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Getting Rid of It
By Lindsey Collen

About the Author

Lindsey Collen was born in South Africa, but has lived in Mauritius for many years. She was awarded the 1994 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for her novel *The Rape of Sita*, which was banned in Mauritius and resulted in death threats against her. This is her third novel.



Also by Lindsey Collen

There is a tide
The Rape of Sita

Getting Rid of It

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To the brave women of Vallee Pitot

You just put one foot on this doormat and hey presto open sesame. No doorman. No questions asked. No magic words. Anybody could do it.

Even Jumila. Invisible waif and stray.

Note the distraction in her manner, see the panic rising to her throat. Like a snake. See her almost imperceptible limp. One foot light, the next one heavy, one foot light, the next one heavy.

She's not running away though. She's on urgent business, rather. You can tell by the way she moves quicksilver towards the door like that. One foot light, one foot heavy, one foot light. Like she's travelling just above the ground. Skimming it. She's harrowing her way somewhere. You can't tell if she's making progress. A ruthless pilgrimage. And her forehead's clammy. In one hand a bag. A white plastic bag. With *Air Islands Duty Free* written on it in red letters. The free hand wipes her hair back and pushes her shawl behind her shoulder.

She puts her beautiful foot, the heavy one, in its worn-thin sponge flip-flop out in front her. A blue bottom sole, pink top sole, blue thong, just like everyone else's, stepping out from under her faded wedding trousers, on to this magic doormat. Shawl flying forward now. Forward, in the puff of smelly seawind that sneaked up the canal, got next to her, and tried to overtake her into the building. Face shining

copper with sweat now. Her beauty, because it's not just her foot that's beautiful but the whole of her, is unbeknown to her. Is her weight sufficient? Yes. Her weight shifts on to the mat. But then beauty doesn't matter right now because she's invisible. Any case, she's got enough, just enough weight, on the heavy foot anyway, to trigger the magic door. They call her a *seller of wares*. This is a thing she knows she is. She's got her card that says bearer-is-tuberculosis-free and everything, to prove that she's a seller of wares. She's left it, the card that is, with The Boy Who Won't Speak, who she's in charge of forever now, and who she's left sitting on the grass mat watching the bras on the upside-down crate outside by the Outer Islands Development Corporation godown. And there she is floating on to the doormat in front of the dark glass door.

It opens.

Slides to one side.

She's going in to see Goldilox Soo.

Goldilox Soo is older. Maybe around twenty-five. They say so. This is unbeknown to her. She's only got this name, no exact age. She's also beautiful. But she couldn't care less. Even if she wasn't invisible, she couldn't give a stuff. Invisible Goldilox Soo leaning her weight on her mop, as if to keep it on the floor, as if it might fly upwards with her on it and escape. She sees this other invisible, being coming through the big automatic doors towards her. Shawl now flying in front of her. Sponge flip-flop stepping.

She waits like this just inside the big windowpanes, dark-glasses on the Millers' Group of Companies building, to see who it might be. Something about the light, then heavy, the light, then heavy, that rings a bell in her inner ear. Some recognizable pattern. The sunlight shining off the sea is so bright when the door opens, a slow-motion camera shutter and a flash, that at first she can't see who the invisible person is. One hand on mop, one on hip, she peers, her pupils readapting to the dark.

Oh!

She starts.

Then, Ah!

Friend, ah, Jumila, ah neighbour. Jumila. Pleasure. Of course, her limp. A limp mote accentuated today. Funny,that.

Plans together for after work today. Today today today. Take destiny in our? False hopes. Today. Plans to attend. Plans to attend to. Plans assembling in her mind on her mop. They've had enough of it. Goldilox Soo and Jumila and Sadna Joyna, all three of them.

Goldilox Soo's jaw. takes on a determined slant> Then, a picture in her mind's eye over her mop comes into focus of a Jumila selling bras just outside the Outer Islands Development Corporation godown. On her. Upside-down crate. When the police don't shoo them away, that is, or man-handle them. Her and The Boy Who Won't Speak. But wait! Why's she here? The time. Not her time. The place. She never comes inside. What is this? She always waits outside,

waits till after work. Something wrong. The police again? . Maybe. Or the Naked Midnight Man? No, she's not a believer in him. Or is it some trouble? Trouble in the kingdom. Right now, sooner than dreaded? Communal trouble, they call it. Murmurs. Bubbles. Gurgles. Burps. Volcanic groans? Hear the rumble? Tune an ear. Goldilox Soo has a *nose* for things. Things you can't even hear. Let alone see. But, That's not here yet. Neither its sound, nor its scent, nor. Its fury. Today is still in time. Goldilox Soo sighs, her weight settling on her mop. Her eyes straining to see Jumila.

Jumina floats in. She is seeing everything, the whole world, the whole universe, in faded black and white only. Then sudden dark. Inside. Strange, unknown, cold womb. Hand clammy forehead tucking in the strands. Inside. Then, when her eyes get used to the dark, in colour she sees Goldilox Soo. Halo around her navy-blue face. 'Ah, Gold. What are you doing here? You gave me a fright on your mop like that!' Jumila steadies herself. Flash of warm relief dries her clammy forehead. for an instant. Holds her outstretched hand, holds it right out, reaching, reaching, towards the figure leaning on the mop.

'I should jump. Not you. It's you who's come to see me, Jumila. What it is? About this afternoon? Today. Not today? No? Police? No? Then what's wrong, then? Where's The Boy Who Won't Speak?

'I've come to see you'

'What's in your plastic bag, Jumila?'

'Nothing, Gold. You free?'

'There's something red dripping out of the corner, what's in there? Of course I'm free.'

'Nothing much, Gold.'

'Looks like blood to me, Jumila. What you got in your plastic bag?'

'Trouble, Gold. There's trouble in it.'

Lucky they're invisible. There's trouble written on their bodies now. Double double toil and trouble. They might become visible and stick out like a sore thumb. And the blood

Drip

Drip

Drip

'You just follow me out of this place, with your mop in your hand, Goldilox Soo, and. you just mop up after me, and I'll meet you on that bit of lawn out front by the canal.'

'Jesus.' It's Goldilox Soo whispering.

'And she isn't eighteen years old, when did she ever learn to talk to me like that? Or to anyone. What's she gone and done?'

'And, where's The Boy Who Won't Speak?'

'Maybe by the bras.'

Today. In big skyscrapers there are people who are going

about their business, as of right, and there are other people like Goldilox Soo who fall into the category of fairies and sweepers and *deevies* and cleaners and elves who are invisible to the others. If a fairy and sweeper and *deevie* and cleaner and elf gets a visitor, someone like Jumila, then she, the visitor is also invisible. It bleeds over from one to another. The invisibility does.

Jumila turns around and glides back to the magic door
Drip
Drip
Drip
behind her
open sesame
and she is gone.

Goldilox Soo, still leaning on her mop frozen right there in that air conditioning in the middle of all that Porlwi heat. Right in the middle of the marble ground-floor foyer dark-glassed-in from the outside. Stuck there with all these perspex partitions and a jungle of indoor plants and ferns and trees and a scary painting of lost in a forest by Stina Becherel behind her.

Five television sets on. In the air bookings behind her. Sound turned turned right down. Three tuned to 'The Mauritian Miracle'. CNN on the other two. Identical scenes change at the same time. Strange dance. Choreography. Silent films. In colour. Child watches heaps of corpses. A massacre in West Africa. With eyes that have seen too much. Seen too

much already. Perhaps seen too much last night Or today?
Today. A young newscaster neutral. Tired. Dead beat. An
old man cries now somewhere in the ex-USSR, his heart
wrenched out already, only sobs left in his breast. 'The
Mauritian Miracle' three times. Changes to 'God saw
Mauritius then He made Paradise', also three times. Just
one channel away. Just the light press of a button, away
from Rwanda, from Burundi, from Zaire. One channel
away from the ex-USSR, ex-Yugoslavia. Ex-what? Today.
Goldilox Soo staring out at the canal, eyes fixed, scarf
can't control her wild rush of, bush of thick hair, alarm bells
of beaten brass, eyes riveted on Jumila. The stare of her
black pupils out of the whites of her eyes out of her carved
face is so intent, so stylized, so concentrated on Jumila, so
focused on that girl's clammy forehead, so hypnotized by
her plastic bag, that for a moment a passer-by stops. She
looks right at Goldilox Soo, and the invisible becomes visi-
ble to her just momentarily, and she, the passer-by, thinks
Goldilox Soo is part of the Stina Becherel painting.
She could be.
But in general she goes on being invisible to those
comers and goers of right. But some hear her murmur:
'Jesus.'
She glances around for a moment, abstractly.
'Be with you, Jumila.' Talking to herself now. Is it today
going to be postponed again?'

