JACQUELINE CROOKS

COOL BURN

Roaring River 1908

Mrs Lulla is sitting on the steps of the barracks. It is harvesting time, and the north wind has set in. There is blackness in her heart. Blackness blooming across the cane fields. Long-time-back smoke rising.

The overseer's bell rings out across the plantation. Five more hours loading trash onto the carts. Five more days burning cane. Three more weeks before her husband will be freed. She squinches her eyes against the black smoke and looks at the labourers sharpening their machetes. They are standing under the extended roof of the labourers' barracks. From the moment their feet touched the island they were not the same.

Nor was she.

"Accha! Let them sharpen." Nothing was sharp and dark as the kohl around her eyes, which flicked up at the corners like horns.

She *aiiiee-aiiieee's* to the dancing girls squatting by the chulah, rolling chapattis. They twirl wrists, jangle their beaded necks in response.

She slurps ganja tea from a bowl. Smacks her lips, clenches her eyes as the ganja lights her gut.

She is taken back to the cold of another lifetime. And there he is, the same husband.

"Why does he follow me through lifetimes?" she asks aloud. "With that long face of his, hollowed-out like a begging bowl!"

She cannot remember her name in that lifetime of creaking ice islands, but she thinks she was the same as she is now – tiny, wire-waist; bead-eyed. Holding out a piece of charred wood, she tells her same-husband, "Put protection around your eyes."

They are standing at the edge of the ice-jumbled Chukchi Sea. Blue sun. Indigo sky. In the distance, black fur-covered specks walk on the smoking ice, loading canoas with blubber and chaga.

"Wife, listen to me," the same-husband says. He pushes the charred wood from his face.

"Fire protection for mind," she says.

He grabs the stick, throws it onto the ice. "We will be cursed if we leave."

"Spirit can go anywhere," she says. She looks beyond at the ice floes floating south, glinting with the promise of unknown worlds. Behind them lie the wet-sedge meadows and shallow ponds of their Siberian village. Some of their people refused to leave. They lit peat fires and prayed for the souls of those departed. Watched as the Katabatic wind covered their tracks.

She cannot feel what happened next in that lifetime. They must have boarded the canoas because the next thing she sees are storms in the sky. The hollow of her same-husband's face becomes the night-sky filled with star dust.

He did not make it to the new world.

Mrs Lulla drains the ganja tea, takes a handful of roasted cashews from her lehenga and shakes them in her hands like dice. "If I bury same-husband again we will meet in next lifetime. Again, again," she thinks. She knows she must save her same-husband if she is to be free of him in lifetimes to come.

She knows, too, that the tin roof prison that he is in will boil out the little life that is left in his bones.

She throws the dregs of the ganja on the ground and twists her small bare feet into the damp earth. The labourers walk past, their machetes glinting. Staring at her, black juice seeping from their burning eyes.

Later in the night, when all the men are sleeping, it is safe for her to climb into her cot, but not safe to sleep. She keeps her small lantern burning. Nothing more than a rotting partition board separates her from the labourers in the barracks. She hears their chests rattling; smells their breaths and overheated bodies.

Her same-husband is in prison for running away.

He'd chopped his way downriver, trying to get back to the sea, to India. To Hariharpur.

His chiggoe feet and hookworm belly hadn't taken him far.

She dreams far and wide with her eyes open. Dreams her dead, wart-riddled mother is throwing scalding cane juice into her face, screaming about the shame of prison.

Mrs Lulla gets out of her cot, her face burning.

"Who are you to say this?" she hisses to her dead mother. "You had no shame."

She remembers how, as a small child, she ran away, trying to get beyond the vermillion dust of Hariharpur. Her mother would drag her back by her hair, shouting: "Worthless girl. You bring shame!"

Her mother – henna-haired, nose-ringed and bull-headed – was the most shameless woman she had known. There was no one her mother would not bribe. Nothing and no one she would not sell.

Nothing too small to avenge.

Mrs Lulla leaves the barracks, goes out into the foggy night air of the mountains. One or two fires are still burning in the cane fields. White egrets fly close, swooping and pecking at the insects that fly out of the flames.

