word on the TV or radio about when it's coming back. A lady in the school office was saying how in Gasparillo they haven't had water for a week. What to do? Pay the water truck three hundred dollars to get a full water tank—assuming the water truck even passing your house. I'm not wasting the three buckets I managed to fill up. Half a bucket is all I need to rinse my skin. If you're careful that's more than enough. Trust me.

Teeth can brush with a cup of water from the fridge. The toilet is a whole bucket. Nothing you can do about that. Luckily I only wanted to pee. Unless number two is an emergency it will wait until I reach to work.

By the time I came out the road to catch a maxi taxi the Monday morning rush was in full swing. I is a man who hate reaching to work late. Not a single maxi taxi. When one finally pulled up it was a set of shoving and pushing to get on. I was thinking in my mind if to walk up to the junction in case more taxis passing there when I saw Mrs. Ramdin's car slowing down.

—Come quick, man. I'm holding up traffic.

Nothing's wrong with Mrs. Ramdin. She's a little talkative. And you can see the girl she was in her big dark eyes and simple shoulder-length hair. I just prefer not to be too friend friend with people in the main office. Next thing

the whole of town all up in your business. I know she so so. Good morning, how you going, but never any big conversation.

If I need to book a room for a special class, it goes through her. Things like that. Her husband passed away a good few years now and the whole school got half day off for the funeral. Take the drop? Don't take drop? The driver behind was blowing horn and shouting,

—Oh shrimps, woman. Drive if you driving.

What to do? I jumped in the back seat.

—Morning, Mrs. Ramdin. Thanks for stopping.

—Morning. I'm surprised to see you here, Mr. Chetan.

She elbowed the boy sitting in front.

—Say good morning, Solo. Anybody would think I never teach you manners.

The boy mumbled something. I don't mind. He looked about ten—the age when they start to feel they big.

—First time I'm seeing you and I pass here nearly every day God spare life.

—My car's by the mechanic and to tell you the truth this is late for me, Mrs. Ramdin. All now so I would be at school already.

—Call me Betty.

—Yes, Miss Betty. If I'm taking transport I would normally come out a good half hour earlier.

—Ain't I just say call me Betty? None of this Mrs. Ramdin like we don't know one another.

—I can't do that. I have too much respect.

—Oh gosh. Don't be so.

We edged forward a little then stopped. Trinidad roads aren't made for the amount of cars we have. Move. Stop.

Move. Stop. She clearly didn't like silence.

—I can't take this traffic every day so.

I nodded although she couldn't see me while driving.

—Mr. Chetan, sorry, I should have asked how you're feeling. Ain't you took sick leave the other day? You're good now?

