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Gonsang: The Saga of a Trini-Chinaman, a novel

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Excerpt from Willi Chen's *Gonsang: The Saga of a Trini-Chinaman, A Novel*.
Forthcoming with Paragon Publishers: Trinidad and Tobago.

Five months after Martong's visit to Gonsang's house, Assing arrived in the land of his birth. Timorous and inquisitive as a complete stranger to the country, he remembered his father's shop where he had spent his youthful life. But in his memory he pictured his mother in the photograph in which he appeared as a child with a toy in his hands. Her impish face was prominent and her nose stood out firm. But it was her dress that kept his attention riveted to the large handsewn patterns across her chest, the oversized earrings, the silver bangles on her arms and her bright ruby coloured lips. Martong told his Chinese clerk that Assing was like his mother in so many ways. As a father, Martong admitted that his dead wife's mannerisms and her heart were crystallized in his son's character. She had broken barriers with her family, putting off a wedding in which she would have been hitched to a cane farmer's son who drove a jeep with an array of spotlights on its hood. Instead she had carried on an affair with the Chinese shopkeeper. But she died from complications in hospital after her son was born. People of the district blamed Martong and there was no end to the rumours, the attack on his person after Assing's mother passed on. Her parents further aggravated by the way the funeral was conducted and the remote plot in which she was buried. No one came to his defense when he was blamed for the woman's death. Except the compassionate schoolteacher who had accepted Assing in her school the year before he was sent away. It was this teacher who had encouraged Martong to send his son to China. One day Martong quietly journeyed to the city and prepared his papers. He left home early one morning and began the voyage to China. With him was his young son, who would be left there for ten years.

On one of his visits Martong brought green jade rings as gifts to Moylan and Moylin, and for Sonia, an emblem in the shape of butterflies held together with red and yellow nylon strings. Gonsang received a delicate elongated opium pipe. This brought unprecedented joy to the sick man, his eye enlarged to unexpected proportions, his hair assuming to look like a porcupine. He quickly took a dark substance from a tin that came with the pipe and lit his instrument. He puffed between words of thanks and kept nodding his approval. He kept expressing his delight to his old Chinaman friend to whom he owed much kindness. Sonia held out her hand to Martong and her daughters embraced him, as they inquired about the cost of the rings and the meaning and relevance of the green colour jade. The gem was so expensive. Jade were good luck stones but pearls were unpopular with the Hakka Chinese. Sonia asked about the colour red that appeared on the cords and strings and the small box containers. Gonsang said

that the red was a lucky colour for the Chinese and even their flags were almost totally red. The communist flag was all red with yellow stars.

On this day the conversation was centered on Assing. Gonsang turned to Martong for answers. Sonia listened. Moylan was curiously awakened. Moylin wanted to know what sort of person he was. Assing was born in Trinidad but spent most of his life in China. He spoke perfect Hakka, adopting the legacy of his forefathers. They learnt that he was schooled in Hong Kong where he took English classes. There, he met young students from inland China, from Macao, Canton and the Guangdong province. Assing said that even though he did not excel in his subjects, he accepted the customs and general way of life, which he found so severely different from the West.

Assing said he learnt to use an abacus; he became a thrifty, industrious individual and was taught to be obedient and to respect the older folks. He practiced greeting the old folks before whom he bowed. He avoided cold drinks, lived a frugal life and considered his cousins as brothers and sisters. Everyone was treated like family, a kinship extending to even strangers to the village whom he considered important. "Chee gargnin" used to mean togetherness, belonging to one and all.