With quick, small steps, past the boiling house, the mill and trash houses, she drags the angry face of her mother behind her.

She comes to the Big House. She believes that Massah Sleifer is one kind of man in the cool comforts of the plantation house and another in the accounting barracks where he spends his evenings during the burning time, close to the smoke and stench. And why not? Hadn't she been another person in her mother's mud hut in the village of Hariharpur?

Who was she now?

She can no longer see her dead mother's face, but she can smell her cardamom-and-amla-oil spirit in the smoldering air. "Go!" she hisses.

She goes up the wooden steps of the accounting barracks and steps inside. An old-time plantation whip hangs on the door, its cowhide tail swinging.

Massah Sleifer looks up from the dim light of the desk lamp. He sees her and his mouth turns up like a sugar bowl. The

accounting books are open in front of him. Half a bottle of white rum, a plate of gizadas.

She stays close to the door.

"Too many men in the barracks, Mrs Lulla?"

"I cannot sleep without my husband, and with the sour breath of men in my face."

He stands up. "Plantations need women, not wives."

She holds out her hands, palms upwards. "You have taken my husband. I am in the hands of God."

Massah Sleifer gets up, walks away from the pool of lamplight by the desk and his squat shadow rises up and follows. He points to fireflies hovering inside the room by the open jalousies. "Look there, they take refuge from the cane fires. In my father's time, life here was different for our women. We held great dances in the Big House. Our women wore fireflies – alive. Living jewels of fire and light. All women are fire, I think."

Mrs Lulla takes the whip off the door. Runs a section through her fingers as if she is assessing the finest silk. She imagines the burn of it against skin. "You are the one turning day to night with black snow," she says.

"Mrs Lulla, you are not a preacher and I am not the converted. I know what you want. You people think I am hard, but the authorities don't want crimes to go unpunished. Your husband stays in his prison."

She wonders whether with one-two-three *lassshhh*, like a Goddess, she can transform the room. But there is no fire in her, only smoke.

Massah Sleifer gives her a glass of the rum and she drinks it.

"Ganja better for my spirit," she says.

"Rum keeps the ghosts away," he replies. He puts his glass on the side table.

She knows he will not speak of the thing that all the labourers are talking about: the strike on the Seaford estate, on the other side of the island. The plantation manager had been killed trying to stop a riot. His skull had been broken. His eyes taken out.

She squinches her kohl protected eyes on Massah Sleifer. If she takes out his grey eyes with the tail of the whip he would stop staring at her. He would stop saying, "You people!"

She walks towards the jalousies, looks at the living jewels weaving trails of light in the smoky air. Like the lighted ghats on the river near Hariharpur.

She left Hariharpur with her same-husband two years ago. They travelled by bullock cart to Calcutta in the summer, through saffron dust storms and thunder. Spent three weeks inside the walled New Garden Depot where she hawked and spat from her dry throat, afraid to drink the globby water that was drawn from tanks.

"Everything has the hand of God in it," she said to her husband as they went into the agent's room. The recruiters in the yard below were shouting, "No dwarfs. No scarecrows!"

She felt sure her same-husband would be told he was a scarecrow. Her mother had called him worse, even though she had promised her to him, an old-man Dholi, when she was eight.

The agent sized her same-husband up with an east-to-west shake of his head. "Wiry-tough is good. Go to your fortune."

Mrs Lulla pressed her thumbprint on the indenture warrant. Her husband was as still as a votive figure.

She lashed her hawker's tongue at him, "Bhains ki aulad boot-nee ka."

"Chup! Chup!" He shouted. He did not look at her as he pressed his thumbprint on the warrant that neither of them could read.

A week later they boarded the SS Ganges, a steamship loaded with scribes and weavers, soldiers and dancing girls.

Four months later they arrived on the island. A truck ride through forested mountains, before the final ridge from where they looked down at a flat valley. A twisting, silver river. Massah Sleifer's sugar plantation.

Massah Sleifer pulls her back, tugs her onto the day bed beside him. He takes the whip from her hand and places it on the pillow as if he is putting it to sleep.