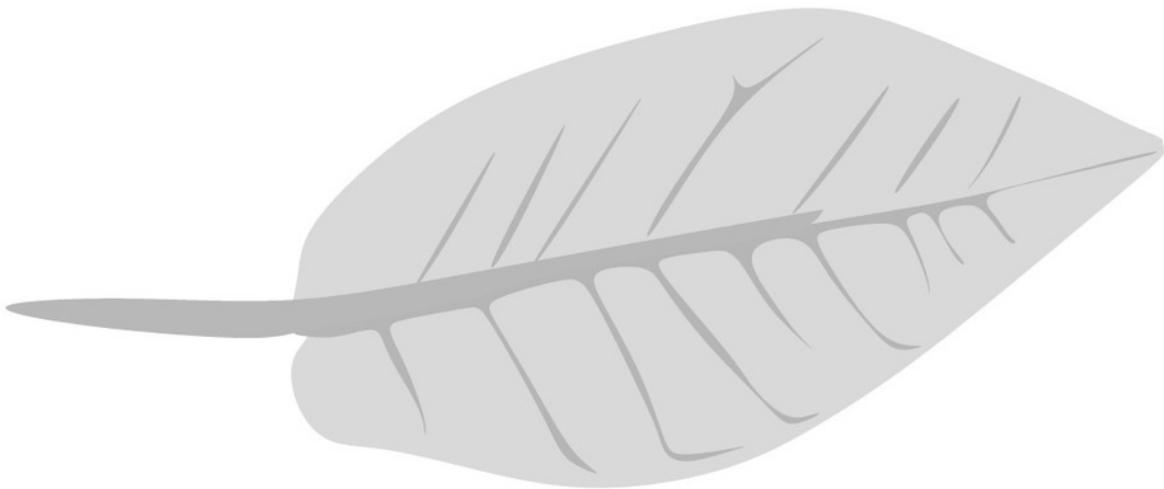
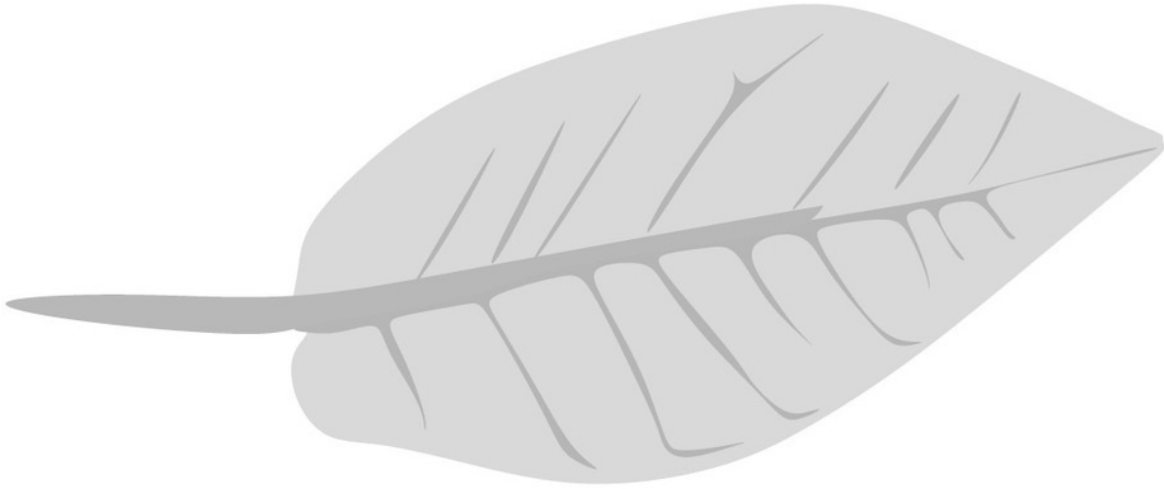
—Yes, Mrs. Ramdin. I mean Miss Betty. Everything's good, thanks. Wasn't anything serious.

I took out my *Express* and held it high in front my face. If I take a couple days off, why is it anybody's concern?

Christ. You can't sneeze without people telling you to take two Tylenol.

—The new headmaster treating you good?

Now look at my crosses. I don't know this woman enough to speak my mind. Suppose she tells the boss I said so-



and-so? Next thing I land up in trouble. I answered from behind the newspaper.

—He seems like a decent man. We haven't had too many dealings yet.

Suddenly we picked up a little speed. Whatever was holding up the traffic had cleared away. Miss Betty was concentrating on the road but that didn't

stop her from prattling on.

—I'm not sure. You notice the label still sew on his jacket sleeve? Oh gosh, man. Pull off the label, nah. Money can't buy breeding. Anyhow, I suppose we should give him a chance. God is love.

I pulled the newspaper so it almost brushed my nose. She took the hint. For the rest of the car ride she and the boy talked until we reached the gates of Saint Barnabas College.

—Mr. Chetan, I want to ask you something if you don't mind.

—No problem, Mrs. Ramdin. Sorry, Miss Betty.

In the fifteen minutes between dropping the boy to his school and reaching ours, Miss Betty chatted nonstop. The husband had died so it was only she and the boy. Well I knew that already. Things were tight. The house was old but big.

She inherited it from her grandmother and it's paid for but she doesn't have much cash. A lodger would be income and company. If I knew anybody suitable I should let her know. A mature, single woman would be ideal. I said I would keep my ears open.

On the Wednesday, I found her in the staff room taking a break. Normally I eat lunch at my desk but today I eased up beside her at the long dining table.

—Miss Betty.

She looked up from the chow mein noodles she was eating.

—Miss Betty, we could talk for a minute? When you're finished your lunch.

She shifted her chair to face me.

—You eat already?

