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Opening Extract from...

River of Smoke

Written by Amitav Ghosh

Published by John Murray

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River of Smoke

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JOHN MURRAY

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One



Deeti's shrine was hidden in a cliff, in a far corner of Mauritius, where the island's western and southern shorelines collide to form the wind-whipped dome of the Morne Brabant. The site was a geological anomaly – a cave within a spur of limestone, hollowed out by wind and water – and there was nothing like it anywhere else on the mountain. Later Deeti would insist that it wasn't chance but destiny that led her to it – for the very existence of the place was unimaginable until you had actually stepped inside it.

The Colver farm was across the bay and towards the end of Deeti's life, when her knees were stiff with arthritis, the climb up to the shrine was too much for her to undertake on her own: she wasn't able to make the trip unless she was carried up in her special pus-pus – a contraption that was part palki and part sedan chair. This meant that visits to the shrine had to be full-scale expeditions, requiring the attendance of a good number of the Colver menfolk, especially the younger and sturdier ones.

To assemble the whole clan – La Fami Colver, as they said in Kreol – was never easy since its members were widely scattered, within the island and abroad. But the one time of year when everyone could be counted on to make a special effort was in mid-summer, during the Gran Vakans that preceded the New Year. The Fami would begin mobilizing in mid-December, and by the start of the holidays the whole clan would be on the march; accompanied by paltans of bonoys, belsers, bowjis, salas, sakubays and other in-laws,

the Colver phalanxes would converge on the farm in a giant pincer movement: some would come overland on ox-carts, from Curepipe and Quatre Borne, through the misted uplands; some would travel by boat, from Port Louis and Mahébourg, hugging the coast till they were in sight of the mist-veiled nipple of the Morne.

Much depended on the weather, for a trek up the wind-swept mountain could not be undertaken except on a fine day. When the conditions seemed propitious, the bandobast would start the night before. The feast that followed the puja was always the most eagerly awaited part of the pilgrimage and the preparations for it occasioned much excitement and anticipation: the tin-roofed bungalow would ring to the sound of choppers and chakkis, mortars and rolling-pins, as masalas were ground, chutneys tempered, and heaps of vegetables transformed into stuffings for parathas and daal-puris. After everything had been packed in tiffin-boxes and gard-manzés, everyone would be bundled off for an early night.

When daybreak came, Deeti would take it on herself to ensure that everyone was scrubbed and bathed, and that not a morsel of food passed anyone's lips – for as with all pilgrimages, this too had to be undertaken with a body that was undefiled, within and without. Always the first to rise, she would go tap-tapping around the wood-floored bungalow, cane in hand, trumpeting a reveille in the strange mixture of Bhojpuri and Kreol that had become her personal idiom of expression: Revey-té! É Banwari; é Mukhpyari! Revey-té na! Haglé ba?

By the time the whole tribe was up and on their feet, the sun would have set alight the clouds that veiled the peak of the Morne. Deeti would take her place in the lead, in a horse-drawn carriage, and the procession would go rumbling out of the farm, through the gates and down the hill, to the isthmus that connected the mountain to the rest of the island. This was as far as any vehicle could go, so here the party would descend. Deeti would take her seat in the

pus-pus, and with the younger males taking turns at the poles, her chair would lead the way up, through the thick greenery that cloaked the mountain's lower slopes.

Just before the last and steepest stretch of the climb there was a convenient clearing where everyone would stop, not just to catch their breath, but also to exclaim over the manifik view of jungle and mountain, contained between two sand-fringed, scalloped lines of coast.

Deeti alone was less than enchanted by this spectacular vista. Within a few minutes she'd be snapping at everyone: Levé té! We're not here to goggle at the zoli-vi and spend the day doing patati-patata. Paditu! Chal!

To complain that your legs were fatigé or your head was gidigidi was no use; all you'd get in return was a ferocious: Bus to fana! Get on your feet!

