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Indenture
(Chapter Two of novel in progress, *Overtures*)

Somar was attracted to the sound of hammering. It was not a steady full-blooded bang, bang, banging, but a muffled tap and then tap and then another tap, as if someone was trying to conceal one's intent. The sound aroused the youth's curiosity. Somar had already put off inquiring into this mystery umpteen times before, but now he could constrain himself no longer. Stealthily, he detached himself from the gang.

This band of East Indian boys and girls were fetching manure to various parts of the estate. They were paid per day. Under Indentureship regulations, children could not be forced to work. They were free to roam or go to school. Neither parents nor the authority enforced schooling of Indian children, and it was improbable for parents of girl-children to send their daughters to school. On the contrary, and of course, both the parents and the estate managers encouraged child labour, a system foreign to neither English nor Indian. Ruth and Adrianna, both educated girls, had discussed this deprivation of Indian girls and made a promise to help resolve the situation. They didn't know how but they would start by looking for loopholes.

To the children, it was fun, not work. Fetching of manure was not distasteful to Indian children, some of whom were already engaged in pottery and dabbing the fireside and bottom house with a solution of cow dung and clay. So fetching manure was child's play. The children were allowed to be children, to play with each other, to be competitive, to grow up, to know money, to deal with money and, in the process, to become frugal like their ancestors.

Somar disappeared into the clump of bushes and raced towards the direction of the sound. It was a long haul because the area was still virgin forest. The first inhabitants cleared and prepared the spaces on the coastal plain of Guyana needed for residential and commercial purposes. So the going was rough and halting, and just as Somar was faltering in his resolve, he came abruptly upon a tiny clearing.

In it was a huge African man struggling to stitch the mortised ends of two stout beams together, to complete the rectangle and, thereby, form the foundation of a house. Somar was transfixed by this scene of creation. The longer Somar watched, the greater his admiration for the lone builder grew. The idea of one man single-handedly building a house fascinated him. And he forthwith planned to check on the progress of the man and the house.

Juba was a burly African with a passion to make things, to do things with his strong arms and long fingers. Juba, a freed African, who recently had the yoke of slavery lifted when emancipation was announced. But he was not satisfied with the new situation that required that he worked longer hours and even harder than before and that he was forced to accept reduced payment due to the influx of indentured labourers. Juba loved to imbibe 'bush rum' and to fight for money, both of which made him unfit to work for days and caused him to lose wages and become indebted to moneylenders. Juba was married to Feba who was carrying his child.

Suddenly, Juba straightened up and threw a knot of wood at a stray dog threatening to steal his dinner, a large tilapia roasting over an open fire, barbecue-style. Juba went up to the fire. Picking up the splint with the fish, he sampled the meal. Not satisfied, he returned it to the flame.

This drama caused Somar to think about his own dinner. Crawling away, he rushed back to rejoin the manure gang. This he discovered was already disbanded; he'd lost all reckoning of the passage of time. In his retreat, he fell twice before it dawned on him that it was easing into evening. There was naught else for him to do but to head directly home.

Home was a range of logies, quarters that were previously occupied by African slaves, now used by the estate to house the new arrivals and, in effect, displace the previous occupants, the now-emancipated African slaves. All of this Somar learned from listening in on conversations, many times secretly. He learned about the logies when a team of "reformers" were discussing the dismantling of the ramshackle buildings, replacing them with wooden erections designed with more space, more ventilation, and built off the ground to avoid flooding and all its concomitant ailments, some fatal. Logies were long, narrow buildings measuring about sixty-four feet by fourteen feet, with sides of wood protected by shingles and covered by a thatched v-roof. This lengthy structure was subdivided into numerous smaller dwelling units, insufficient to properly house a small family even of four persons. The ugly logies were sandwiched between the luxuriant cultivated areas and palatial residences of estate managerial personnel.