On Sunday two weeks later, a welcoming party was planned with elaborate detail. Gonsang was able to walk slowly and move about with persistence; he would pause at times to catch his breath. Sonia and Sumintra prepared the meal but Gonsang chose the dishes of oyster sauce and vetsin. The ingredients consisted mainly of Chinese flavour: tofu, chowmin, hamchoy, salted Chinese fish, fried rice, steamed tripe, roast pork, boiled chicken to be served with olive oil, chive and chopped onion. Vegetables consisted of broccoli, bean sprouts, bitter melon and snow peas. After lunch, tinned lychees, salted prunes, hawflakes and preserved plums were served. Were they in China, a dish of stewed dog would have been a luxury. Gonsang had spoken about this, saying that the local roaming pot hounds were not suitable. The animals were tough, and as he remembered, a creolized specimen of uncookable meat. He admitted cooking dog meat. He suffered a rash over his stomach and attributed it to eating dog. Gonsang offered real generous portions of his Chinese concoctions that were brought to the table after his careful supervision. He sat propped on a stool, a crook stick at his side.

Assing's presence was an instant attraction to both Moylin and Moylan. He was charming and carried himself with confidence, speaking in a voice that caught their attention. His pronunciation at times was amusing but his vocabulary was extensive. Sonia imagined that he had his mother's face, a spade-like jaw, a well-formed nose, dark rounded eyes under the dark blotches of eyebrows. The pallor of his skin was a blend of Indian and Chinese. Moylan observed his pleasant candid behaviour. They listened attentively to his experiences in China.

Gonsang also told about his own exploits, his connections with some people he met in the neighbouring districts. He chortled, laughing at some of the odd incidents he experienced. Sonia listened. Sumintra shook her head. She acted as if she understood whenever Assing spoke in Chinese. She quietly exclaimed words of hindi, “array bharp ray.”

As he sat on his chair, shirtsleeve pulled up to his elbow, Assing engaged in conversation with Moylan and Moylin. He could not help commenting on the close likeness of the twin sisters. He was unable to tell the difference between them. They had the same physical features, of the same height and conducted themselves no different, one from the other. Their voices had the same pitch, their gestures were alike, and this caused Assing to ask them personal questions. About how they felt about each other, about their likes and dislikes, trying to find the little differences that separated them. He was puzzled, touched by their innocence and their closeness with each other. They in return want him to speak in Chinese, asking him the names of fruits, places, and phrases that prompted laughter. It was a happy afternoon and Gonsang asked Martong to return with Assing because he wanted to know much more about Fusang and especially about Meiling who had taken such care of his mother until she died.

Moylan and Moylin became good friends with Assing, as he visited regularly. Sonia wanted to know more about Assing’s mother, an Indian woman like herself. Assing remembered the long-gone days of his infancy, the early school days when barefooted, attired in button-less short pants, he attended classes that began in the school yard. He used to stand in line; he remembered the girl students at one side of the gathering saying the Morning Prayer while above their heads the branches of a long mango tree swayed in the morning breeze. And higher above where corbeaux were black circulating dots against the blue sky. The teacher, a bearded spectacled man holding a worn out hymnbook before them, was a commanding figure, whom Assing found to have a close resemblance to a drawing in a school book of a pirate holding a weapon. The teacher had a strong voice but was gentle, asking the class to sing with all their might because God was first in their lives. He remembered his aunt coming to meet him after class when the pupils would noisily rush outside with their book bags, the girls in their clean bright apparel, some with their hair braided with strings, plaited and oiled. He said his aunt was always cautious about walking on the road, telling him he must walk on the right side of the road and keep his eyes towards oncoming traffic, to avoid thistles at the roadside and the dead frogs found flattened on the roads. Aunt and nephew journeyed the miles, she holding his hand and carrying his book bag. She asked him about the sums he was given and if he had received ‘licks’ with the strap or the ruler the teacher had on his desk. What he remembered quite distinctly were the jokes the students used to give him about

his racial mix and wanted to know whether he had yet eaten dogs or cats. He admitted he was once served a strange looking dish of steamed meat his father had on the table. His father claimed it was wild meat, lappe or tattoo, asking him to use the oyster sauce and see yow to flavour the meat.