It wouldn't take much to rouse the party; having come this far on empty stomachs, they would now be impatient for the post-puja meal, the children especially. Once again, Deeti's pus-pus, with the sturdiest of the menfolk holding the poles, would take the lead: with a rattling of pebbles they would go up a steep pathway and circle around a ridge. And then all of a sudden, the other face of the mountain would come into view, dropping precipitously into the sea. Abruptly, the sound of pounding surf would well up from the edge of the cliff, ringing in their ears, and their faces would be whipped by the wind. This was the most hazardous leg of the journey, where the winds and updraughts were fiercest. No lingering was permitted here, no pause to take in the spectacle of the encircling horizon, spinning between sea and sky like a twirling hoop. Procrastinators would feel the sting of Deeti's cane: Garatwa! Keep moving . . .

A few more steps and they'd reach the sheltered ledge of rock that formed the shrine's threshold. This curious natural formation was known to the family as the Chowkey, and it could not have been better designed had it been planned by an architect: its floor was broad and almost flat, and it was

sheltered by a rocky overhang that served as a ceiling. It had something of the feel of a shaded veranda, and as if to complete the illusion, there was even a balustrade of sorts, formed by the gnarled greenery that clung to the edges of the ledge. But to look over the side, at the surf churning at the foot of the cliff, took a strong stomach and a steady head: the breakers below had travelled all the way up from Antarctica and even on a calm, clear day the water seemed to surge as though it were impatient to sweep away the insolent speck of land that had interrupted its northward flow.

Yet such was the miracle of the Chowkey's accidental design that visitors had only to sit down for the waves to disappear from view – for the same gnarled greenery that protected the shelf served also to hide the ocean from those who were seated on the floor. This rocky veranda was, in other words, the perfect place to foregather, and cousins visiting from abroad were often misled into thinking that it was this quality that had earned the Chowkey its name – for was it not a bit of a chowk, where people could assemble? And wasn't it something of a chokey too, with its enclosing sides? But only a Hindi-speaking etranzer would think in that vein: any islander would know that in Kreol the word 'chowkey' refers also to the flat disc on which rotis are rolled (the thing that is known Back There as a 'chakki'). And there it was, Deeti's Chowkey, right in the middle of the rock shelf, crafted not by human hands but by the wind and the earth: it was nothing but a huge boulder that had been worn and weathered into a flat-topped toadstool of stone. Within moments of the party's arrival, the women would be hard at work on it, rolling out tissue-thin daal-puris and parathas and stuffing them with the delectable fillings that had been prepared the night before: finely ground mixes of the island's most toothsome vegetables – purple arwi and green mouroungue, cambaré-beti and wilted songe.

Several photographs from this period of Deeti's life have survived, including a couple of beautiful silver-gelatin

daguerrotypes. In one of them, taken in the Chowkey, Deeti is in the foreground, still seated in her pus-pus, the feet of which are resting on the floor. She is wearing a sari, but unlike the other women in the frame, she has allowed the ghungta to drop from her head, baring her hair, which is a startling shade of white. Her sari's anchal hangs over her shoulder, weighted with a massive bunch of keys, the symbol of her continuing mastery of the Fami's affairs. Her face is dark and round, lined with deep cracks: the daguerrotype is detailed enough to give the viewer the illusion of being able to feel the texture of her skin, which is that of crumpled, tough, weatherworn leather. Her hands are folded calmly in her lap, but there is nothing reposeful about the tilt of her body: her lips are pursed tightly together and she is squinting fiercely at the camera. One of her eyes, dimmed by cataracts, reflects the light blankly back to the lens, but the gaze of the other is sharp and piercing, the colour of the pupil a distinctive grey.

The entrance to the shrine's inner chambers can be seen over her shoulder: it is no more than a tilted fissure in the cliffside, so narrow that it seems impossible that a cavern could lie hidden behind it. In the background, a paunchy man in a dhoti can be seen, trying to chivvy a brood of children into forming a line so that they can follow Deeti inside.