At the back of the logie, Somar found his elder sister, Bena, cooking. The *chula*, or earthen fireside, was sheltered by a piece of thatch material. The few cooking utensils were either hanging from or tucked into that roofing.

As a greeting, Somar tugged at Bena's long, oily and jet-black hair. She answered by flicking the *saapie*, or pot-holder, at him. After the by-play, she ordered him into the logie to await his meal.

On the threshold leading into the building was his father, Bhim, engrossed in the elaborate process of smoking his hookah. The pungent aroma of the tobacco was a welcome relief to their foul-smelling quarters. Loud smoking and heavy burning of incenses were encouraged for just that purpose—to rid the residual odour left behind by previous occupants.

"Ram-Ram, pa." Somar greeted his father in the correct Hindi manner, hands clasped and a slight bow of the head.

"Sita-Ram son." Puff-puff, bubble-bubble. "Yuh work today?"

"Yes, pa."

"You must mark it down—you educated. An me own to—mark it abook. We mustn't let nobody rob we."

"Yes, pa. You work extra yesterday?"

"Nah."

"But you did come home late-late."

Bhim had gone into the Creole community to a certain house to satisfy his sexual desire. Of such nature was his forage the grownup didn't think it wise to divulge the information to his son which was sort of living in denial. But by now almost every man, woman and child was aware of the situation. There were but few East Indian women on the estate, and they were all married and those of marriageable age were already matched. This created a number of social problems for that community. To make this social injustice all the more glaring, there were heavy fines imposed for going unto your neighbour's wife. It was a sordid situation that led many young men to suicide and/or to experiment with sexual orientations.

"Yes, pa where you been so late-late last night?" Bena entered the logie with the evening meal.

"Mine you own business, child." The voice did not carry a snap as Bhim turned his face away from his children, stroking his long, tapered, white beard.

Bena kept a straight face, "I know where you was—you was wid dat Creole lady again."

"Hush, gaal. Take dis way." The father gave up his bubble pipe to his daughter to put away, avoiding making eye-to-eye contact. "Take care wid it—it very old and very dear, you know how much it mean. You know, I bring it wid me from India in me *jahaji bandhar*. Look at how beautiful it make, carve by master craftsman in India."

The *jahaji bandhar* was not unlike today's Georgie Bundle. This sack was sometimes the only possession of an immigrant crossing the Kala Pani; in it were all his earthly goods—his religious books, and various seeds.

"But pa..." The young lady was trying to get the man's attention.

Bhim wasn't one to dodge the issue—his children must be aware of the complexities of this new society that is now home for at least five years according to the indentured contract. But the grownup also wanted to ease the knowledge to them.

"But you keep telling us to be careful how we mix wid de others."

"Is only to protect you all. We only know de white man, de sahib. We deal wid he before an we know he. He is Aryan an we is Aryan too. We from de same stock. We aint know nothing about de African nor about de Amerindian, nor about none of de others. An tobesides, I went to de village to do business."

The children knew that their father was already a much sought after palm reader and fortune teller. He was well-schooled in the art of

physiognomy and numerology, art forms Bhim was slowly teaching Somar and Bena, instilling in them how useful physiognomy can be to them as new arrivals in a strange land. The son and the daughter knew the father was daring and enterprising because they had seen him in action getting people to part with their money by telling them what they wanted to hear.

"But be careful, pa," the daughter sounded alarmed; "I hear those people can work obeah."

"How you know dat, gaal?"

Bena took some time before she answered. "We does talk about those black people, you know, dis an dat. Who hear, who see, who know. So come I know about dis obeah thing. Even de same people fraid of dem own obeah. One day, I here dis story of someone 'wuking obeah' on Juba because of a promise of marriage he break." It is said that "someting is berin" on the plot of land on which he live, how this curse is causing his wife, Feba, to experience difficult labour, how Feba and other relatives dig up the land in search of "the ting," passing off the exercise as a flower garden venture, that if this thing is not righted, someone—the man, woman or child—will die. But the danger was more against the woman. Should she die, the man would be free to fulfil his previous obligation. And there is also word out that Juba is planning to remove his hut and relocate it on some distant plot, so as to get away from the thing, the evil, the curse.