Two of his classmates reminded Assing about the police visiting his father's shop. They had come to question his father about two dogs their neighbour had found missing and which it was believed to have been slaughtered when Assing was at school. Armed with a search warrant the police had arrived; they searched the backyard for entrails, evidence of the killing of the animals, but found only duck feathers on galvanized sheets, left to dry in the sun. This account made Sonia a little uneasy when she herself remembered Gonsang bringing roasted pork each week he travelled to the city. He also brought paper bags of hot pows. But one day he heated up his wok for what he said was a special dish. She ate it and continued asking him to bring the special meat which she found was succulent and tasty. She later suspected that it could have been cat meat. But she found it a delicacy.

Sonia asked Assing to speak about his mother, whom Martong had said was a very charming person, a village beauty who was admired but who had refused getting married. She kept herself well dressed and wore all the latest fashions. Her seamstress was fully occupied with her clothes and her father, a contractor with the government road programme, was proud. He introduced her to the officials at his meetings and used her as a ploy to attract tenders for large scale work. She had won a community sponsored beauty contest, sang at shows and danced on stage. She was considered a local movie star, brave, alluring and unafraid. She played cricket, flew kites and at Christmas time, and she once got her eyelashes singed over a bamboo-busting spell in the backyard, where only boys had taken up the noisy yuletide celebration. She was described as tom-boy despite her feminine charm. Once she attempted to climb a greasy pole. She climbed the pole with difficulty but when she slid down, her long shapely legs became covered with grease. She cut her skirt and began cleaning herself on the ground to the delight of the staring eyes of the young men who clapped and praised her for her performance. The men attempted to help her remove the grease from her legs but she rejected their offers and jokingly raised her bare feet as if to kick them off. Later when the ham was brought down, after the greasy pole was laid on the ground, she gave the tar skinned ten pound ham to the village councillor. He made no public acceptance of the prize but he secretly asked his yard boy to collect it.

Sonia listened with special interest, wanted most of all to find out how Martong became involved with Assing's mother so intimately that she bore him a child. The account Assing gave Sonia in the presence of her daughters was not similar to Sonia's relationship with Gonsang. Both mothers of Indian origin were

young country girls with long oiled hair who got involved with Chinaman shopkeepers. They cultivated an obsession for the shy gentle “yello man.”

Assing’s mother was attracted to Martong. He attended the school concerts, the Ramlelas and pujas, and went on excursions to the beaches. He donated drinks and food stuff, which the villagers appreciated. Assing’s mother was impressed with Martong’s involvement. He proved to be a compassionate man who gave at will whenever the occasions arose. To Assing’s mother he offered gracious support. It was not surprising that she later became Martong’s unmarried wife.

Three months later, Mungal arrived at Gonsang’s shop to tell him that Mr. Ramkahlawan wanted to know whether his daughter was still interested in the job as an office clerk, because the influx of Chinese immigrants to Trinidad were new clients in the lawyer’s office. Mungal met Soogrim and Sookraj behind the shop counter and gave them the message. The shop air washed over their dull faces. Soogrim with one hand over his mouth asked him quietly if his boss wanted an office boy-helper who would be willing to work in his office and as a handy man also. He was prepared to wash his car and tend to his garden. Mungal said he would ask Mr. Ramkahlawan, but he wanted to know Moylan’s reply. When Moylan herself appeared she was surprised that the young, fair-skinned clerk was so fancily dressed, wearing a tie, a long sleeved white shirt and two-toned shoes. The gold watch on his hand glinted and his black vicuna trousers contrasted with his shirt. He looked very rich. Moylan looked at the briefcase clasped under his arm, and his clothes gave him a special appeal. She was moved by his appearance and she suspected Mungal had deliberately dressed for this gracious occasion. She hesitated a moment, asked him to wait after she had opened the door for him to be seated in the back room of the compound. She dressed quickly, dusted her face with the soft powder brush that left a tinge of glamour, touched her hair, squinted her face in the mirror and then came out to accompany Mungal to the lawyer’s office. Mungal’s concealed eyes behind his dark shades opened wide to secretly gaze at Moylan when she presented herself to be escorted.