Goldilox Soo doesn't actually work for the Millers' Group

of Companies. She hasn't got a birth certificate for a start. They just get Klinnkwik in. Klinnkwik takes a building, or the public lavatories, or the courts, or the waterfront, or the Ministry of Finance, or whatever, for a fixed price, and they break it into square feet and take women to clean it for them piece-rate. Goldilox Soo is therefore what they call a Kwinnkwik piece-rate girl.

But that is the least of her worries right now.

Now.

Now is pulling her out. Dragging her along. Insisting.

Now is active. Now demands.

Right now is Jumila. Jumila standing out there with a plastic bag with Goldilox Soo not even knowing what's in it that's dripping blood into the please don't walk on this grass.

Have to go see Sadna at her work.' The thought is there.

In her mind already. Goldilox Soo sees that this a strange thought. Shudders. 'Go see Sadna.' She doesn't even know what's in the bag yet. But then again, she does.

So, invisible as ever, she follows in Jumila's footsteps, mopping the drip drip drip to the magic door, and then turns round again and prepares to go over, over somewhere, to park her mop someplace by the lift or something.

Today is the day before what they call the first isolated act of communal violence. The day before things, as they said in the press years later, were triggered off. Today is late.

At this point, the air inside the Millers' Group of Companies starts to firm up into jelly all around Godilox Soo and her mop. An icy jelly. She has difficulty making her way through it. But she's got to. Got to go put her mop down.

'Is after work today already *too late*?' Goldilox Soo feels this thought like a physical premonition. Like it's somewhere outside of her, in that thickening air.

Their plans are out there too. They hang suspended now in the air before her. Balancing in that jellied air.

Goldilox Soo starts to move. *The now*, like gravity, attracts Goldilox Soo.

Today, The three of them intend to act. Intend. Today. This very afternoon. *Old oppression around too long now*, they felt it in their bones: time now for getting rid of it. *Start today*.

'Whatever were we thinking of?' she ask aloud. 'Who are we anyway? To think such thoughts.'

Now there's this plastic bag in Jumila's hand, with the red writing on it. And whatsoever may be inside it .A plastic bag powerful enough to put our plans in aspic.

The mop is heavy now too. No choice, she's got to leave it behind. Somewhere. She can't just roam around the streets with it.

Streets. There have been riots in the streets already. Riots. You don't really know why. Sometimes a road accident sparks one off. As if people are inflammable. Tinder.

Inflammable. Public burnings of books. Already. Once because the prophet. They said. Then because the gods themselves were cross. They said. Insulted.

Insults. Too many. They play football at the Anjalay Stadium behind closed doors now - in case of.

And then right now there's blood dripping out of the corner of Jumila's plastic bag. Air Islands Duty Free bag.

Will they notice my absence? Can my mop stand in for me.
Hurry. Hurry up. We must act. Before it all separates out.
Into colour and creed and bloodshed. Blood shed.
Could it be some crime?

Should it be buried? Poor girl. What am I thinking now?

Panic stirs in Goldilox Soo. But everything's too slow for
panic. Even panic can't go rampant now. Not in such air.
She feels her hair try to escape the scarf on her head.
Spring out against that thick air. Oppose.

Goldilox Soo hauls herself, heavy, over to the service lift.
Mop parking place there. She gets a fright, seen a scarecrow,
seen herself reflected in some glass surface, mirrored
on her mop. Fright reminds her of him. Of the Naked
Midnight Man. A shiny and black and beautiful visitor who
appears all of a sudden like that. He comes mainly to
women, women and girls, and always at night and he can
turn himself into a wolf, if that isn't what he already is.
And then he disappears. Sometimes he leaves red marks on
women's necks. Or he leaves young girls pregnant. So then
men, men and boys, they make up bands and roam the
streets pangas, bloodthirsty.

It must be blood. Drip drip drip, out of the corner, the red colour of it.

And they say, people say, that there are people stealing people's children. To offer as a sacrifice? It isn't clear.

Rumours are rife.

'Inauspicious times,' thinks Goldilox Soo. And, 'Maybe it's too late. Silly idea we had. Who are we anyway. What could we possibly do? Is now already late?

Praying it isn't. She prefers calling on Mary. But anyone will do.

Invisible Goldilox finally parks her mop. It also goes invisible right then and there, between the service lift and the stairwell.

Well, what's wrong, Jumila? You said "trouble". Trouble in your plastic bag?

The sun was so bright you felt nothing could be wrong.

But a green fly came and sat on the grass under the Air Islands Duty Free bag, which meant there was something wrong. Something rotting. Directly under the bag, it sat.

Wings blue silver black green. Just where the bag was dripping. Goldilox Soo held her breath waiting to hear.

'I didn't look at it properly. Covered in blood and blood clots it was. And I pulled the afterbirth out too. I'm still all shaky. Weak just under the knees. And my limp's got worse. And I don't know whether to cry.'

'You poor thing. All on your own?'

'I just put it all in a one-rupee plastic bag, a pale-blue one, I cleaned up the mess, and went out to bury it by the frangipani tree. You know, that stunted thing between my house and Sadna Joyna's. Between it and the dwarfed *peepur* tree. You know, where they said the Naked Midnight Man appeared just before he turned into a wolf.' As if the precise place would tell the whole story. As if a stunted tree or two could bear witness.

They lived, the three of them, on neighbouring shacks on government land. *Kowlenn*, it was called, from when it was called Crown Land. Now called State Land. They lived on the uninhabitable mountain slopes up behind Porlwi. Where floodwaters kept washing the earth away, making *dongas*, causing landslides in each cyclone, and now threatened to wash them away, bodily, and their shacks too. And even the electricity draped on rickety poles up the mountain, homemade, like a clothesline, too. And wash away their hire-purchase television sets. And their hairdryers. And rice-cookers. And themselves as well. If the police didn't get the squatters out first. With caterpillars. The Government called them squatters. But the House Movement said they were State Land dwellers. Jumila and Goldilox Soo didn't know what they were for sure. Nor did Sadna Joyna. What they did know was that they were *illegal*. They each had an eviction order pasted with flour glue on their corrugated-iron wall by the front door to prove it. They had been warned. But then they had nowhere else to

live. Who would live up in a valley on the mountain slopes if they could live on the flat? Who would like a goat climb up those slippery tracks? Who would choose to have an eviction order glued up by her front door? So they couldn't do anything about it anyway.

Their tin shacks didn't have more than six-inch foundations because of the rock. 'The mountain's shin', everyone called it. There weren't even storm drains up there. And the pit latrines so shallow that you couldn't throw a foetus into them for fear of being found out. The smell would give you away. You had to dig a new pit every six months, they said. Jumila, Goldilox Soo and Sadna Joyna had lived there for less than six months so they didn't know for sure yet. They would soon find out.

'Are you all right? What did you do? Why isn't it buried then? Jesus.'

'Nothing. I didn't do anything. I never did nothing. It came down by itself. All by itself. It was quite big already. I got a fright. I got a terrible fright, Gold. Feel my head, I feel weak. Feel how heavy it is.' Goldilox Soo measured the weight of the Air Islands Duty Free plastic bag on her right hand and felt Jumila's wet brow with the other.

'Jesus. You know you shouldn't wait till late like that. It's dangerous. You're all clammy. And you'll get sick. You'll get admitted to hospital. Do you want to die or something? And you'll get a court case, and a jail sentence. There's ten years in it. And shouted at by nurses and doctors and hospital servants. Please, please, Jumila, don't get sick.'