This too was an inviolable part of the ritual: it always fell to Deeti to make sure that the youngest were the first to perform the puja, so they could eat before the rest. With a cane in one hand and a branch of candles in another, she would usher all the young Colvers – chutkas and chutkis, laikas and laikis – straight through the hall-like cavern that led to the inner sanctum. The famished youngsters would hurry after her, scarcely glancing at the painted walls of the cave's outer chamber, with its drawings and graffiti. They would run to the part of the shrine that Deeti called her 'puja-room': a small hollow in the rock, hidden away at the back. If the shrine had been an ordinary temple, this would

have been its heart – a sanctum with an array of divinities that was centred upon one of the lesser-known deities of the Hindu pantheon: Marut, god of the wind and father of Hanuman. Here, by the light of a flickering lamp, they would perform a quick puja, mumbling their mantras and whispering their prayers. Then, after offering up handfuls of arati flowers and swallowing mouthfuls of tooth-tingling prasad, the children would scamper back to the Chowkey, to be met with cries of: Átab! Átab! – even though there was never a table to eat off, but only banana leaves, no chairs to sit on, but only sheets and mats.

Those meals were always vegetarian and perforce very plain, for they had to be cooked on open fires, with the rudest of utensils: the staples were parathas and daal-puris, and they were eaten with bajis of pipengay and chou-chou, ourougails of tomato and peanut, chutneys of tamarind and combava fruit, and perhaps an achar or two of lime or bilimbi, and maybe even a hot mazavaroo of chilis and lime – and, of course, dahi and ghee, made from the milk of the Colvers' cows. They were the simplest of feasts, but afterwards when all the food was gone, everyone would lean helplessly against the stony walls and complain about how they'd banbosé too much and how their innards were growling and how bad it was to eat so much, manzé zisk'arazé . . .

Years later, when that escarpment crumbled under the onslaught of a cyclone, and the shrine was swept into the sea by an avalanche, this was the part that the children who had been on those pilgrimages would remember best: the parathas and daal-puris, the ourougails and mazavaroos, the dahi and ghee.

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It was not till the feast had been digested and gas lamps lit, that the children would begin to drift back to the shrine's outer chamber, to stare in wonder at the painted walls of the cavern that was known as Deetiji's 'Memory-Temple' – *Deetiji-ka-smriti-mandir*.

Every child in the Fami knew the story of how Deeti had learnt to paint: she had been taught by her grandmother when she was a chutki of a child, Back There, in Inndustan, in the gaon where she was born. The village was called Nayanpur and it was in northern Bihar, overlooking the confluence of two great rivers, the Ganga and the Karamnasa. The houses there were nothing like you'd find on the island – no tin roofs, and hardly any metal or wood anywhere to be seen. They lived in mud huts Back There, thatched with straw and plastered with cow-dung.

Most people in Nayanpur left their walls blank, but Deeti's family was different: as a young man her grandfather had worked as a silahdar in Darbhanga, some sixty miles to the east. While in service there he had married into a Rajput family from a nearby village, and his wife had come back with him when he returned to Nayanpur to settle.

Back There, even more than in Mauritius, each town and village had its points of pride: some were famous for their pottery, some for the flavour of their khoobi-ki-lai; some for the unusual idiocy of their inhabitants, and some for the exceptional qualities of their rice. Madhubani, Deeti's grandmother's village, was renowned for its gorgeously decorated houses and beautifully painted walls. When she moved to Nayanpur she brought the secrets and traditions of Madhubani with her: she taught her daughters and granddaughters how to whiten their walls with rice flour, and how to create vibrant colours from fruits, flowers and tinted soils.

Every girl in Deeti's family had a speciality and hers was that of depicting the ordinary mortals who frolicked around the feet of the devas, devis and demons. The little figures who sprang from her hand often had the features of the people around her: they were a private pantheon of those she most loved and feared. She liked to draw them in outline, usually in profile, supplying each with some distinctive mark of identity: thus, her oldest brother, Kesri Singh, who was a sepoy in the army of the East India Company, was always

identified by a symbol of soldiering, usually a smoking bundook.

When she married and left her village, Deeti discovered that the art she had learnt from her grandmother was unwelcome in her husband's home, the walls of which had never been brightened by a stroke of paint or a lick of colour. But even her in-laws could not keep her from drawing on leaves and rags, and nor could they deny her the right to adorn her puja-room as she chose: this small prayer-niche became the repository of her dreams and visions. During the nine long years of that marriage, drawing was not just a consolation, but also her principal means of remembrance: being unlettered, it was the only way she could keep track of her memories.

The practices of that time stayed with her when she escaped that other life with the help of the man who would become her second husband, Kalua. It was only after they had embarked on their journey to Mauritius that she discovered herself to be pregnant with Kalua's child – and the story went that it was this boy, her son Girin, who led her to the site of her shrine.