Three months into the lawyer’s office and getting familiar with the clerical routine of legal work, Moylan typed, took notes, filed documents, deeds, contractual agreements and various correspondence assigned to company-business places. She felt privileged to the numerous civil matters that astounded her. She became engaged in the intricacies of the legal profession, especially with Mungal who chose to sit at her side to discuss matters involving intrigue and murder. Mungal himself would arrive earlier than usual wearing a different shirt each time. He brought Indian delicacies which he shared with Moylan. He had the key to the office and was trusted by Mr. Ramkahlawan. Their early morning arrival to the office became anticipated trysts.

After their meal they discussed court cases as an habitual exercise of revelation. They looked into the secret files, read the decisions of competent testaments, witness statements and personal accounts of those accused of crimes. Moylan became curious, introduced into this world of mystery, intrigue and adventure. She read the dusty files in her plodding research, fingering the inert pages with her index finger and thumb moistened on her lips with Mungal at her side, clean shaven, fair faced, and at her beck and call.

He offered her home-made sweets, and later, cool drinks specially prepared at home, brought to the office in a newly purchased thermos flask. One day, kindness, charm and devoted attention brought about an unpleasant incident. Moylan felt dizzy, she vomited and her skin was wet with fever. She had drunk a glass of peanut punch Mungal had given her.

What could have been a perilous event in the turn of affairs, brought them closer. Mungal embraced a weak Moylan, walked her to the wash room, wiped her dribbling mouth, patted her back and brought the phial of smelling salts out of the first aid box and bandaged her head. All evidence of the mishap, with pathetic remorse, had disappeared so that when Mr. Ramkahlawan arrived, both clerks were positioned at their respective desks. They offered a courteous happy greeting to their portly boss.

When Moylan arrived home earlier than usual accompanied by Mungal, she told her mother of the incident. Sonia made not comment but advised her to ask her father for his Chinese herbal medicine. Taken many times before, the colourless liquid had brought curative relief to them. But Sumintra in her blithe spirit of countryside wisdom thought otherwise. She felt Moylan's temples, and blurted out, "That is goal milk obeah, beti." Gonsang was enraged, for he himself was now stricken with strong fever. Was that attributed to obeah also?

Gonsang became a solitary, slant-eyed feeble presence behind the counter of his own shop, assisted by his two patient clerks. He made them arrange the selves in proper order and ensured that the parcels of shop goods were neatly stacked, the kerosene drums filled, the saltkine room cleaned. He sat on his chair when the pain in his abdomen became sharp. He held on to the door and Sonia had to hold on to his arms. She brought him to the drawing room and fanned him. He began to sweat.

But the pain that made him more depressed was the association of Moylan and the law clerk, Mungal. He spoke vexatiously about the matter, blamed his wife and quarrelled with Moylan who did nothing to discourage her twin sister from befriending the law clerk. Sonia tried to console him in his anger but failed. He threatened to go to the police and to put Moylan out of the house, lifting his flabby arm and pointing his fingers with stabbing emphasis. Sumintra stood in the background, lean and hungry, and tried to calm Sonia and Moylan but dared not

approach Gonsang who now became silent, staring into space, gazing at the night sky, standing like a statue in the yard. He was seized by this new family problem: the fear of his daughters getting married to local suitors. The spells of anger grew more pronounced and soon he kept smoking and refused food and drink. He smashed his teapot with unusual anger and the loud noise made Soogrim and Sookraj rush out of the shop. Sumintra cowered with a broom and said, “Kar karay lah array bharp.” Laitian jumped in excitement, the collar at its neck strained, and Sumintra had to pat the dog and hold on to the chain with her bare hands, as his master ranted and raved in his insane symphony of madness. Despite her father’s displeasure, Moylan and Mungal became friends. They were seen together on the streets, as the wind of gossip circled around them.

Gonsang’s vehemence continued to burn with fury. He had never displayed such aggressive bouts of anger. Sonia was stunned, and her daughters were even more startled, cowering and saying nothing to their enraged father. Once he pounded the kitchen table when he could not find his misplaced cooking ingredients and another time when his special shaving blade he brought from China was missing. Sonia’s feelings were ambivalent, knowing that her daughters had to go out to work. The shop was really not the rightful place for them.