"There is some truth in that story...." Somar paused as all eyes turned on him. "I ...I hear some one of them is building a wood house in de back dam."

"Could be Juba!" exclaimed Bena. "Know him?"

"No, but there are stories about him all over the estate," replied Somar.

"I know Juba well," all eyes turned to the father, "paths cross plenty-plenty times." Bhim directed his attention to Bena, "Bout dis obeah ting—don't worry, child. De obeah man know wat e doing an I know wat I doing. We running de same game."

"Eat, pa, before de roti get cold an stiff."

Hot *saada* roti with generous dabs of salted butter was washed down with an aromatic bush tea brewed from bay leaves.

After the meal they lay themselves down on the floor to prepare for sleep. But sleep wouldn't come to the children. Lying on the ground, the boy and the girl appeared small, frail, and helpless. Then, with a concerted restlessness, they shortly managed to make their father aware by huddling themselves to either side of the grown-up.

"Ahright, wat bugging you two!" Bhim boomed.

"Can't sleep pa," squeaked Somar, the first to answer.

"Why you can't sleep?"

"De noise bothering me."

"You mean de dat sweet sound of the African drums?"

"No, not de drumming. De other sound."

"Wat other sound?"

"Dat tump-tump–tumping sound."

"Oh, dat—dat wat they call stamping tubes. They does only use them sometimes like on special occasions." Bhim cleared his throat. "Let me explain—is different lengths of bamboo wid opening at one end while the other end is pound upon de ground."

"But...oh, I get it—the bamboo is hollow," Somar nodded as the full import of the process became known.

"An the different lengths of the tubes produce different sounds."

"But..."

"Wat is it now?"

"You see when I rest my head on de ground to sleep, dat pounding noise does get to me. De drumming I can take—dat sound does melt away in de air after a time. But dat tump, tump, tumping does stay alive in de ground, coming an going, coming and going like an echo. Dat does bother me—like it wouldn't end. On an on, coming and going."

"Well," said the father, "I put an end to dat."

"Wat you going to do pa?" Bena asked, her arms crossed, alarm in her voice, thinking her father meant violence. She knew of the exploits of her father as a feared wrestler and the marks on his face, forearms, and knuckles were readily visible. Because of Bhim's reputation his opponents usually resorted to arming themselves with cutting implements, and with each engagement his skill at disarming and conquering was enhanced. Bena remembered when, on board the ship, a sailor cornered her mother in the corridor leading to the lavatory and when her father went to the rescue the sailor used a grappling hook on her father.

"Sorry, *beti*. I didn't mean to fraid you." The father hugged the daughter, reassuring her. He continued, "I will build a charpoy for your buddy so he wouldn't have to sleep on de ground an de sound shouldn't bother him anymore."

"Dat's a good idea, Pa," Bena looked around the room devoid of furniture. "I think I know what it look like." Bena started to make a shape in the air with her hand, stalling suddenly as if thinking. Then she brought both hands to her mouth, covering it, and cowering as a somewhat unsavoury image flashed through her mind. Bena recalled seeing a charpoy in the overseer's cottage into which he had deceived her, hoping to seduce her. Although she was not disagreeable to such a situation, she bolted. But she was able to see that a charpoy was a wooden frame on crossed legs covered lengthwise and crosswise with strips of cloth.

Somar relaxed. His father was a very resourceful human. With that most reassuring thought, Somar felt sleep creeping up upon him. But as Somar was drifting off, he noticed his sister was still agitated.

Bhim also noticed Bena's nervousness. "An wat wrong wid you?" The father asked the daughter.

"Same thing."

"De same sound?"

"No, is not de noise bothering me. I can't go to sleep."

"Why?"