Goidilox Soo knew these things. She was, as you know, maybe twenty five. And she didn't want Jumila to get sick and to die.

Please, don't, Jumila. You went to see Madam Naga? Why didn't you ask me to come with you on the day? What if you keeled over on the way back or something? Are you sure she's got it all out?'

No. I tell you, it came down by itself. All by itself.'

'You Went to the chemist's and got Cytotec and took it?'

'I went to the chemist's but I didn't buy anything.'

'You bought those *latizann bazar* with the wild pineapple and god knows what poisons all tied in a bundle and stewed them up, put them to draw and strained the brew and drank it?'

'No,no, no.'

You pawned god knows what and went to a doctor?'

'NO. And don't you cross-question me either. I'm not a criminal, Gold. I'm just a woman. And I feel dizzy right now. Giddy woman.'

Jumila was what you *call learning to talk*. Talk as in talk back.

'Well, why are you acting like one then?' Meaning a criminal, Poor thing, look at you. There's a left-over question, you slipped and fell like everyone else in the -slip-and-fall ward?'

'No. I'm telling you, no. I'd tell you the truth. I didn't do anything. It came down by itself I promise.'

'You didn't tell me, though, Jumila. I didn't even *know*. A

pregnancy isn't something you keep secret, Jumila. And it's heavy already. And you expect me to believe you now, Jumila, afterwards?

'Well, I knew I was pregnant, in a way. In my own body, I knew. I 'also knew we didn't use anything one day. You know how sometimes you feel carefree and thoughtless. And maybe the condom broke another time. I remember Rahim being worried and secretive. Anyway, I wanted it. I wanted this one. I wanted to keep it. I wanted to tell everyone. I wanted to tell Rahim. First, it's true, I did have two or three months of indigestion and nausea. My breasts swelled. Then, to confuse me, I bled a bit. I am so easily confused these days. Distracted. I put on weight. Then I didn't have periods. But you know how my periods have gone all mixed up since I left *him* and my little girl. And then I had another bit of bleeding. You must have noticed my tummy distended like that, come to think of it. Anyway, before saying anything I thought I'd go to the chemist's for a test, to be sure, you know, hundred per cent sure, because I was so pleased. But the test came out negative. So I thought I wasn't, in that-case. I couldn't be. I've got the results with me. Folded up in my bra. I'll show you. So then this morning, at least a month after the test and my tummy getting quite taut, these terrible cramps started, and the bleeding. So it wasn't negative. So I sent The Boy Who Won't Speak to come in to town and get the bras set up, to get him out of the way. He wouldn't know what was going on. Then I crouched over this one-rupee plastic bag to try to

make less mess. My body didn't want to expel it. So I had to force and force. It seemed to take hours. I felt so alone. Sweating and moaning myself. I thought should I go to the hospital, but there wasn't anyone to take me. So I just decided to get on with it.'

'Always just getting on with it,' murmured Goldilox Soo. 'Then when it seemed over, the afterbirth and everything, I stuffed everything into this plastic bag, stuffed a towel into my pants, went and washed my hands, and I went outside right then and there to bury the damn thing. Even before I'd cried. Oh, I wanted to keep this one. Since he took away my baby. Since I gave *him* his baby, I could say. I really wanted to keep this one. Rahim's. But it was all over. So I took the hoe, and looked for a spot between the frangipani tree and the *peepur* between my place and Sadna Joyna's, just where they say they saw him, and started digging. With a fury. I went mad. Digging and nearly fainting and digging.

'Then who should tum up but Koko. So he said need a hand, what you doing, so I said, oh nothing. You'll tire yourself out, he said. And I nearly keeled over. I was so pleased to see someone. I'm just equalizing the lay of the land a bit, I said. You know, equalizing. It seemed true enough. Flat again. And so he came and gave a hand. Nice man, Koko is. *Bon bug*. He didn't suspect anything. They don't, you know. He thought I was just equalizing the lay of the land with a vengeance. Some past vengeance. Some past vengeance that he didn't know about, or not yet anyways.

'Lucky I had hung the plastic bag on a hook by the tin door in case of red ants so he didn't see it. So after a while I said the land was equalized enough for now.

'Then when he'd gone to the shop for a drink, you know he drinks in the mornings now, I started digging again. And then this dog came and stood next to me, and I thought oh my god he'll dig it up again and pull it out in front of everyone. And then I got scared. I thought the police might find out. Or the courts. Or the hospitals. Or my brothers and uncles. Or even *him*. The world seemed full of people who shouldn't know. And me a criminal.

'So I put the one-rupee plastic bag into this Air Islands Duty Free bag and came down the mountain, caught the bus instead of walking, checked on The Boy Who Won't Speak and the bras and put my foot oh the magic door and came in to see you. And you sent me out again because of the "What's in your plastic bag?" And that's the truth, Gold.'

'So now what?' Gold said.

She believed Jumila. Now she believed her. Relieved. To get rid of it was easy now that that worry was over. Or so she thought. At least Jumila wouldn't go and get sick on her, and start a haemorrhage or an infection or the gangrene and go and get even sicker and then go and die on her. It was just a practical question now. How to get rid of it. It was just a bit big to stuff into a rubbish bin in broad daylight.

'Isn't there any sort of place where you throw away things in this building, Goldilox Soo?

'Let's see. The sanitary 'towel disposal thing has got this small ledge you have to put the Kotex on. Would be appropriate in a way. But then again it's much too small. For the other rubbish, they employ this Millers' Company man to check on Klinckwik' s rubbish every day. I don't know why. In case we steal through the rubbish system maybe. Or to sniff out industrial spies. Or whatnot. A bit dangerous. And there's the gardener's bin.'

Like Aladdin's genie, he turned up.
Please don't stand on my grass. Can't you read, Goldilox Soo? You should know better than that.' The gardener, Dodconn was there, smiling.

'Your Grass my arse'

The gardener turned and walked off, smiling wider, pleased with the rhyme.

So Goldilox Soo and Jumila stepped off the grass, but Jumila kept the Air Islands Duty Free bag over the grass. And over the bag flew the green fly. Thank god for grass. Only one green fly. Blue and black and silver and green. Loud, it was. And threatening. Thank god for it being only one,

We'd better go and see Sadna Joyna.'

She is the third heroine. She's just started work on a probation basis, as a hospital servant at the Civil Hospital. She is also beautiful. All hospital workers are. Especially the hospital servant. Because they were there first. They know everything. Doctors come and go. Nurses get transferred from ward to ward, from hospital to dispensary.

Sadna Joyna knows everything Jumila and Goldilox Soo need to know.

And she's working days.

'Hurry because she's got time off for her court case today.' Jumila hurried on ahead. One light foot, one foot heavy, one light foot, one foot heavy.

'Be with you.' Goldilox Sao's navy-blue face shone in that sunlight as she looked at the sky. She noticed a wetness on Signal Mountain. Crying again, she thought. Silly mountain.

'Dodonn, hang on.' She ran after him. In her pocket Goldilox Soo had this circular letter that Giovanni had got at school the day before. She called the gardener back. His son was in the same class. At the government school.

'Did your boy get this circular?'

'No. No, he didn't. I don't think so. What's in it?'

'Look!' She had suspected as much. But she hadn't dared believe it. Not given to *all* the kids.

Goldilox Soo swore. 'I'm resigning.'

'What from?' Dodonn was lost.

'I'm writing to the *monseyner* and I'm giving back my baptism certificate. That's what I'm resigning from.

Although I haven't got one, I'm resigning.'

'What you on about, Goldilox?'

'Listen to this, Dodonn: *Cher Parent, L'avenir de votre enfant est en jeu. Ses petits camarades qui font les langues orientales beneficent d'une subvention de Rs180,000,000 du*

Gouvernement tous les ans. Les Catholiques n'ont pas un sou. Il n'y a pratiquement plus de professeurs Catholiques dans les écoles du Gouvernement. Il est très difficile aujourd'hui de trouver des volontaires pour le catéchisme. Il ne nous sera donc pas possible de faire la première communion cette année à votre enfant dans ces conditions.'