Moylin, daubed with khus khus perfume and her hair teased into glamorous waves, went to work by taxi, five miles away. The experience was new and interesting. She learnt so much about household material. She became acquainted with the different grades of gravel and sand brought from the quarries; the use of steel and lumber and galvanized sheeting; the various types of paints and emulsions and varnish that were sold in the hardware. This was different in nature from her father’s shop. She enjoyed the office work and Mr. Ramjass was pleased with her punctuality and attendance to her duties. In two months she was given a five dollar raise. She began to dress more carefully, stylishly; she copied modern dress patterns taken out of magazines and kept her hair groomed and held together with bright coloured pins. Mr. Ramjass praised her for her work and was happy that she brought a certain measure of radiance to his office. She worked late on weekends, a dependable stalwart, made up payrolls and kept all the invoices and office accounts stapled and clamped then properly filed before leaving. Her office overlooked the hardware store. Large storerooms below were stocked with lumber, steel rods, galvanized pipes, wire mesh, BRC, and RHS material. Trucks reversed into the warehouse with building materials. Invoices were sent up to her for recording. In time the task became routine and she knew the names and prices of the goods and the names and addresses of contractors. Moylin became an important member of the staff. There were two other women, Mrs. Clothilda James and Ma Rajin, a senior accounts clerk who was the

matriarch, a watchful reserved person, who had been with the company for a long time. She was Mr. Ramjass's mother-in-law.

In time Moylin recognized the displeasure Ma Rajin expressed about Mrs. James' late coming and missing work, especially on Mondays. Mr. Ramjass was a very quiet man and did not want to confront his employee. He asked his mother-in-law to speak to her. Ma Rajin complained about Mrs. James for spending such a long time in the washroom powdering her face on afternoons. She would later emerge thirty minutes before closing time, the whole office saturated with strong perfumes. She would sit at her desk looking at the clock while reading a magazine. She would be on the phone. Ma Rajin would be furious but Mr. Ramjass would not take part in chiding Mrs. James. Her father was an old friend he said. From early school days, when they flew paper kites, played cricket, caught mangrove crabs and went to outings together; they were very close. Mrs. James's father had assisted Mr. Ramjass in his business in many ways. Apart from sitting together in school, they grew up together, worked for the same type-repair man, and a welding company. Mr. Ramjass was best man for Mr. James's wedding, where he appeared in his plantation boots and a parrot on his shoulders. He used to ride his lame donkey through the unmarked country tracks to hunting grounds shooting gulls, poor me-ones and iguanas. They dug out oysters from the sea coast swamp. Always in the company of Mr. Ramjass.

Mr. Munsoom's lessons, which Moylan and Moylin had received many years ago, became helpful in their education. Years of coaching with mathematics and English paid off. And the use of the typewriter was a necessary tool in addition to short hand courses, comprehension and office procedures. Gonsang was reluctant to allow his daughters out of his house. He used to wait for them on afternoons after the shop closed. He kept looking out for them at the gate. He made sure they changed into their home clothes, awed by the books they carried. They showered, and sat with their mother at dinner. Sonia had to convince her husband that private school lessons were important, and added that, should they both accompany him to Fushang, they had be well informed and educated. They might be asked to teach Chinese students to learn and speak English.

Gonsang agreed but he was always apprehensive of their meeting people he would not approve. And now stricken with cancer of the colon he became distressed, even though he had part of the organ removed, not knowing what his future would be.

At times, seemingly in good health, he would call Martong over, especially on Thursdays. These visits gave him a certain degree of comfort and happiness, short lived as they might be. He remained unusually silent until one morning, Sonia found him on the floor like a fallen log, his fists clenched. Her instincts prompted her to rush him to the hospital, but Sumintra was against this

move and recommended that they go to Matoomba, the obeah man. He lived in the remote forest past Moruga, which was unreachable by roads, battered by the raging winds and drenched by incessant rain.