"Because...it is..." Bena turned away from her father.

"Speak, child."

"I miss ma." Bena began to sob. "Ma use to tell we stories every night an now, an now…."

The mother was a much-travelled woman. She knew peoples, places and things. Therefore, stories were not difficult to come by. The mother was a dancer with magic in her routine. The woman was also comely and shapely. Heads turned, eyes transfixed on her whenever she was about. On board the ship, there was a sense of expectation and apprehension when she was present and those emotions too often resulted in unfettered molestation and fights. For a while the admiration went to her head and she lost reason, inviting danger. And there were many embarrassing episodes. It was only after she was knifed several times about the abdomen that she realised she was hurting her family, but the alienation had already seeped into their relationship. For many weeks, she grieved and grieved, wasting away before the eyes of her loved ones and admirers. The surgeon on board could not say what caused her death.

"Well," started Bhim, "I not much of a storyteller like our chief spokesman but I can tell you a story. Do not hope for much but I could tell a good story when I put my mind to it. I out-a practice but for now I will tell you a story I hear from my grandfather in India. The story goes like dis word for word:

"One day, long, long ago, a Guru named Paramanandayya was sitting in the shade enjoying a breather when his disciples came to say, 'teacher, your cows are coming home.' The teacher scowled at his students, explaining to them that it was inappropriate for them to say 'your cows' because a teacher and his students belong to one large family. It was more gracious to say 'our cows.' The students forthwith and diligently completed their lesson. The following day, the students saw the teacher's wife coming from the well with a pot of water under her arm. Anxiously and enthusiastically, the students ran to the teacher to report, 'our wife is coming.'

The giggling girl and her laughing brother sat up, wide awake, the sound of the drums far away in the distance. Bena and Somar wanted more. More stories. More of their father in this new role. Since coming to Demerara, the children only witnessed the serious side of their father. It appeared to them as if he had lost the fun side of him during the crossing of the Kala Pani. In gratification, the father responded with another tale.

"Once upon a time, there lived a man whose lips protruded so much and for so long that they became an awful sight. By the by, he came to be known as 'utatan' which means 'one who has conspicuous lips.' Before too long, even his wife was calling him by that repulsive name. One day, Utatan invited a friend to dinner but not before begging his wife not to call him by that cruel word. As the story goes, his wife was good to her promise until her husband in an extremely harsh and condescending voice ordered her to bring betel leaves and lime for the guest. Then everything

turned sour when she sarcastically responded, ‘yes my utata’ and bowed with a flourish.

“The husband was infuriated and hastily got rid of his disconcerted friend; then, he ranted and raved at his wife for her indiscretion. The upshot was that the husband killed the wife and buried her in the backyard. Shortly, a tree sprung up out from that very spot and would whisper ‘utata utata’ whenever the wind blew. This enraged the man all the more having thought that he had gotten rid of the problem by silencing his wife. Soon, he cut down the complete plant, chipped it into small pieces and boiled the pieces. But to his dismay, even the boiling water began to mock him by gurgling aloud: ‘tala tala utala, tala tala utala.’

“Utatan’s anger spewed over unto the dog on which he threw the boiling water. The pet accepted and blessed his master with a ‘val val utata, val, val, utata.’ The dog was ordered to be killed. The scavenger doing this service/disservice withheld the dog’s skin with which he made a drum. The drum when beaten would boom ‘dum dum utata, dum dum utata.’ Utatan himself was to destroy the drum, but as he burned the drum, this sound came forth, ‘buss buss utata, buss buss utata.’

The trio chorused, ‘buss buss utata.’

And the African drums and stamping tubes took up the tune, ‘dum dum utata. Dum dum utata.’

As they listened, Bhim said. “Some things you can’t get rid of. Some situations you can’t change—we are here now far away from India and we must adapt.”

That night, the sounds of the drums put them to sleep.

Their beds were rice bags covered over with flour bags.

The father used a smooth stone as a pillow.