I nodded and sat down. Sadly, my story wasn't that unusual in a country clocking forty murders a month. Henry's Pharmacy on Cipero Street is my

landlord's business. Bandits came in broad daylight. They knocked him down, buss his head with a gun, and tied him up. It was he and his wife there. I never asked but I pray the men them didn't interfere with her. That happened Easter time and made the papers. Not front-page news because nobody died but it was still in the first section. They took it hard and now they're selling up. Everything's going—the pharmacy, the house, two cars, furniture—the whole jahaji bundle. Fort Lauderdale is already home to their grown children and that will be where they settle. I've been renting the little apartment downstairs their house for the last four years. Now I've got to move.

Everything I see that I like, I can't afford. What I can afford, I don't like. Maybe Miss Betty's place could be a temporary thing until I find what I want.

—I know you prefer a lady and that makes sense. So, if you say no I will understand. But I promise you will hardly know I'm there. You can ask my landlord. All the years I was there we lived easy easy. Not a single quarrel passed between us.

—Well look at that. When I said that word to you the other day I didn't know nothing nothing about you looking for a place. It's true I would prefer a woman but you wouldn't be a bother. Nobody in this office has a bad word to say about you. Not one body. Anyhow, pass later nah and we go talk.

—Thanks, Miss Betty. I appreciate that.

—Mr. Chetan, I know you're teaching math but you don't have to be so serious all the time. You and me are roughly the same age. Neither of us reach forty yet. Calling me Miss Betty makes me sound like an old lady.

—I don't mean you're old, Miss Betty. It's a respect thing. Leave me nah.

—Well I only hear people calling you Mr. Chetan so I suppose that is what you want me to keep calling you?

I gave her my sweetest smile. In this situation it was best to stay quiet. Let her figure it out.

—God is love, yes. I didn't have time to say crick crack, monkey break he back for a piece of pomerac, and boom, the room gone.

Crick crack, look at that. By that evening everything was settled. Moving is next Saturday.

Two trips and we moved everything into Miss Betty's house. Her car trunk was chinky for so. One big suitcase and it was nearly full. Lucky thing I wasn't bringing any of the two-three pieces of old furniture I had. Massy had a Rainy Season Blowout. I said to myself, Chetan, when last you buy something for yourself? I went to town. New bed and an armchair were the main items. Wherever I move to after this, I will need my things. While waiting to pay, I saw a cute desk so that passed in the rush too. Normally Massy takes a week to deliver. Don't ask me why but they catch a vaps and dropped off everything the same day. When I told Miss Betty new furniture was coming she wanted to help me choose. No disrespect but when you've lived alone it's hard to take people interfering and this woman looks like she could well interfere. I am going to have to keep my distance or next thing you know she's running my life. If it was woman I wanted, I would've got myself a wife long time. And, of the things I want in life, a wife does not even make the list.

As we turned in to the yard with the final carload of my stuff, her son, Solo, was waiting by the black wrought-iron gate. Miss Betty had barely parked when the child was trying to open the trunk.

—Mr. Chetan. Mr. Chetan. I can lift up this suitcase. I can do it.

The suitcase was nearly as big as the child. It probably weighed more.

—Leave it, son. Let me do it and you help your mom take things from the back seat.

Miss Betty declared she was leaving the gentlemen to sort out everything and going to take a five minutes. Solo put himself in charge of settling me into the house. I was trying to unpack but the boy kept calling me. Could he show me his room? Two minutes later he wanted to explain how to operate the TV. I had barely packed a drawer when he demanded I inspect the

kitchen. What to do? He was only being friendly. Solo showed me everything—down to turning on the water heater if there wasn't enough hot water in the pipe. He was a completely different child from the morning they had stopped to give me a drop. A right little chatterbox.

—Mr. Chetan, is that the last box you're bringing up?

—Yes. You stay. There's nothing else to bring. Ouch. Oh jeez-and-peas that hurt!

I had stumped my so-and-so toe on the sharp edge of the concrete step. Books tumbled out the box I was carrying.

A flashlight went clanking down the steps. Solo rushed to help.

—You all right, Mr. Chetan? You all right?

—My toe. Damn. That nail going to turn blue. I hit it and then the flashlight dropped on top it.

The boy ran after the flashlight and scooped up the books.

—You want ice to put on your toe?

—Don't worry. I'll manage.

—These steps are very dangerous. My daddy fell down these same steps and died. Right here.