They waited until the shop was closed and hired a taxi to take them to the coastal village of Bunsaree where they boarded a pirogue. They made Gonsang lie down on jelly fish and dead herring on the fishing net in the center of the open boat. Sonia and Moylin were accompanied by Soogrim who held on to his master's shoulders. He pulled the barefooted man across the narrow seats. Moylin held on to her father's slippers. As Sonia kept her husband's head in this open exposure of scenic repose on her lap, she was tormented. The boat rocked, the oar man heaved at the steady oars and the craft headed towards open sea. The stars blinked above their heads with deliberate conviction. A dull yellow moon witnessed their ordeal, a distant sign to their outing, the secret voyage of a sick Chinaman, heading towards the high unreachable cliffs in search of Matoomba, obeahman of Moruga.

The swarthy oarsman pulled on the oars, a strong, strapping man who fished and sold his catch on shore to local buyers. They relied on this man, a village stalwart-seaman whose strength was known. It was he who lifted Gonsang bodily across his shoulders and toted him to a small shed. Now to continue their journey to the forest, the oarsman and Soogrim strapped Gonsang on planks held together with vines. They dragged the sick man, now smelling of fish, along the dry-leaf dirt trail until they arrived at a plantain patch, passing tall palmiste palms and rouseau patches that overcrowded the narrow path. Sonia and Moylin clung to each other as the thick forest gloom swallowed them, their flambeau lights glowing in the darkness, the screeching sounds of unseen insects and crawling animals among dried leaves littering the forest floor. The red specks of light in the darkness were eyes of unseen birds and tree rodents and snakes coiled on pine covered branches. Macajuels and poisonous mapepires, slithering denizens of the dark jungle.

After passing a wide stretch of grassland the party arrived at a grove of trees, their branches low and mossy, impenetrable in the gloom. The grotesque hut made out of mud paste and gri-gri leaves was a structure of outlandish proportions. Overhanging boughs formed a nightmarish canopy that kept away the moonlight slathering its buttery paste of light on the open meadows. To Gonsang's repeated groans, as he clung on the oarman's shoulder, the hefty strong man muttered, "Ok. We reach. You go be good now."

A ringing bell made the group of people stop on their tracks. A hoary unseen mule brayed in the shadows. A bone-grey figure appeared, coming out of the open doorway of the grass hut. A gown out of dried grass draped his tall figure. On his head was a crown of vines and weeds out of which dried stalks,

thorns in a network of thistles and bright coloured flowers gave the mass a bizarre supernatural look. The man held in his hands a jug and a paddle-like object. Around his waist a heavy chain kept his long pendulous gown clasped to his gaunt frame. It swung as he walked towards the small crowd of people, a boy, two women and a frail Chinaman atop a black robust man. This was an uncommon sight to the obeah man, to the high-woods-spirited priest, consort of the dead, nomadic sleepwalker who was sought after for his supernatural skills. He was now visited by a crew seeking remedial services to revive a frail, fallen man with continuous pain that had shattered his will to live. The forest creature stood before them like an apparition, ghost-like, musty in his morbid appearance. Sonia imagined steam rising out of him as if he had emerged from some secret cauldron. He extended his hand and led them into the dismal chambers of his hut. Surprisingly the space was large, extending to walls covered with bones and skeletal remains of animals. This was Matoomba's home.

In a small dim-lit chamber with walls out of bamboo and dried upright stalks of mangrove, Gonsang was placed on a slab of wood supported by empty oil drums. Tall candles were lit on mounds of clay and Matoomba gently warned the oarsman and the others to stand away from the patient. He opened a bottle of strong lime-scented liquid and sprayed the room. Then he sprinkled a tin of blue powder around Gonsang, in his poui stoned idiocy rubbing his cold forehead and cheeks. Gonsang coughed and attempted to raise his head. But the obeah man pushed him flat and placed a potted plant on his chest. It contained earth that reeked of pig droppings combined with dried pounded donkey faeces; the lumpy mixture brought a challenging stench to the smoking herbs Matoomba had lighted. The drifting smoke clouded the room, making the visitors cough. Sonia attempted to walk out but the only door was blocked with a bar of teak wood. Matoomba raised both hands over the sick Chinaman and wailed; his voice was heavy and somber, as he recited his verses of strange-sounding warbling, his lips making insensate noises, flapping loudly over the sick Chinaman, whose original yellow coloured face was long stamped out by Matoomba's blue suspicious powder.