She hears the cries of crickets and cicadas escaping their burrows in the bush of the lowlands.

Massah Sleifer takes her face between his hands and squeezes until her black-protected eyes bulge.

She sees that his eyes are filled with the numbers of his accounting books. She holds his stare and the numbers fall from his eyes and she is able to see the darkness of his own journey, the migration of his German people a hundred years ago from their land. The same tin tickets, rations. Crowded steamships with rotten partitions that did nothing to protect their women.

Massah Sleifer pushes her onto her back.

She thinks, "This grinding season. All cutlass thrash and thrust. Breaking my body for land. What have I become?" She remembers her mother's hawker tongue.

"Grinding season hard," she says. "Plenty cane to cut, Massah Sleifer."

He is on top of her. "Two hundred and eighty acres," he whispers in her ear, "seventeen point one a piece. I will give you two days holiday when all is done."

"Strong hands not easy to find in these times," she says. "And we Indians good at strike."

"What is that you are saying?"

"We can strike good, like the Indians on Seaford plantation."

Massah Sleifer rolls over, sits up, clicks his wrists. "Woman, don't play with me tonight."

"It is bad when an honest Indian is put in prison like a criminal. It is a great shame for our people. The Indians say they will strike." The Indians had not said this, but she decided she could play with numbers too. "If Indians strike, you have to hire Creoles for harvesting, and them is more shillings than a Coolie."

Massah Sleifer takes the whip and lashes it at the fireflies, breaking up their trail of light. "Madam Lulla, take your husband tomorrow. But be careful. Plantations can be dangerous places for wives."

"God is good."

She does not go back past the Big House, or the cane fields. She walks towards Roaring River village and crosses the old Spanish bridge to the river.

Women stooping at the shore, lighting votive boats, placing them on the river where they sail south into darkness.

She is not sure what lifetime she is seeing.

MEILING JIN

THE TALL SHADOW

He sent his shadow to court her. He waited until the day was far advanced, then stood in the sun so that his shadow would be at its longest. Raising his arms, he whispered, "Ran-jai-pa", and sent his shadow scurrying.

Maralyn stood in the yard washing her feet, her blouse soaked through with sweat. She was tired from standing all day in the market selling roti. The fact that her basket was now empty gave her no satisfaction; she was tired and far too preoccupied. For one thing, taxi driver Winston, had asked her to the dance on Saturday night. And for another, today she had received a postcard from her cousin, Sandra. The postcard was a picture of a golden apple. It had the words, "Greetings from the Big Apple", on it. Maralyn held the image of the apple in her mind like a forbidden fruit; one day, it was going to be her turn, one day soon.

"Maralyn, girl, come and help me mix the roti for tomorrow." Her mother's voice cut through the daydreaming. Maralyn reached for the old cloth and dried her feet slowly. She would join her mother in the kitchen when she was ready. Washing her feet was a ritual she clung to, like washing away the aggravation and boredom of standing in the market. People wanted roti and more than roti when she stood there between the rum shop and the bakery. She thought about Winston again. Why had he asked her to the dance? She unhooked the mirror from the post and peered at herself: was there something different about her since she left that morning? Straight nose, flat forehead, high cheekbones stared back. That flat forehead and straight nose was the "Buck in she", Moses had remarked on more than one occasion. Well, likely Moses was right. The "Buck" in she had been the source of

more than one joke at school. It was hurtful then, but now she didn't care; now her mixed ancestry had fulled out into features that were, beyond doubt, beautiful.

Maralyn smiled at the thought of Winston telling his passengers to wait in the car, while he calmly strolled over to invite her to the dance. She put the mirror back and turned to fetch water from the standpipe.

She saw the shadow when she reached the standpipe. At first she thought it was her own, but when she looked behind, she saw her own, and when she looked in front, the shadow, the other shadow, hovered as if it was waiting for her. Maralyn's heart skipped a beat. She threw the bucket on the ground and stepped backwards,

"Me na want nuttin to do with jumbie."

The shadow approached her and, even as she backed away, it reached her because it was a tall shadow. Maralyn forgot.