—For true? Right here?

—I don't remember anything because I was small but I know he fell down.

—I'm sorry.

—Sometimes he used to drink, get drunk and fall down.

—You mustn't say that about your father.

—But Mammy told me that happened.

I hoped Miss Betty wasn't listening. Her window was open so unless she was sleeping hard she must have heard.

Children these days.

—I'm sure your father was a good man.

—Just please be very very, very, very careful on the steps. Okay? Especially if you come home drunk.

—You're not going to see me drunk. I take my Carib or a Stag now and then but I'm not a drinker. And Solo, you must be careful on the step too. If I knew about your daddy's accident I wouldn't have let you run up and down with boxes.

—I'm accustomed to the steps. Nothing will happen to me.

He bent down and picked up a large plastic bag.

—A boy in my class said he does thief Carib beer from the fridge and drink it in the backyard.

—I hope you never do that.

—Mammy said that is the one thing she will give me licks for. I can do anything but that.

It took the both of us till evening to put everything in place. Of course I could have done it all much faster but Solo refused to leave my side. I didn't mind and, although this boy's blabbing nonstop, half the time he's muttering to himself. At dinner Miss Betty acted like she hadn't heard what Solo said about his father. Still, it bothered me. People like to run their mouth—especially when it's nothing to do with them. No, I wouldn't want that for these two. About half past eight I asked Solo please, let's knock off for the day. What wasn't put away could wait.

—Solo, you can help me again but not too early. It's Sunday tomorrow.

—Okay. I won't come in your room and wake you up then.

—Before you go come let me whisper something in your ears.

He smiled and came close.

—You mustn't go around telling people that your father used to drink. It doesn't sound nice especially since he's passed. And it will make your mom cry.

He leaned into my ear and whispered back,

—My mammy won't cry for that.

BETTY

Friday night is pizza and TV. You should see Mr. Chetan and Solo—happy as pappy and I'm like a Wednesday in the middle. They don't care that a film's boring for me. If I don't want to see the car chases and the shooting I best go in my bedroom. Funny how Mr. Chetan made it clear he was only staying by us for a few months. After a year I noticed he stopped that talk. I'm glad. He's a help plus he's security. People know a man living about here. I wish I could say a good-looking thing like him by we because of my charm but hands down it's because of Solo. Them two real tight. He's not a father but he's a natural at fathering.

With Sunil dead and gone long time, my riding partners through thick and thin, Deedee and Gloria, are forever behind me to get out and meet people. They find I'm too young to stay home. Their thing is gambling. Two of them don't let a weekend pass without showing their face in the casino. Well, I surprised myself and had a good time. We stuck with the slot machines them. My rule was to stop when I reached my limit. If you see games. Cash Hunter. Slotfather. Dog Ca\$her. Moola Rouge. When we were fed up playing we sit down, eat we belly full, and relax we-self. Tonight we're not

going far. South City Mall has a brand-new casino. But them girls' foot hot for so. We've hit casinos all about. Grand Bazaar. Couva. Penal. One time we reach quite Woodbrook. And is only Chineese people running them. How Chineese people reach from so far to open all these casinos in little Trinidad I don't know. It must have a story behind that.

In the casino my arm started paining me bad. Gloria noticed me rubbing it.

—What happen, girl? Your arm like it giving you trouble.

—You have anything I could use?

—I have a cream. A muscle relaxer. Problem is if you put it on here, people on the other side of the casino will smell it too.

—Don't worry then. You see from the elbow to the hand? Remember I break them two bones years ago. Every now and then it will pain me. And if rain fall? Worse yet.

I saw Deedee walking between the machines towards us. She'd been watching live roulette.

—A white fella just take them for a whole ten thousand dollars. Ten thousand. We better go make friends.

I had to laugh. Not one of us have a man and we are unlikely to find one here. The pickings these days real slim.

—You win anything, Gloria?

—Girl, tonight's not my night. I played Wish upon a Jackpot and I tried my luck with Gold Raider but nothing doing. Must be the full moon. All you might think I'm making joke but I've never won a red cent when the moon full.

I reminded them it was past seven. The dining room was now open.

—Betty, tell me something good.

I gave one long steupse—sucking air and spit through my front teeth to make a hissing noise because is vex I vex.