Back in those days, Deeti was a coolie, working on a newly cleared plantation on the other side of the Baie du Morne. Her master was a Frenchman, a former soldier who had been wounded in the Napoleonic Wars and was ill both in mind and body: it was he who had brought Deeti and eight of her shipmates from the *Ibis*, to this far corner of the island to serve out their indenture.

This district was then the remotest and least populated part of Mauritius so land here was exceptionally cheap: since the region was almost inaccessible by road, supplies had to be brought in by boat and it sometimes happened that food ran so short that the coolies had to forage in the jungle in order to fill their bellies. Nowhere was the forest richer than on the Morne, but rarely, if ever, did anyone venture to climb those slopes – for the mountain was a

place of sinister reputation, where hundreds, perhaps thousands of people were known to have died. Back in the days of slavery the Morne's inaccessibility had made it an attractive place of refuge for escaped slaves, who had settled there in considerable numbers. This community of fugitives – or marrons as they were known in Kreol – had lasted until shortly after 1834, when slavery was outlawed in Mauritius. Unaware of the change, the marrons had continued to live their accustomed lives on the Morne – until the day when a column of troops appeared on the horizon and was seen to be marching towards them. That the soldiers might be messengers of freedom was beyond imagining – mistaking them for a raiding party, the marrons had flung themselves off the cliffs, plunging to their deaths on the rocks below.

The tragedy had occurred only a few years before Deeti and her ship-siblings from the *Ibis* were brought to the plantation across the bay, and its memory still saturated the landscape. In the coolie lines, when the wind was heard to howl upon the mountain, the sound was said to be the keening of the dead, and such was the fear it evoked that no one would willingly set foot upon those slopes.

Deeti was no less fearful of the mountain than any of the others, but unlike them, she had a one-year-old to wean, and when rice was scarce, the only thing he would eat was mashed bananas. Since these grew in abundance in the forests of the Morne, Deeti would occasionally screw up her courage and venture across the isthmus, with her son tied to her back. This was how it happened one day, that a fast-rising storm trapped her on the mountain. By the time she became aware of the change in the weather, the tide had already surged, cutting off the isthmus; there was no other way to return to the plantation so Deeti decided to follow what seemed to be an old path, in the hope that it would lead her to shelter. It was this overgrown trail, carved out by the marrons, that had shown her the way up the slope and

around the ridge, to the rock shelf that would later become the Fami's Chowkey.

To Deeti, at the moment when she stumbled upon it, the outer ledge had seemed as sheltered a spot as she was ever likely to find: this was where she would have waited out the storm, unaware that the shelf was merely the threshold of a refuge that was yet more secure. According to family legend, it was Girin who found the fissure that became the entrance to the shrine: Deeti had put him down, so she could look for a place to store the bananas she had collected earlier. She took her eyes off him for only a minute, but Girin was an energetic crawler and when she looked around he was gone.

She let out a shriek, thinking that he had tumbled over the ledge, on to the rocks below – but then she heard his gurgling voice, resonating out of the rocks. She looked around, and seeing no sign of him, went up to the fissure and ran her fingers along its edges before thrusting in her hand. It was cool inside, and there seemed to be space a-plenty, so she stepped through the gap and almost immediately tripped over her child.

As soon as her eyes grew accustomed to the light she knew she had entered a space that had once been inhabited: there were piles of firewood stacked along the walls, and she could see flints scattered on the floor. The ground beneath was littered with husks and she almost cut her feet on the shards of a cracked calabash. In one corner there was even a scattering of ossified human dung, rendered odourless by age: it was strange that something that would have excited disgust elsewhere, was here a token of reassurance, proof that this cavern had once sheltered real human beings, not ghosts or pishaches or demons.

Later, when the storm broke and the winds began to shriek, she piled up some wood and lit a fire with the flints: that was when she discovered that some parts of the chalky walls had been drawn upon with bits of charcoal; some of the

marks looked like stick figures, made by children. When the raging of the wind made Girin howl in fear, it was these older images that gave Deeti the idea of drawing upon the wall.