She followed the shadow through the gate, across the ditch and down the road. The day's heat had lost some of its relentlessness and was giving way to a slightly cooler evening. Coconut trees shimmered in the late afternoon sun, but Maralyn was not aware of it. On she walked, past Teacher Thomas' house with the red flamboyant guarding the gate, past the baker shop, past the donkey in the field, the church; on and on. She may have heard the frogs croaking in the ditch, or the kiskadee in full song, and then possibly she did not, because all she knew was the shadow.

The house stood well back from the road surrounded by trees: coconut, mango and guava. It was large and you could tell it was well kept because someone had taken the trouble to paint it recently. One hand on the bannister, Maralyn climbed the stairs to the front door. She opened the door and went in without knocking. It was already evening. The jalousies were shut, to keep the shadows in.

At first she thought the gallery was empty, then she saw him hovering, like his shadow, by the jalousie, an old man, medium height, grey hair, large ears and a hooked nose. His skin was smooth and dark brown like old leather.

As his shadow returned to him, Maralyn remembered. Her

eyes adjusted to the light and took in the gallery at a glance: polished wooden floor, rocking chair, Berbice chair, full length mirror, Chinese screen, long low table. Everything had an exactness about it, like the exact amount of furniture. There was no clutter, except perhaps the photographs, too many photographs.

Maralyn watched the old man warily, mindful of all the stories of jumbies and die-dies.

"Maralyn?" he said.

The sound of his voice made her jump. "Who you is?" she said, hiding her fear.

He seemed to sink a little into the shadows. "Sultan," he replied. "My name's Sultan."

She grew bold. "How you know my name?"

He walked out of the shadows towards her. "I do because I've watched you. You're Moses' daughter. You sell roti in the market near the rum shop and clear fifteen dollars a day."

Maralyn frowned over the fact that he knew she cleared fifteen dollars. She wondered if he knew she kept a dollar back when she handed the money over to her mother. She searched her memory to see where she could have come across this old East Indian man before, but her mind refused her the information. She decided to be bold, but eyed the door first, in case. It was good to be near the door.

"Is you bring me here?"

"Yes."

"Why you bring me here?"

He spread his hands in a half-pleading, half-welcoming gesture. "I wanted to meet you. A person can get a little lonely in a big house like this."

Maralyn felt on familiar ground. "You wanted to meet me, but what about me? I lef me mudder and the roti just lik tha'. Me mudder going to be vex." She turned to go.

He raised his hand. "Stay!"

Something in his voice made her pause, perhaps it was the urgency, or the ring of power in it. She hesitated. He was an educated man, and he had powerful magic. He crossed the room

and switched on the light. The shadows disappeared. He rang a bell. It made a tinkling sound and brought a servant at once.

"Bring some refreshment, er, some sweet drink." The servant disappeared.

"Sit down, won't you please," he said, and as if to show her how, he sat down in the high-backed armchair.

Maralyn thought of her mother waiting for her to help with the roti: Eileen was a tall, strong woman, as tall as Moses. She would beat her if she didn't go home. Maralyn considered the old man: the old man looked frail, but he had powerful magic and he had servants. She hovered, undecided. She remembered the shadow and sat down, carefully, on the edge of the rocking chair.

As she did so she looked up accidentally and stared into the old man's eyes. Young eyes locked into old: he was the first to look away. She straightened her back in triumph. She had power too: youth was her power, youth and a recklessness in the face of... of what? What was she facing?

The servant returned with the sweet drink and offered it to her. She wondered idly whether it really was lemonade, or something else.

"It's only lemonade," the old man said, apologising. Maralyn jumped, "You does read thoughts!" she accused.

"No, no not really," he lied.

She sipped the liquid carefully and, satisfied that it tasted like lemonade, drank it thirstily. She felt better afterwards and braver.

"So why you bring me here?"

Sultan clasped his hands together and leaned forward. "I brought you here because I need a companion. Someone to talk to. Share my pursuits. Spur me on to the finishing post. In short, I need a wife."

Maralyn sat back, mouth open, staring. The old man was at least eighty. Old enough to be her grandfather. Great grandfather even.