—Paco and the Popping Peppers and King Cashalot gone with the few dollars I had in my purse. Anyhow, God is love.

Over dinner I was rubbing my arm again. Gloria pulled out the smelly cream and a pack of Advil. I shook my head.

—Leave it. And the doctor them can't do a blasted thing. They say that is how it is. At least it doesn't pain me steady.

Deedee put down her fork.

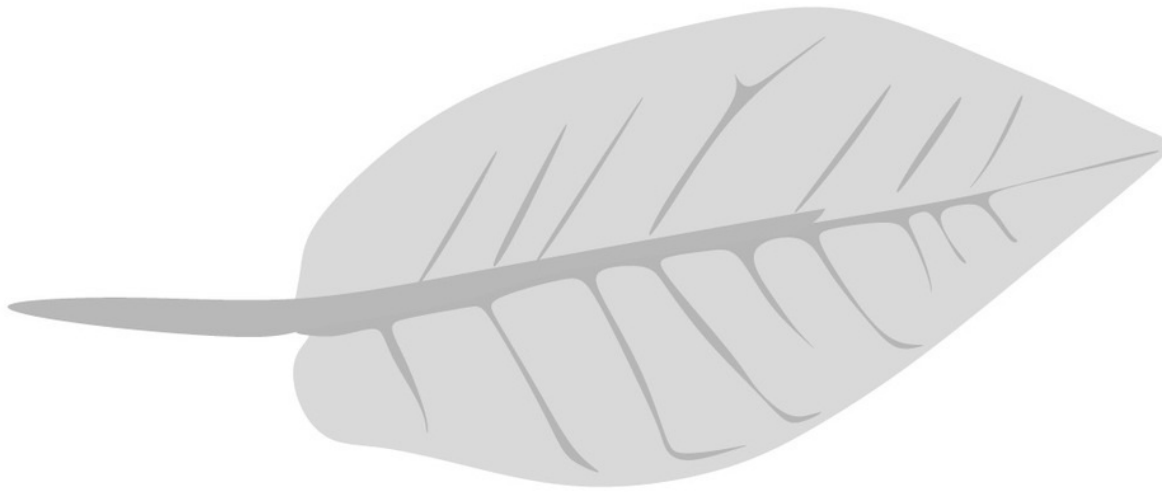
—How I never thought of this before? Betty, you need a good jharay by somebody who know what they doing. I feel the hand hurting because somebody put maljo on your head.

—Hush your mouth. Who would want to put bad eye on me? Sunil's family? Half of them in New York anyway.

You can't put maljo from so far.

—That is the thing, Betty. You wouldn't even know they do it.

Deedee and Gloria too sweet but I'm keeping quiet. One pain and they're ready to get me jharay. Thing is, worse than the pain in my arm is Sunil's spirit in the house. The man in the walls, on the stairs, in the rooms. Before he passed



he must have put he bad eye on me for truth. Years ago I went by Reverend Lutchman and asked him to say prayers for the spirit to cross over for all eternity. I don't know if it's because he was just ordained, or the fact that he's Guyanese, but his prayers didn't do a blessed thing.

We left the talk there but it had me thinking. Not counting our son, this pain in my arm is the only lasting thing Sunil left me. When he was alive I was too shame to say anything, and once he passed, I was even more shame. What kind of woman does bad talk she dead husband? And Sunil was good-looking. You have to give him that. A fair skin Indian with thick, black hair was a big catch. No one said it but I knew. Why would a hot man like that settle for a mook like me?

Saturday afternoon I finished cleaning the house, washed clothes, and cooked. Sweet breeze was blowing so I sat down on the front porch. I wasn't there a good ten minutes when Deedee's car pulled up outside. She was busy waving from the front seat. Gloria came out and stood by the gate.

—Me and Deedee had a panchayat and when we done the talking we decided you need a full jharay. Not just for your arm. Everything from your head come down. Let we go by a pundit in Williamsville. Deedee swears he's the bomb.

—Hush your mouth and come upstairs. If you're lucky I will give you some of my chicken pelau that just come off the stove. It make with pigeon peas I pick this morning.

—We'll take the pelau to go. Change your clothes and come. We're waiting.

—What about Solo?