I can't understand a word,' he said.

So she gave a Kreol summary. 'Dear parent; Future your child threatened. Every year government gives other little classmate doing oriental languages 180,000,000 rupees subsidy. Catholics don't get a cent. Next to no Catholic teachers left in government schools. Difficult to find volunteers these days for catechism. Therefore, impossible, under such conditions, to do first communion for your child this year.

Dodonn just laughed: 'I don't understand in any language.

Nor did Goldilox Soo. She started to run off after Jumila. But this time, Dodonn called after her: 'Gold! Hold it!' He came close to her and said, 'Look at those posters when you go across the road after your friend, the seller of wares. Chill your blood, even in this stuffy heat.'

'Hands off our Vice Police Commissioner!' she read.

'Shiv devotees are right now demonstrating in favour of him. Right inside the Line Barracks,' he added. 'Posters not just here. All over the main island. Water department subcontractors got their labourer to do it. My neighbour' one of them.

It's a fact. There's a group, he says. Two minister, three members of the National Assembly, the Vice Police Commissioner, some Cultural Advisors, heads of parastatals. Give contracts and tenders. Employ men.'

'Power and money,' said Goldilox Soo, not understanding what she was saying. 'And it might be too late. Today we've got *plans* you know, Dodonn. Plans to make plans.'

Then she put her head back and laughed at herself. Fools, we are.'

'What plans?

'Dodonn? Why stick to yourself? Why's your neighbour not doing something about it. I'm busy, Dodonn. Women's matters. And it's so late now. We're so late.'

'That's funny,' he murmured, when he saw four or five green flies on the lawn. Black and silver and blue and green. 'Bodes ill,' he mumbled. And looked at his watch.

'Yes, she's working days,' said the clerk at the administration section of the Civil Hospital.

'We know she's working days. Thank you anyway. We need to know the ward, please.'

'Eleven.'

Goldilox Soo recognized the ward. They call it the slip-and-fall ward. Ward Eleven.

They made it sound like a moral slip and then a moral fall.

It was a legal slip anyway. When a woman arrives there at the hospital in a bad state, she knows to say 'I slipped and fell.' Some even say 'I *only* slipped and fell'. So now the nurses and doctors say: 'Slip and fall?' Then the sick woman, agitated with pain and unnatural contractions, only has to say 'Yes'. Not add lies to her sins, Goldilox Sao thinks. Not add worries about what words to use for the cover-up. Not add any more stress to her -already pain ridden body.

And the doctor would say, 'It's OK. You'll be fine. Let's keep death at bay.'

Sadna was working exact slip-and-fall ward, they had just realized. Goldilox Sao and Jumila didn't know if this was an advantage or a disadvantage. But it did seem to be an omen some kind.

Golqilox Soo, who had been right through primary school, and had written essays, said half-'aloud to Jumila: '*Advantages and disadvantages of Ward Eleven*. Easier to dispose of, but there's probably more vigilance around.' What's that?' said the hospital clerk, not hearing properly.

'Nothing. Thank you.'

The Air Islands Duty Free bag was now inside another bag. This new outside bag had *Priba Paradise* written on it. It was a bag that Goldilox Soo had pulled out of her work overalls' pocket, like a surprise package. So now there wasn't blood dripping into the corner any more. It was probably just dripping into the corner of the Priba Paradise bag.

So they set off towards Ward Eleven. No one was allowed into the hospital outside of visiting hours, but in her work overalls, Goldilox Soo looked as though she belonged there. Or anywhere for that matter. She was practically invisible. And Jumila stuck to her.

Up on the balcony she was, when they saw her.

She came wheeling a trolley round a corner at high speed. Her body prancing out the message: 'It's today! Today is the day!'

Out of Ward Eleven into the wide open veranda leading from Theatre. Dancing. Sadna Joyna, laughing, left hand out to the side, as if in a ballet or some opera. Or an operetta. Blue uniform a tunic around her. Hair pinned up behind the blue thing on her head. She saw them down in the garden. Her hand was already positioned to wave wildly.

'Here I come,' she called loudly. The 'Quiet Please' rules don't apply to hospital domestic workers. 'What brings you two here?'

And; with that, she whizzed off into the lift with trolley of laundry. Their neighbour. She and the twin babies. Also squatters on Kowlenn. She, also going with them, as if their lives were now plaited together, to their first ever *Political* meeting. Today. This very evening after work. *Today* 'Well I never did.' She arrived, stopped in her tracks. 'What brings you two here? Thunder, lightning or is it rain?' By now there were some full, heavy. Clouds building up and rolling down the mountain, and building up again.

and beginning to roll down again, and a rumbling thunder in the far distance. And-it was only morning.

'A foetus,' said Goldilox Soo.

'A what?'

'A foetus. In this plastic bag. In this Priba Paradise bag.'

'Yours?' Sadna asked her.

'No,-mlne.'

'She turned up at Millers' with this plastic bag dripping blood on the marble floors. Poor girl.'

'Oh, my god. Oh, my god.' Sadna put out a hand to Jumila's forehead to check for fever. 'Pain? Haemorrhage? Fever?' And while 'No, no; no' she put her head slightly backwards and flared her nostrils. Checking for infection. Clear Oh, my, god.'

'I'm all right. I'm still bleeding a little bit, that's all. I've stuck a whole towel there. I'm just a bit thirsty. And everything seems in black and white. Like old movies. Jerky too.'

'Well, call it *ours* now,' said Goldilox Soo. 'Hers and mine. We're dealing with it together now. And if you'll help, you can call it yours as well. What are we going to do with it?'

'Call a priest in to do a service,' said Sadna snidely, as if a squall had suddenly blown up in her. Her summer mood clouded over too. 'Yeah, call in a priest, Helpful in

these matters. They register souls.' She was sarcastic, if nothing. Her dancing turned into a kind of stamping. 'They like doing the extra burial or two. They call it overtime. The Lord's own overtime.'

'Seriously, Sadna. This is no time for blasphemy.'

'Or go tell the gravediggers to dig a hole? Go to the Civil Status Office by the hospital gate, and get them to enter it in the ledger: found and lost: one foetus, sex, age in minus months from zero, and perhaps a ghost name. See if they give you a burial permit or a cremation permit or a what?' Fury built up in her. As if there was something about the hypocrisy that made her madder than a snake. Dancing snake.

'Don't be cross, Sadna. Be helpful.'

'I'll bloody well be cross if I want to. Making this poor child suffer like that over an abortion.' Anyone'd think Sadna was more than twenty years old herself. 'Could have killed her and you tell me not to be cross. Where did you get it done? Who by? Speak, girl. What method was used?' 'I didn't get anything done. It just came down this morning all by itself.'

'Go tell your brothers and uncles. Family! Yeah; go tell that religious brother of yours. And your ex-husband as well. They might dig a hole and hold a little homely burial service.' She got more furious.

'No need to lie to me. Keep your lies for 'the whole army of lie-collectors,' she went on.

'It's true, what she's saying, Sadna. I've had it out with her. It's true. It's that nice man of hers, Rahim's.' Goldilox Soo was trying to hurry things up now. Everything takes time. Jumila lowers her eyes in assent. 'He doesn't-know any-thing about it, though.'

Sadna quietened down. In respect. The squall had passed. A calm descended. They all stood there. As if at a graveside.

'Better leave it that way,' Sadna said. 'Let him be. They don't always understand. And they get scared.'

Sadna Joyna had realized it all. That Jumila had lost a wanted little one. 'My poor love. it's difficult when it gets up and leaves by itself like that. You feel lonely, don't you. And deserted.-Are you sure you're not feeling sick. Ward Eleven's right here. We can go to Casualty and get the doctors to have a look at you?'

No, I'm fine. And I've got things to do today. I'm busy. As you know. You are too.'

'You know something, Jumila, if you'd gone and had it done on purpose, there wouldn't have been this problem of disposal either. Come to think of it, I wonder what they do with the foetuses? All the backstreet abortionists.'