"Me. You wife! Is joke you makin!"

"No. No joke. Perhaps you think me a foolish old man and perhaps you're right. No, let me finish. I'm old it's true. And weary. When you get to my age, all you have is time on your hands

and all you think about is time... running out. I need a companion, someone who will spur me on to the finishing line."

"Man, I don' even know who the damn hell you is?"

The old man smiled. "Have you ever been to the County Court House in Campbell Street?"

"No. What I would be doin there? Is only crook and tief man does go there."

"That's where you might have seen me."

Maralyn sniffed. "You never going to catch me in dey."

The old man regarded her affectionately.

Maralyn stiffened. "Any case, why me? Dey plenty other people in this damn place."

The old man gestured, eloquently. "You, because I've watched you. I like your stillness and your beauty."

Maralyn drew back. The old ones were just like the young ones, maybe a little more humble but still after the same thing in the end. She started to rock backwards and forwards nervously.

"You can live here and enjoy my wealth. Have anything you like. I have more dollars than you can spend."

"And what about the shadow. What about the shadow you send to fetch me?"

"A shadow is only a shadow."

"But dis shadow do you biddin'. How I know I ain' endin up a shadow?"

"You have my word."

"Pah! You word. You know magic and you got plenty wealth. Where from I ask meself? Tek kay you got a baccoo working for you."

The old man spread his hands wide and smiled. "No it's all my own. All belonged to my family. My father was a lawyer, a very good lawyer. My mother owned land."

He pointed to the photographs. Maralyn stared at them: they were old-fashioned pictures, framed exquisitely in gold or wood. Most of them were of East Indian people with intense expressions on their faces, as if the photographer had caught them by surprise. Maralyn shivered suddenly: the photographs made her skin creep. She looked away in the direction of the old man, keeping

her eyes fixed on his chin so she would not, even by accident, look into his eyes.

The old man spread his hands in apology. "You must excuse an old man's whim. I get a little lonely so I collect photographs of people."

Maralyn shrugged. The old man shrank a little into his chair.

"Look I gotta go now, me mudder goin to kill me if I don't help she with de roti. Tanks for lettin me see de pictures. But I gotta go now."

"Stay! I will reimburse your mother and escort you safely home."

Maralyn wanted to laugh, escort her home, reimburse her mother. The old fellar was making joke.

"I could even help you get to the Big Apple."

Maralyn paused, suspiciously. The old man had strong magic, of that she was sure. Otherwise, how he could say the only thing that she ever really wanted? The Big Apple. Sandra had done it. And so could she. She could lift herself out of this grinding poverty, this small, stinking world and go abroad.

"Yes, I could help you go abroad. Tomorrow, if you like. I have plenty money."

She sat down carefully. "Wha make you tink I wan go place?"

The old man smiled and sat back, his hands resting on the arms of the chair. "I know you. I can see it in you. I know where you live. I know you share a room with your mother. Your clothes are draped over the clothes-stand because you have nowhere to hang them. The flies bother you, fetching water up and down bothers you, you bathe under the house and you can see through the floorboards because they're loose."

Suddenly, Maralyn felt naked. She could see her poverty as a stranger might see it and she felt shamed. She sat silent, looking down at her hands.

The old man continued, "The Big Apple is nothing, you know. A big city. Big buildings, too many cars, crime, poverty. People work their ass off in the shops, or worse, sell their tail on the street. You think the streets are paved with gold? No. Street paved with bodies, some dead, some alive. I could take you there, you know. They have a big hotel called the Plaza. You can ride to the top in

a thing called an elevator, and see the whole of the city at your feet."

Maralyn stared at the old man; her eyelashes, long and curling, drooped over her eyes. She looked like that other Maralyn, the blond one.

"There's a place I can take you to have afternoon tea, the Savoy. We can listen to music and enjoy a civilised life."

She sat there looking at the gallery, listening to the old man talk about the Big Apple. In her mind's eye, she was there already, sipping tea from a china cup and wearing a dress made of pure silk.