Look, she said to her son: dekh – he is here, with us, your father. There is nothing to fear; he is by our side . . .

That was how she began to draw the first of her pictures: it was a larger-than-life-size image of Kalua.

Later, in years to come, her children and grandchildren would often ask why there was so little of herself on the walls of the shrine. Why so few images of her own early experiences in the plantation? Why so many drawings of her husband and his fellow fugitives? Her answer was: Ekut: to me your grandfather's image was not like a figure of an Ero in a painting; it was real; it was the verité. When I managed to come up here, it was to be with him. My own life, I had to endure every sekonn of every day: when I was here, I was with him . . .

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It was that first, larger-than-life image that was always the starting point for viewings of the shrine: here, as in life, Kalua, was taller and larger than anyone else, as black as Krishna himself. Rendered in profile, he bestrode the wall like some all-conquering Pharaoh, with a langot knotted around his waist. Under his feet, engraved by some other hand, was the name that had been thrust upon him in the migrants' camp in Calcutta – 'Maddow Colver' – enclosed in an ornamental cartouche.

As with all pilgrimages, the Fami's visits to the shrine followed certain prescribed patterns: usage and custom dictated the direction of the circumambulation as well as the order in which the pictures had to be viewed and venerated. After the image of the founding father, the next stop was a panel that was known to the Fami as 'The Parting' (*Biraha*): there was no inscription or engraving below it, but every Colver spoke of it by this name, and even the youngest of the chutkas and

chutkis knew that it depicted a critical juncture in the history of their family – the moment of Deeti's separation from her spouse.

It had happened, they all knew, when Deeti and Kalua were on the *Ibis*, making the Crossing, from India to Mauritius with scores of other indentured workers. Bedevilled from the start, the misfortunes of the voyage had culminated with Kalua being sentenced to death for a simple act of self-defence. But before the penalty could be administered a storm had arisen, engulfing the schooner and allowing Kalua to escape in a lifeboat, along with four other fugitives.

The saga of the patriarch's deliverance from the *Ibis* was often told amongst the Colvers: it was to them what the story of the watchful geese was to Ancient Rome – an instance when Fate had conspired with Nature to give them a sign that theirs was no ordinary destiny. In Deeti's depiction of it, the scene was framed as if to freeze for ever the moments before the fugitives' boat was swept away from the mother-ship by the angry waves: the *Ibis* was portrayed in the fashion of a mythological bird, with a great beak of a bowsprit and two enormous, outspread canvas wings. The fugitives' longboat was to the right, only a foot or so away, and it was separated from the *Ibis* by two tall stylized waves. As a contrast to the schooner's bird-like form, the boat's shape was suggestive of a half-submerged fish; its size, on the other hand – perhaps to underscore the grandeur of its role, as the vehicle of the patriarch's deliverance – was greatly exaggerated, its dimensions being almost equal to those of the mother-ship. Each of the two vessels was shown to be bearing a small complement of people, four in the case of the schooner, and five for the boat.

Repetition is the method through which the miraculous becomes a part of everyday life: even though the outlines of the tale were well known to everyone, Deeti would always be confronted with the same questions when she led family expeditions to the shrine.

Kisa? the chutkas and chutkis would cry, pointing at this figure or that: Kisisa?

But in this too, Deeti had her own orderly ritual, and no matter how loudly the youngsters clamoured, she would always start in the same fashion, raising her cane to point to the smallest of the five figures on the lifeboat.

Vwala! that one there with the three eyebrows? That's Jodu, the lascar – he'd grown up with your Tantinn Paulette and was like a brother to her. And that over there, with the turban around his head, is Serang Ali – a master-mariner if ever there was one and as clever as a gran-koko. And those two there, they were convicts, on their way to serve time in Mauritius – the one on the left, his father was a big Seth from Bombay but his mother was Chinese, so we called him Cheeni, although his name was Ah Fatt. As for the other one, that's none other than your Neel-mawsa, the uncle who loves to tell stories.

It was only then that the tip of her cane would move on to the towering figure of Maddow Colver who was depicted standing upright, in the middle of the boat. Alone among the five fugitives he was depicted with his face turned backwards, as though he were looking towards the *Ibis* in order to bid farewell to his wife and his unborn child – Deeti herself, in other words, here depicted with a hugely swollen belly.