'What are we going to do with it?' Goldilox Soo persisted.

'And of course there's the police. They always interested foetuses. They won't believe you like Goldilox Soo and I do. "Where did you find it?" "Whose is it?" "What sex is it" "What age is it?" "Who did it?" "Where does she live?" "How much did she charge?" Blah blah blah.' She was besides herself again. The calm had been temporary. 'It's like policeman in bed with you and your man. Watching what will happen next. Waiting. Then pouncing.'

Policemen

'And there's the reporters. *Decouverte macabre*. Which reminds me, they had a little "faits divers" article in *Le Mauricien* yesterday afternoon. *Yesterday*. A patient on Ward Eleven's got it next to her bed right now. We were all sitting reading it together just before I took this trolley. An article about our ward, really. The bleeding ward. Look at all these sheets on the trolley. Women bleeding. Anyway it said: "Found in the Civil Hospital, a foetus in a plastic bag in a *poubelle* with the other usual detritus." So that's why I'm so cross, because I don't know what to suggest now. After this big hullabaloo. Nice thought you had: *hospital*. But here, they are all eyes for our sins, girls. We'll get arrested on the spot. Then we'll have to explain, and you know how that is. We'll have to get lawyers and everything. End up in the District Court.'

'Don't they have an incinerator, or something here?' It was Goldilox Soo. 'You know, for the appendices, the chopped-off gangrenous legs, the chopped-off hands; the cancers, the other foetuses, and what not? Do they burn them somewhere here?'

'Well, no, they don't. Not here anyway. Not anymore. Environment,' she said. 'Environment. Now there's this "offal" lorry we call it. It comes at night. I know the driver. But that's complicated. Specially after yesterday's article. I never asked what they do with it all. Perhaps they bury it somewhere. I don't know where, or burn it somewhere. I must remember to ask the driver. Samuel he's called.'

'Let me take 'this trolley to the laundry van. KlinnkWik.'

does it now. Then I'm off duty because it's my case today. which is another reason I'm so cross. It's hard for me to take another case. But then again, I have to. Yes, it's *ours* now. How big is it? You didn't tell me, Jumila. Mind you, you look pregnant. You never said you were though. God it's very heavy.'

So, she went to take the trolley back. Signed out. And the three of them set off to look into the matter of canals and rivers.

It was only nine o'clock. So the green flies wouldn't start bothering them in a big eyed yet. Not in swarms anyway. And there was a quickening breeze rushing down the mountain, and the smell of a change in weather.

'What's all this noise in the hospital? And a marquee? Sadna, am I going mad, is this a circus or something?' It was Galdiox Soo, staring.

'The hospital is. Prayer day. No one can say anything. Maybe that's why I'm being so quick to shout at you about calling in a priest. Close the hospital down and pray instead! I mean I've tried to object. Lots of the staff have tried.' Look at this petition, Sadna said, and dug a piece of paper out of her uniform pocket. They glanced at it: '*A chapel inside each hospital. Hospitals are not religious places. They must be secular space. The Church won't close it down, or hand it over to be used as a secular space. The chapel must stay, the Church says. Now a marquee for kirtann and bajann. Now an application to build temples and mosques. We protest.*

We protest against the presence of any organized religion on the hospital property. We, the staff and patients of the hospital, offer scientific treatment and care. In addition, we will not allow our selves to be classified the whole time. Even when patients are sick. No shame. Religions have got no shame. The noise is unbearable. 'The staff cannot' work. Patients suffer. Call on the Minister of Health ...'

'We haven't got time to read things,' Goldilox Soo said, tearing her eyes away from the bit of paper.

'I've signed it,' Sadna said," and I'm circulating it. I have got time.

As they were going out, Jumila said,' See this ward. When I was in the Surgical Ward two years ago, up there, they thought had appendicitis but then decided I didn't, a group of some religious people came in, I knew some of them, and they said they wanted to adopt the ward. *Adopt the ward.* The specialist in charge said, "This, young men, a government hospital. For everyone. Do you mind getting out." So they went away.'

'Not far enough away,' Sadna said. Took over there. See that plaque. They've adopted the Children's Ward over there. Look the name of a religious organization on the wall outside the ward. Think they can do anything on the strength of they mean well. A children's ward. Children divided because these men mean well.'

'Could make you puke,' Jumila added with conviction, because she was left feeling rather nauseous with exhaustion. Also when she looked at the Children's Ward, She remembered her little girl.

With her ex-husband now, the one she calls *him*. Women, we're. always producing, she thought. She looked at the bag now in Sadna's hand.

Why don't we just throw it away any old where,' Sadna announced.

'Why not just here? It's not as if we haven't got important things to do today. The court case and the meeting. Stupid of us to ever even think we would be able to even get to this meeting.'

'And it's late. It's late. I can hear the sound of war getting nearer. Listen. Put your ears to the ground, girls. There it comes. Put your heads back and sniff the air, girls. Get the scent. It's got to be stopped by someone. And now we've got to get rid of this first,' Goldilox Soo said. 'Because, it can't wait. A foetus in a plastic bag can't wait.'

'Being a woman,' Sadna said enigmatically, 'Being women. There's-always this.'

Being a woman. Human being. Woman being. Jumila knew what Sadna meant.

Becoming a woman. Jumila stopped on the bridge. No light foot or heavy foot. Stillness. Dreamlike. Emptiness. Dizziness. Over a few seconds whole lives of hers were in her consciousness. Giddiness. What brought her to be standing here? Foetus in a plastic bag, feeling queasy,

hiding from the police? From the public? From doctors?
From the magistrates? From the priests? From men? From
him? Giddiness. Seeing in black and white again. Seeing an
old home movie when she looked up the canal outside the
hospital. Granular Sepia. Reality hitting a mind wrap.
With memories in colour.

'Whenever I see you, Rahim, my ears are filled with singing
and light music. And deep inside my head there is a
dance.'

'My whimsical,' he answered.

At first sight? No. Always. In sight and out of sight she
carries him around with her. And he her too. Childhood
sweethearts. They always knew one another so there never
was a first sight.

But there were looks. Looks through eyelashes and long
direct glances and then love-notes left in the contiguous
wall and hands brushing.

She thought of him before she thought of herself. If you
asked the question 'Who', Jumila would reply 'Rahim',
before you specified what. And vice versa. In her dreams, it
wasn't clear who the I was. Sometimes it was Jumila, some-
times it was Rahim.

Everyone knew they would get married. There were a
dozen solid reasons. Like, same community same, same caste,
same religion. Same mosque, same ancestor language, same
passport, same race, same ethnic origin. Perhaps more
to the point; same class. Their families friends.

like the Capulets and the Montagues. And neighbours.

They lived in that bit of Plenn Vert that the Electoral Boundaries Commission has put into Constituency Number Four, for some reason. Anyway, to their marriage, there were no foreseeable obstacles.

'Some professional matchmaker will be out of a job,' people said. Their marriage was what everyone agreed it would be. A thing called a foregone conclusion.

'He was two years older and not in any hurry.

He was wayward and would work when there was work and sit about on the edge of the pavement talking to passers-by in front of the tobacconists when there wasn't any work. From falling in love so young, so early, he had no highfalutin thoughts for himself. It didn't enter his head to compare himself with anyone. He went to primary school and then to high school. He stayed unambitious, and used to just read and read and read until his mother said this will be the death of you this reading.

And whenever he saw Jumila, he would tell her about all the things he read. So she knew more than people might think a seller of wares would know.

He stopped high school when he saw the cost to his mother. What with her sewing and sewing over her Singer sewing-machine and her eyes seeing dimmer and dimmer customers not bringing their money as promised. And the Sundays sitting waiting for them to bring the money. And then they didn't bring it. He said he didn't like college anymore anyway. And it was true in a way. All that competition that went on to beat the others.

It was morbid, he said to Jumila.

So he stopped.

Instead, he thought a lot. About life and this and that. He listened in to old men talking and tuned out of the exclamations of the ignorant. He was an intellectual, a child of the enlightenment. How and why? They shook their heads at the difference between him and his big brother. Nobody can say for sure. A thousand little things, the women sigh. The mysteries of children growing up.