"If you married me, we could travel; you would revive my interest in it all. We could see the wonders of the world, and at my age, that's all you want to see," he added.

She eyed the old man. At your age you can't live much longer. She remembered the pyramids and the Taj Mahal, from her geography book at school. Was it true that those things existed somewhere? She could see herself escorting the old man there, as a guide or something. She stopped abruptly: the old man gave her the creeps. She guided her thoughts back to something safer. Eileen. Eileen was a harsh mother, but she loved her all the same. She thought that after she went to the Big Apple she would send for Eileen. And Moses? Chia! Moses can go hang heself! He and Eileen were always quarrelling. They quarrelled like a real married couple, to hear them. She recalled that lately the quarrelling had lost its sparkle and wondered whether Moses would go back to his wife in Rose Hall. She felt sorry for Eileen. Eileen had struggled for the past twenty years to keep up the semblance of being married to Moses. As if the whole village didn't know he already had a wife. She, Maralyn, didn't care a hoot, although she herself was going to make damn sure she got a ring round her finger first.

The old man broke through her thoughts. "You're wasted here, you know. You earn fifteen dollars a day, fourteen of which you give to your mother. How long will it take you to save up enough to go to the Big Apple? Three years? Maybe four?"

Maralyn thought of Winston. Winston was not bad looking. Tall and stocky. He earned good money driving a taxi. She

wondered if Winston, like Moses, already had a wife and was just foolin around asking her to the dance.

She thought not. He had too much money in his pocket to have a wife.

"And if you marry Winston, worse. He'll want you to stop working and then you'll have children. You'll be stuck."

Maralyn brought her mind round with a jolt. How did he know about Winston? Chia! This old man powerful.

She begins to be aware of the room, its stillness, the kerosene lamp, the rug brought back from his travels, the mirror, the photographs. Outside, it is dark, dark and still, except for the rustle of leaves and the crickets chirping.

She wonders how she will get home tonight and thinks of her mother again. Eileen, a powerful woman, part Indian, part African. Her mother will beat her if she doesn't return tonight, doesn't return tonight. She wonders where that thought came from.

"You could even send for your mother. There's nothing like family to make us happy," said the old man, gesturing eloquently with his hands.

Serve you right for readin me thoughts.

"Well, Sultan man, lemme tink about it. You know how things stay. I can't up and marry jus like tha'. I have to ask me mudder." A wicked thought occurs to her. Why you don't marry me mudder and I come and stay with allyou?

The old man stretches his short thin legs. "No."

She looks at him and frowns.

"I mean no need to think."

Maralyn laughs. "How you mean no need? At least I have to go home and fetch me things."

"Everything you need is here already."

Maralyn begins to feel trapped. She remembers the dragonflies she use to catch and tie with thread. She would let them fly a little and then tug them back when she felt like it. She often kept them in jars until they died. Maralyn rocks, nervously, in the armchair. It makes a creak, creaking noise. She has the feeling this is some sort of test, but has no idea what sort. Again, she

remembers the string on the dragonfly: loose then tight, loose then tight and then always, always back into the jar. She looks at the old man's eyes. They look glassy. Her mind opens a little and she remembers where she has seen the old man. Why this fella used to be the old judge at the court house. Maralyn is shocked. She jumps from her chair and makes for the door; the door remains a long way away. Her legs feel like jub jub.

"Sit down, Maralyn!"

She sits down. Part of her thinks, the ole judge, fancy that. Then she panics.

"I goin home, ya hear me? I goin home." She makes a mad dash for the door again and realises that it is the mirror. "Gawd!" she squeaks. She crashes into the mirror and finds herself "inside". She knows she is "inside" because she can see him on the other side. She hammers on the glass. She recalls the people in the photographs. Her mouth forms an Ohhhh.

The old man sighs, listlessly "Why do they always try to escape?"

He thinks of the photograph he will frame that night, a beautiful photograph, a beautiful girl; she deserves the best, perhaps a velvet background and an ebony frame. He rings the bell absentmindedly. The servant appears.

The old man hangs his head. "Only one for supper tonight and then I'll work on my picture."

The servant nods.