There, vwala! That's me on the deck of the *Ibis* with your Tantinn Paulette on one side and Baboo Nob Kissin on the other. And there at the back is Malum Zikri – Zachary Reid, the second mate.

The placement of Deeti's image was one of the most curious aspects of the composition: unlike the others, who all had their feet planted on their respective vessels, Deeti's body was drawn in such a way that she appeared to be suspended in the air, well above the deck. Her head was tilted backwards, so that her gaze appeared to be directed over Zachary's shoulder, towards the stormy heavens. As much as any other element of the panel, it was the odd tilt of Deeti's

head that gave the composition a strangely static quality, an appearance that seemed to suggest that the scene had unfolded slowly and with great deliberation.

But any suggestion to this effect was sure to meet with an explosive rebuke from Deeti: Bon-dyé! she would cry; are you a fol dogla or what? Don't be ridikil: the whole thing, from start to fini took just a few minits, and all that time, it was nothing but jaldi-jaldi, a hopeless golmal, tus in dezord. It was a mirak, believe me, that the five managed to get away – and none of it would have been possible if not for that Serang Ali. It was he who set up the escape, that one; it was all his doing. The lascars were all in on it, of course, but it was so carefully planned that the Captain was never able to pin it on them. It was a marvel of a scheme, the kind of mulugande that only a burrburrya like the Serang could think up: they waited till the storm had driven the guards and maistries below deck and into their cumra. Then they sealed them inside by jamming their hatches. As for the officers, the Serang timed it so that they broke out during the change of watch, when both Malums were off deck. Ah Fatt the Cheeni, who was the quickest on his feet, was given the job of shutting the hatch of the officers' cuddy – what he did instead was to send the first mate to lanfer with a sandokann between his ribs – but that wasn't to be discovered until the boat was gone. Me, when Jodu let me out and I came on deck, I thought vreman I'd lost my sight. It was so dark nothing was vizib except when the lightning flashed – and tulétan the rain, coming down like hail, and the thunder, dhamak-dhamak-dhamkaoing as if to deafen you. My job was only to cut your granper down from the mast, where they had tied him, but what with the rain and wind, you can't imagine how difisil it was . . .

To hear this description was to assume that the scene had ended after no more than a few minutes of frantic activity – and yet, in almost the same breath that she gave this account of it, Deeti would claim also that the duration of the Parting

had lasted for as much as an hour or two of ordinary time. Nor was this the only paradox of the experiences of that night. Later, Paulette would confirm that she had been beside Deeti from the moment when Kalua was lowered into the boat until the second when Zachary bundled them back below deck; in all that time, she swore, Deeti's feet had never left the *Ibis*, not for a single instant. But her insistence made no dent in Deeti's certainty about what had happened in those scant few minutes: she never varied in her avowal that the reason why she had portrayed herself as she had was because she had been picked up and whirled away into the sky, by a force that was none other than the storm itself.

No one who heard Deeti on this subject could doubt that in her own mind she was certain that the winds had lofted her to a height from which she could look down and observe all that was happening below – not in fear and panic, but in unruffled calm. It was as if the tufaan had chosen her to be its confidant, freezing the passage of time, and lending her the vision of its own eye; for the duration of that moment, she had been able to see everything that fell within that whirling circle of wind: she had seen the *Ibis*, directly below, and the four figures that were huddled under the shelter of the quarter-deck's companion-way, herself being one of them; some distance to the east, she had noticed a chain of islands, pierced by many deep channels; she had seen fishing boats, sheltering in the islands' bays and coves, and other strange unfamiliar craft, scudding through the channels. Then, in the same way that a parent leads a child's gaze towards something of interest, the storm had tipped back her chin to show her a craft that was trapped within its windy skirts – it was the *Ibis*'s fleeing longboat. She saw that the fugitives had made use of the stillness of the storm's eye to race across the water to the nearest of the islands; she saw them leaping from the boat, and then, to her astonishment, she saw them turning the boat over, and pushing it out where the current could seize it and carry it away . . .