Big books don't know where they come from next to his bed. And dog-eared pamphlets by the television. And where do the tides come from and look at these ants carrying a cockroach up a sloping path. And war will soon break out there, he warned, and it did. He would put his cap on and be off, in person, to a strike meeting at the docks, that had nothing to do with him. Before the Socialist Party knew, he knew. It was said to be in his bones. He would be the one to tell them. Today at about twelve. Or, tomorrow round about three. But, when it was the fascist movement that got on the rampage, he would be cross and vigilant, pull his cap on right down, and go watch them from distance. Hidden. Make sure I know what's happening, he said. He would inform his Socialist Party branch. He spied on the fundamentalists. Fundamentalists? Same thing. Only they're hypocrites as well, the lot of them, he said. And worse.

He fed a stray mother dog in the bare land that like an old scar divided Plenn Vert from Sen Krwa. He stroked her head.

But his big brother said they couldn't keep dogs anymore because dogs are unclean.

Women are too, he warned Rahim.

Rahim loved Jumila.

And they knew they would get married. Just like everyone knew it.

But she also had this big brother. And he decided one day and announced his decision: 'You're not going to marry that man. No sister of mine, no female of this family, will marry an atheist. Or a Communist. Infidel, no.'

He wouldn't hear of it, he said.

No one in my family will marry that kind of man.

Jumila couldn't believe it. Ever-fragmentary grouping, even Jumila could see that. Or was it just pretext. She didn't know.

She was silent. By silence, she meant no.

But he knew that you can make a girl's silence mean assent. She was only a minor in any case, so assent was not at issue. He knew that you can marry a minor off legally.

Her mother and father were deferential to this brother.

Scared of him. They seemed, she noticed, to bow down to him. He had beaten their father up. His father. The shame was hidden. The Code Napoleon gave prison for it. Not just a fine. But he had god. God was available for people like him to use.

Her family knew what Jumila felt.

Everyone knew her opinion on the matter.

Everyone knew her feelings for Rahim.

Only too well.

It was common knowledge.

But this particular big brother, who dominated the family, said marry her off the minute she turns sixteen, when the law allows, and he went right ahead and looked for and found a man from a village in the North for her and they did just that. She didn't even know his name. Had never seen him. And when she did see him, she felt a cold withdrawal in herself like from a toad. It wasn't his fault.

But then it wasn't the toad's either.

He had a difficult time. For example, he had to all but tie her down on the marriage bed to impregnate her. This was expected of him. There would be sheet inspections and he didn't want anyone challenging his manliness in his house. So he impregnated her. Her belly swelled against her own will. And at quickening, she was torn between the movements which stirred an excitement in her flesh and her own willing the disgusting thing in her womb still.

When her sister's husband died, she, big-bellied, passed by right close to Rahim the day of the funeral. By the gate. Everyone was watching them, so he could only say three words. *It doesn't matter*. She smiled for the first time since the forced marriage. Right there in front of everyone. At a funeral. Big bellied and all. And then she half-accepted the growing creature, tried to accept it, *it doesn't matter*, used her conscious mind to calm her expelling womb, but she

couldn't stop what went on deep inside, and deep inside the rejection grew.

Three months after having this one child - a measly, slimy little creature, that she had difficulty expelling, that was not expected to live, but that she learnt to love in a forlorn and gloomy manner - she tore herself from it and left. She left *him* and the still suckling baby. He made the child, she thought. And he was a good man. So he could have her.

She left *him* and her child.

They all thought she had gone mad with the *post partum*, and they were too scared to do anything so they just let her be. Get her later, they said. You have to lie in wait for the young, they said. Catch them when they stumble into a difficulty.

But she hadn't gone mad. She'd just gone stubborn. And so it was that she came to live with her widowed sister and her sister's nine-year-old boy, Tibye. This widowed sister, who had already fallen into a deep depression before her own husband's death stayed in it, god knows why, after his death. Maybe her insides, just like Jumila's, also stayed cross after her outside mind wanted to stop being cross. Anyway, her depression deepened.

So then one day, not one month after Jurnila moved in, her sister just went and poured paraffin all over herself, doused herself like she was an old copy of the Sunday Star being used to start a rubbish-dump fire, and set herself alight right there and then in front of her son; Tibye.

He never spoke again. He probably could speak, everyone said. But he just *wouldn't* speak anymore.

Jumila's sister's rented house also burned down with her, so Jumila and her nine-year-old nephew went out into the world together.

Jumila and The Boy Who Won't Speak found work as live-in domestic servants at this historian and his wife's house. Jumila couldn't believe her luck. She had heard about the job from her mother's own sister, who lived on her own. Her aunt had wanted to take Jumila in, but the others threatened to have her house burned down if she did. No one was allowed to help Jumila. Unless she fulfilled a condition. The condition?

On condition that she return to her husband and her child.

So she didn't get help.

But now she had a job and a place to stay.

Her husband threatened to steal her back. He held out the baby girl, five months old then. She was tempted. But then again Rahim was in her ears and in her eyes and in her understanding. The baby opened its mouth and smiled, pulling her towards it. Then everywhere Rahim everyone Rahim pulling away. Then the baby.

It was The Boy Who Won't Speak who saved her. She had The Boy Who Won't Speak to look after instead. No. She said no. Hardened her heart. Against her own daughter. Her daughter would understand one day, she thought.

She decided to survive on her own with The Boy Who Won't Speak. Nobody wanted him anyway. This silent presence that he was. He reminded them of something they had done to his mother before him. Jumila found him a warm child, an understanding being, and a bond stronger than mother and child grew between them.

She and Rahim met there. In secret, at her mother's sister's house. This aunt wanted to help Jumila. So she left them on their own. She was like that. She was an adviser or a counsellor or something. No one paid her to do it. She just did it.

A religious air about her. But the *maulanas* neither spoke for or against her. Two unrelated systems. She knew, it was said, the past, the present, and maybe the future.

She went off with The Boy Who Won't Speak for an outing, she said, maybe to the new docks to look at all the coloured containers, piled up like Lego, or to the old Garden to show him where slaves were hanged in public as a lesson long ago at the bottom of Plenn Vert and where no one sat on the benches till now. Blood marks the earth, she said. And off they went. The Boy Who Won't Speak's eyes gleaming with the excitement of the unknown. Of surprises. Of shocks.

So they were alone. Alone together.

Her mother's sister promised.

But then how was even she to interpret things when she didn't know *everything* there is to know, herself.

She said, 'You will be alone. Just' the two of you.

A private time.' But then how was she to remind them of people watching. And of policemen. Policemen who keep watch on even the most private sex.

So they believed they were alone.

This is how it happened.

He closed the door and looked at her. She said can I undo my hair and brush it. Yes he said. And she stood up and did. Can I beat out a *sega* on an imaginary one-sided drum? Yes, she said. And he raised the imaginary drum to his left knee which was on the arm of a chair and did.

It started slowly and softly, the brushing and the silent drum-tapping, and then it became more and more abandoned and in time to the imaginary drum-beating, she brushed out her hair, and the brushing turned into a dance, one foot light, one foot heavy. The dance turned into the dance of love. And she danced and he played for her. She looked into his eyes with a look so direct and honest that he almost lost concentration until he summoned up the same look in his own eyes. ·

And then after reaching a calm climax, the number came to an end.

And they bowed to one another.

And laughed a deep laugh of love.

And expectancy of making love.

Love that was about to be expressed.

She put out her hand to him. And they marvelled at one another's hands. Let this take a century.

And in her hands she felt a deep warmth, almost aching, in the palms and it echoed through her arms into her breasts and made her nipples stand on end against her bra.

Let this last forever. A glowing warm fire.

And he spoke words of love, poems of adoration, to her and she listened. And the words caused blood to pound in her ears and to pass through her chest into her womb and down between her legs. As is the wonder of womankind. She was at her most desiring of him just fourteen days before her next period.