—Sister, please. Solo tall like you. He could look after himself. It's not like you're leaving the island.

They carried me far up in the country where the trees and grass were a deeper green than in San Fernando. We drove past giant, whistling bamboo groves and tall, laden breadfruit trees. By the time we reached Williamsville the place was making dark. Deedee said relax because jharay can only happen after six o'clock anyhow. Either then or before six in the morning. Pundit was living in an upstairs wooden house. The place was small but neat with vegetables planted up on one side of the yard. A line of washing, all whites, was hanging under the house and parked next to it was a beat-up yellow Corolla. Somebody was home for sure.

Deedee went in front. Set next to the gate was a bundle of bamboo poles with solid-colored triangular flags attached. I may have lost most of my Indian culture but I knew these were jhandis. The flags were yellow with one-one in between in other colors—red, black, blue, and white. Some were faded and torn from months, possibly years, of blowing in the rain and hot sun. A few looked new. My ma would have known the god worshipped by each color. I read in the Sunday papers that this flag business is now only a Trini-Guyanese thing. People like my great-great-grandmother brought it from India but modern Indians stopped doing this long time.

—Pundit! Pundit!

A round, sleepy face peeped out a window.

—Pundit, like you're resting? Is Deedee. How you going?

The man welcomed us in and Deedee explained my pain. Pundit agreed it was the correct thing, coming to him.

One glance at me and he said I carried a bad aura. Well, thanks for that, pundit. I mentally prepared for a long, confusing set of prayers on my head but it wasn't too bad. Pundit made a little parcel out of a piece of white cloth and inside he put five garlic cloves, five bird peppers, and a shake of salt and pepper. He tied that and passed it over me, front and back and then around my head. Five times he did that while chanting prayers in Hindi. He could've been chanting the alphabet for all the Hindi I knew.

Next he got a cocoyea broom. Cocoyea broom is easy to make. Strip some coconut palms of the leaf them. Take a good set of the hard, center strips, tie up one end to make a handle, and sweep with the next end. Best yard broom ever.

Pundit took five pieces of cocoyea broom and passed that over me the same way. Five times again. More chanting. The only difference was that he blew on the cocoyea after each rounds. When that was done, he put the cloth bundle and the cocoyea stick on the ground, took a box of matches from his pants pocket, and looked me in my eye direct.

—Daughter, you know your Bible?

I was a little surprised because this ain't no Christian thing and he better not blaspheme here today. I nodded.

—Yes, pundit.

—You remember what scripture say did befall Lot's wife?

I nodded again but he started off anyway.

—The woman turned into a pillar of salt. The Lord tell them straight. Do not look back at Sodom. But she disobeyed and the Lord punished her. Well today you come like Lot's wife. I'm going to burn everything I used. All the evil that's on you will burn away too. But you mustn't look at the fire. You hear me? One look and the evil will come back more strong. If that happen even I go can't help you. You understand?

On the drive back home it was pitch black. Clearly no government minister have house and land out here or they would've made sure to put in

streetlights and have the bulbs them working. Whole road Gloria and Deedee prattled nonstop while the radio belted out soca hits. I felt exhausted. But God is love. They dropped me home and drove off happy happy. I don't know why but as I started walking up the back steps I got into one set of crying. Instead of coming from my eyes the tears like they were shooting up from inside my heart. I sat down right on the cold concrete steps and covered my mouth. Solo mustn't hear. Or Mr. Chetan. Truth is I believe Sunil's spirit, his nasty bad eye, ain't ever leaving me no matter how much jharay I get.

MR. CHETAN

I understand a kitchen. I'm not saying Miss Betty can't cook. But give Jim his gym boots. She hand nowhere near sweet like mine. Two of us coming home from work, same tired, so I took over the cooking three times for the week. As it's Sunday I decided to do my nice steamed kingfish, callaloo with salt meat, rice, and, just for Solo, a macaroni pie.

While the pie was in the oven I went on the porch. Solo was there swinging in the hammock, head in the iPad as usual.

—Why's lunch not ready?

—Excuse me?

—It's past twelve o'clock.

—I am not your slave, young man.

—Well if you're cooking you should try and finish on time.

I told myself, Chetan, breathe. Teenagers.

—Solo, don't speak to me like that. Don't speak to anybody like that.