All this – this succession of visions and images – had been granted to her, Deeti would insist later, in a matter of a few seconds. And it was plain enough that if her testimony were true, then the visions could not have lasted any longer than that – for the arrival of the storm's eye had provided a respite not only for the fleeing fugitives, but also for the guards and maistries. With the abating of the winds, they had begun to hammer at the jammed hatch of their cumra; it would take them only a minute or two to break through and then they would come pouring out . . .

It was Zikri-Malum who saved us, Deeti would add. If not for him, it would have been a gran kalamité – there was no telling what the silahdars and overseers might have done to the three of us if they had found us on deck. But the Malum, he got us on our feet and pushed us back into the dabusa, with the other migrants. Thanks to him we were out of sight when the guards and overseers burst out on deck . . .

As to what happened after that, they – Deeti, Paulette, and the others in the dabusa – could only guess: in the brief interval before the passing of the storm's eye and the return of the winds, it was as if another tempest had seized hold of the *Ibis*, with dozens of feet pounding across the deck, running agram-bagram, this way and that. Then, abruptly, the typhoon was upon them again, and nothing could be heard but the howling of the wind and the roar of the rain.

Not till much later did the migrants learn that Malum Zikri had been blamed for everything that had happened – the escape of the convicts, the desertions of the Serang and the lascar, the freeing of Kalua, even the murder of the first mate – the responsibility for all of this had been laid foursquare on his shoulders.

Down in the dabusa, the migrants knew nothing of what was happening overhead, and when at last they were allowed out again, it was only to be told that the five fugitives were dead. The longboat had been found, overturned and with a hole in its bottom, they were told by the maistries, so there

could be no doubt that they'd met the fate they'd earned. And as for Malum Zikri, he was under lock and key, for the Captain had been forced to promise the enraged overseers that he would be handed over to the authorities when they arrived in Port Louis.

Dyé-koné, you can imazinn how this news affected us all and the gran kankann that was caused, with the lascars lamenting the death of Serang Ali, the girmitiyas mourning for Kalua, and Paulette weeping for Jodu, who was like a bhai to her, and for Zikri Malum too, because he was her hombo and she had set her heart on him. I was the only one there, let me tell you, whose eyes were dry, for I knew better. Listen, I whispered to your Tantinn Paulette, don't worry, they're safe, those five; it was they who pushed the boat back in the sea, so they'd be taken for dead and quickly forgotten. And as for Malum Zikri, don't worry about him either, tu-vwá, he'll have made some arrangements for you – just trust in him. And sure enough, a day or two later, one of the lascars, Mamdoo-tindal was his name, he gave your Tantinn Paulette a bundle of the Malum's clothes and whispered in her ear: 'When we get into port, put these on, and we'll find a way of getting you ashore.' I was the only one who wasn't surprised, for it was as if everything was coming to pass as I had seen, when the storm carried me abá-labá and showed me what was happening below . . .

There was never a lack of sceptics to question Deeti's account of that night. Most of her listeners had grown up on the island and could boast of a certain intimacy with cyclones: not one of them had ever imagined, or could believe, that it might be possible to look at the world through the eye of a storm. Was it possible that she had imagined all of this in retrospect? Had she perhaps succumbed to a seizure or hallucination? That she could actually have seen what she claimed seemed doubtful even to the most filial among them.

But Deeti was adamant: didn't they believe in stars,

planets and the lines on their palms? Did they not accept that any of these might reveal something of fate to people who knew how to unravel their mysteries? So then why not the wind? Stars and planets, after all, travelled on predictable orbits – but the wind, nobody knew where the wind would choose to go. The wind was the power of change, of transformation: this was what she had come to understand that day – she, Deeti, who had always believed that her destenn was ruled by the stars and planets; she had understood that it was the wind that had decided it was her karma to be carried to Mauritius, into another life; it was the wind that had sent down a storm to set her husband free . . .

And here she would turn to 'The Parting' and point to what was perhaps the most arresting aspect of its imagery: the storm itself. She had portrayed it so that it covered the upper part of the panel, stretching all the way across the frame: it was represented as a gigantic serpent, coiling inwards from the outside, going around and around in circles of diminishing size, and ending in a single enormous eye.

See for yourselves: she would say to the sceptics; isn't this proof? If I had not seen what I saw, how would I ever have imagined that a tufaan could have an eye?