And as she passed her hands over his bare arms, he felt his heart ache with love, and his groin grow and tighten comfortably in his clothing in expectancy. Let this go on and on. His love, too, was linked to the moons, but he didn't know how. Perhaps she would teach him. Take him back to being a sea creature, now in the sea, now on the land, as the moon waxed and waned.

Love transformed their sexuality into eternal life. From the first sea change that stirred life into non-life and on into the end of time. Love linked them to the world of the past when life began and the world of the future where the unknown lies like an eternal gaping.

They were alone., Each of them.

At last.

Both of them.

Standing facing one another. Humans the strange standing animals.

'You have been through so much. Married off, tied down, impregnated. You have given birth, and circumstance has snatched your daughter from your breast. Your sister has set herself alight and burnt herself down, and left you. The Boy Who Won't Speak to look after. You are only seventeen.'

'And right now I stand and listen to you.' She, standing listening to him, the other. Humans the strange talking mammals. Listening animals.

'I don't know if I will be with you tomorrow or the next day or the next.' She went on. 'I know. that up till now and right now I love you and I want to express my love. This can never be taken away. Let the future look after itself. Come and let me undo your shirt buttons.'

Which she did.

And he said, 'Yes, you undress me first.'

Standing humans being considerate of each other.

Consciousness of me, myself, and you, yourself. Humans, being the strange caring mammals.

'No, just your shirt.' Then she took off her dress and her bra. And they touched one another's breasts. Where the babe feeds. There feed I. Where one generation joins another. The heart of the person. Hers full, his flat. And it was as though time stopped and a low divine hum, hum, humming-sound filled the universe. He kissed a birthmark on her ribcage. And she circled his nipples one by one with her tongue. And they stood out. Empathy of the male for the suckling of the female.

'Salt,' she said. 'Of the earth.'

Standing, she swivelled around and undid her *choos*

string. And calmly pulled her chaos down and peeled her panties down and walked out of both and around Rahim. He looked at her as though she was a vision. She took his hand and placed it between her legs momentarily, and he felt hot warm wet, breathe in fast, and his own clothes tighten further.

Standing, she looked at him and put her hand to his belt. 'Yes,' he said. 'You undo it.'

She unzipped his fly as well, and caught his underpants in her fingers and pulled them down with his trousers.

He stood there. Vertical man, horizontal organ. Exposed. Tender. Vulnerable.

She vertical woman all roundness.

Two proud animals. Calm and beautiful and still.

He took her hand and passed the back of it over his collar bones. And squeezed her hand between his head and his shoulder.

She felt a trickle of her own warmth on the inside of her thigh. And then, as a sea breeze went through the room, the wetness cooled.

He knelt down, and then sat on his feet. Slowly he rolled a condom on. She smiled the smile of womanhood honoured. 'Yes' she said.

He kissed the hair between her thighs. He palpated the swollen vulva lips. They tingled. His tongue touched her mons venus light as a dream and she closed her eyes and swayed

She felt an aching pleasure pierce-her ovaries one by one. A sucking motion began inside her depths. Her whole yoni felt at one with the tides and the moon and the universe. Time being born incessantly.

He felt a deep longing at the base of his penis. A longing which rose from between his bent thighs, and a twinge in each testicle squeezed upwards as he sat. The skin of his scrotum contracted and moved him. Up, up, his penis reached. Sea creature.

She stood her feet on each side of his feet, her knees hugged his flanks.

And then slowly, slowly as the sun sets, taking his hand in hers to steady herself, she bent her knees, they quivered unequally, she bent them further as she lowered her buttocks, opening her thighs, her yoni, her insides to him.

Slowly she aimed him into her.

First just the tip, and then she prolonged this moment of entry. Out of reverence for the sacred. In. And out. In and out. Like the tides. The tip catching on her contracting vagina mouth. Like the surface tension of a wave. Before it retreats. Over the reef.

And then she put her whole weight behind her and drew him into her completely.

They stayed still a while. Unison. Silence. Respect. Holiness.

Then moved up and down like a dolphin in perfect motion. She leant back. The burning heat of the pleasure rose. Rose and fell. Always higher, Wilder. Wetter. Hotter.

Slippery noises sucking. And just as a crescendo neared, she slowed and whispered:

'Let this go on forever.'

She held him still, moving just her muscles on the inside. Like the 'lup' of a heart beat. He too was still, moving just his penis on the inside. Independent of his body. Like the 'dup' of the replying heart beat. Lup-dup. Lup-dup. Lup-dup. 'Stand up a minute,' she said, moving him slowly out of her, and herself off him. She pulled him up.

She went over to the mirror, stood in front of him and they looked at their naked selves.

And were pleased.

'My eyes feed,' he said.

'It is as though we found something out that's hidden but is always there.'

He touched her clitoris. She felt a wildness.

'Please come in again. Now now now.'

Which he did, from behind, touching her all the while.

And they both watched their souls meet in the mirror. A wild abandon took their bodies. Their mouths opened to the sky. Oh! Oh! Their hips berserk. Yes! Rising, rising, rising feelings. Total empathy. Joining of the universe with itself. The mirror shuddered with the orgasms, falling, falling, falling, dying, dying, dying, into outer space and utter peace.

Their knees shook, and they lay on the grass mat in front of the mirror, two child angels born.

'We have found innocence,' he said in her ear.

'Yes,' she smiled.

Someone must have seen him go. And then her mother's sister come back with The Boy Who Won't Speak. Or maybe they had seen him arrive and her mother's sister go out with The Boy Who Won't Speak. Or maybe they always suspected her. Who knows?

When Rahim went round to see her mother's sister, to take her her Friday's meat, he was that kind of man. Fetch an aunt her Friday's meat.

When he got there.

When he got to where the wall to her house was, he dropped the meat. He stood rock still. No! They wouldn't.

They couldn't have.

'No!' he shouted.

'No!' he screamed.

Behind the stone wall, he saw it in disbelief, they had broken her house down and removed the rubble. She was gone. And Jumila? He panicked on two scores.

He picked up the meat and ran, ran in all directions at once. Asking the least offensive people. Where? What happened? Why?

'I don't know.' They all said the same thing. A chronicle learnt by heart over how many years of submission. A chronicle. *Chronique d'une mort annoncee*. But they said her aunt wasn't dead. Just gone. Gone for good. It had happened two days before. Two days after he'd met Jumila there.

Jumila was all right. Gone back to work.
But, she, they said, the aunt, she ought to have known better. Can't let these women do what they want.

Godmen. The Hisbullah. At night in four-wheel drives with cellular telephones chasing phantoms that travelled in four-wheel drives with cellular telephones. The devils and themselves fully modernized. In the day, punishing women.

And of course, when somehow the condom failed, the sperm met the ovum, in secret harmony, as if defying barrier and reef, the police were watching. And the priests. And the magistrates. Just in case a woman put a foot wrong.
Like Jumila now. Standing in the middle of the bridge outside the Civil Hospital with her weight on her good foot.

They didn't need to exchange any words. There it was in front of them. Just outside the hospital, a thing still called a canal.
All along the southern wall of the hospital it ran, from the mountain side to the sea side. They walked down the middle of the bridge that crossed it from the hospital, drawn by centrifugal force to the left handrail and

by some other equally strong centrifugal force to the right handrail. They stopped in the middle of the bridge. A hawker sold tapioca cakes in a glass box on his tricycle at the far end of the bridge. They all three moved slowly towards the railing on their right hand, downstream had there been water in it, towards the sea. Then they leaned over and looked down into it. *Just chuck it into the canal.*

Of course there wasn't any water in the canal. Just dirt. Instead of water, just swirling clouds above, rolling off Montayn Sinnyo, and getting pushed up again by a tuna-cannery-smelling northerly wind, a threat of rain, and far away thunder egging it on. Not enough to throw a foetus into. You can't throw a foetus into these signs that may become a gushing torrent by afternoon. Right now there was, at the very most, some slime here and there, oozing out of the bowels of the earth through the joins between the stones.

It was one of those old storm-water drains. A derelict ruin. Some memory of grandeur about it. Hewn basalt rock, massive walls. Same style as an old lime kiln built by the French East India Company. Now a sorry sight. Full of all sorts of junk. How many sorry sights had it seen? Accident cases rushed in and dead bodies being driven out from the morgue in taxis specially licensed to carry the dead. The offal van. But now staring at itself, it saw only household rubbish, plastic bags that looked just like Jumila's, dry leaves and green leaves, nondescript sludge,

dead hedgehogs, rotten mangoes, one particular plastic bag caught their attention because used sanitary towels were spewing out of it in mockery of their foetus, a washing-machine, old car tyres, all overlaid by more plastic bags, and potato-crisp packets and one old worn high-heeled shoe. Maybe there were already one or two foetuses in plastic bags down there. And a tomato plant stubbornly pushing through between two hewn rocks and grass and weeds and determined creepers getting a grip somewhere and persisting with green life.

They were tempted, all three of them, to just chuck it over the edge. One two three. There you go. Finished with the thing. Not make a production out of a simple miscarriage. They are happening all the time. Other women are managing.

But then, a canal with no water in it is a most uncleansing thing.

'I want to be cleansed of this thing,' Jumila murmured.

In any case, there were a lot of people just on the edge of the canal, people watching. People looking over the canal, as though it still had water in it. Leaning on the handrails, as if the two points that used to ply it long ago when there was water in it might pass one going up and one going down before their very eyes. The State Bank had a calendar with this picture on it. Where has all the water gone? And the best dogs and the *ticas* and the umbrellas and the steps down to life on the canal? And the giant water lilies on the eddying edge?

The three of them stared down at the absence too. They were forced by their circumstance to stare at the new presences too. Because they had a decision to make.

It wasn't something you'd be proud to be seen doing, throwing a plastic bag with whatever in it into a dried-out canal. It would even look as if you were the ones that threw all that rubbish and garbage and junk in all along.

And there's a constant danger of accumulating fault, hoarding it up, invisible bit by bit, until you get guilty. You didn't want anything wrong to get into your actions at this point. Imagine being done for littering under the present circumstances. Everything could escalate till they got you for a hanging crime.

They were being watched. The people standing there watching them were all sorts. There was a young man who looked as though he had come from out-patients, practising in his head what the doctor had said and trying to make sense of it. There were two young women just stopped, watching the municipality workers cleaning the canal. Yes, there were municipality workers coming down, cleaning the canal. What if the municipality workers came over to the plastic bag when you threw it down, and then picked it up and looked inside, saw what it was, and raised the alarm? Cried, 'I saw the three of them. On that bridge.'

There's Line Barracks police headquarters right in view. What if there was a passer-by who had seen them throw it over and who could identify them afterwards. And then

there'll be an investigation. Section 235 of the Criminal Code. It will be in the papers the next day: *Decouverte macabre. Trois femmes interroge par le CID. Foetus male dans un sac plastique. Complot delictueux. Arrestations imminentes.*

Not so easy.

All three of them leaned on the handrail. Let their minds wander off.

Jumila sweated and trembled. She wondered if The Boy Who Won't Speak was doing all right. He was just as good as she was at knowing a girl or woman's cup size. He knew all the prices. A regular client would hand him a bit of paper money and wait for the change. But he'd lose casual buyers. They're already timid coming up to strangers in the street right in front of the Outer Islands Development Corporation godown and talking about bras. They wouldn't stay long with that look on his face, those haunted eyes. And that silence. Customers like reassuring sounds. And looks.

Standing still calmed her. She felt better anyway now Goldilox was carrying the Priba Paradise plastic bag with the Air Islands Duty Free bag in it with the one-rupee-blue plastic bag in it with the foetus in it. The clamminess got less. A bit faint. A bit dizzy. The same tendency for everything to go back into a faded black-and-white photograph for a few minutes, then old home movies, and then back to colour.

Goldilox Soo was wondering if anyone had found her invisible mop and noticed that her absence was rather

longer than usual. She shrugged. Only cut her pay. Life was so simple now she had her land and her shack. Didn't know why she hadn't done it before. It made her think of Sara. Sara. Sara. Sara. If Sara were still here, she could have done the same thing. So easy. Just up and off and stake it out. Could have made a house next to hers. Sara if only. Sadna Joyna was preparing her court case in her head. The union lawyer had said she should think it all out in her head beforehand. Then the government lawyer would manage her case. What date she started work, and how, and who paid her, and how much, and the circumstances of the dismissal to prove it was unjustified and therefore that he had to pay. She owed it to Mrs Blignault. Get the bastard back. And to the Queen and Sheeba. No one ever brought to court for them.

But mainly all three of them had an unspoken excitement. Today was the day of the *future* for each of them.

Their lives were going to try to be like a song that they would compose themselves. At least partly.

These chains to the present, the present, the present, and this being bound to the past, the past, the past, were going to be cast away. Today. They had decided to look forward, into the future. For the first time in their adult lives.

Reclaim the future. As children dream the future.

It was Friday.

And they had plans for later. A meeting. Meet. Come together. Heads together. Think aloud. Meet others.

Communion. Meditation. On mother earth. For tomorrow's

little ones. For ourselves. For every creature on the surface of the. And fowls in the air. And fishes in the oceans. Meet to work out. Meeting.

They didn't have time to think what would happen there. They had to *get* there. Even if they couldn't concentrate on a single thing that went on when they got there, they intended being there in person, in flesh and blood. Like the plastic bag was here with them right now, in flesh and blood.

'Are there other women in this socialist party? I don't like politics,' Jumila mused.

'How would I know?' Sadna answered.

'What do you say at a party meeting? Do you think it's *different* politics?'

'We'll see later, when we get there. Why do you think they invited us?'

'Will we ever know that? And what exactly is a party? They said it's ongoing. Not just for the elections?'

The questions and answers were circular, like a round robin.

But their decision to go was not.

It pointed forward.

Look over there. What's that? What on earth's that?' Sadna Joyna was pointing across the length of the canal all the way to Line Barracks. There was a file of people going past, emanating self-righteousness and provocation, like a morbid beam. Young men and old women. All shouting

slogans. 'Our Vice! Our Vice! Our Vice Commissioner. Shiv is with us. Shiv is with our Vice Commissioner!' 'Oh, Kali, where are you?' sang Sadna insolently.

Long ago terrible things happened in stories and nobody complained. They just knew that's what happened in that particular story. They thought about the meaning of it. These days, when you write a story, you have to be so careful. People can accept a magic door, invisible people, love at first sight, and that sort of thing, but there are other things they just can't stand anymore. They feel attacked. They don't know if you're just telling a story or somehow taking advantage of them. They get cross. Some of them do anyway.

These days, in a story, when parents go and die before the beginning of a story and leave two children, a son and a daughter, that is a brother and a sister, all alone in a house together, some people get cross with the writer on the spot.

They get agitated. A defensiveness gets into their voices. Their chests get tight. Their palms sweat. What if there's pornography in it? What if incest? They wish you hadn't chosen to write it like that.

As if you had the choice.

Another thing. Lots of people don't like things like axes in stories either anymore. Long ago any old-story could

have a bit that went 'And then he chopped off her hands at the wrist'. Nowadays they suspect this sentence. They accuse it. They say it smacks of wanton violence. And people aren't used to foetuses being in stories anymore. They have been censored for so long now. Hidden in secretive gestures, not even amounting to whispers anymore. They say things like foetuses haven't got a place in stories. You never know what might happen if they get into stories.

What some people don't seem to realize in all this is that there is the truth to take into account. And there are things that happen that have to be faced up to. Stories that have to be told. Like it or not.

Don't they realize it's more difficult for us, the storytellers, to tell it when it's like this? With risks of incest and dismembering and might-have-been-characters and I don't know what?

Can't they be a bit more understanding? What has happened to audiences lately?

And why don't they take it like a symbol? Can't they see that the brother and sister are parts of the same person now, just like they always used to be? Can't they see it anymore? Can't they just ask what hands mean in the story? What did they always mean? That foetuses are what could have been. How many could have beens do we lose every single day, without noticing it. Could have helped someone. Could have built something. Could have planned. Could have given.