Matoomba fastened both big toes of his patient. He brought the man's frail arms over his body and tied his two thumbs. He opened his shirtfront and poured a mixture of herbal liquid made from pounded jigger bush, spice, marijuana leaves and stinging nettle. Matoomba in his inexplicable magnetism later told Sonia that the other ingredients were secret and that they came from other West Indian Islands and far away Africa. As he poured the thick liquid over Gonsang's chest, he spoke in a strange tongue, his eyes became reddened, and a faint whisp of smoke came out from his nostrils and ears. Sonia felt the earth shake and Moylan held on to his mother. She trembled and both mother and daughter kept looking at their loved one, now inert, stretched out before them a slab of yellow

ivory in the low ceiling room of the obeah man's house, its lilac darkness clouded with dark mystery.

"This man have trouble and he not going to have a easy life. He thinking big things and he badly want something. He might get it but not sure what could happen afterwards. What I do here go help him and you bring him just in time."

He spoke in a steady unearthly voice and tried to calm those standing around him. A cough escaped Gonsang's lips. He began to shake his arms and attempted to raise himself. Rising from the dead.

"Yuh see my work showing up already, he go get up."

"Doh let him walk about. He have to stay in bed for twenty days and he mustn't eat salty food."

"He like Chinese salt fish, he does prepare it he self," Sonia told the obeah man.

"No! Forget that. I giving you a bottle ah honey and a bottle ah manicou tail syrup. I make it with mami sepote skin and tattoo tripe. One spoon in the morning, noon and night. And no bathing for thirty days, no sunlight too. Until he get better he could sleep under tarpaulin."

The trip back home was encouraging because Gonsang seemed conscious of his whereabouts and he began to whisper and talk.

"You want snake bit me?" Gonsang whispered.

"Pa, is obeah, Creole obeah on a Chinee, and it look like it working."

Sonia clasped her husband's head close to her chest and could not understand what he was saying; Gonsang was humming a Chinese folk song which made them laugh. Sonia disagreed with others putting blame on the obeah man. The whole meaning was that he meant well she said. Whatever unpopular and secret methods he had devised in the depth of the high woods was his choice of means. Her mother seemed to think that obeah men in their sinister planning could only bring bad things upon people.

"Yea, but ma, they have good people too. You doh like what he using, how he doing he own thing. Whatever, he wanted Gonsang to get better. And he ent charge us."

"He must have reason to do that," Sumintra said.

"Well, I know Orisha people doing plenty good in the street corners. Ringing they bell and shaking they waist. But all to wake up everybody."

"Orisha?"

"Yes – they self."

"Some people want to go inside a church full a decoration and plenty glass window. But Orisha is God's world – in the street, in the yard and in the forest where all the natural things like trees and animals, the man upstairs make for us."

“And is the fuss time, Gonsang happy. He singing a Chinee song. So what you think,” Sonia added. “And ma, I too old now but I think I shoulda call them to help me – to see if I coulda get ah son. Ah mistake.”

“The doctors say after them twins, thing was bad for you,” Sumintra added.

“Doh mind that, Orisha, Obeah or black magic, anything could happen in this world.”

It was still a strange-happy experience when the party arrived home past midnight. The journey through the forest was an unforgettable adventure. The smooth-tyred taxi bumped its way over rocks and broken branches along the dirt road, its hanging, broken muffler dispensing blue smoke on the trail. The darkness was like an impenetrable black cloud between tall teak trees. The mysterious jungle animal noises had made their blood crawl. But they were relieved because of Gonsang’s Chinese musical ditties and they became involved in a new mood of joy until they arrived home. Their shop front was crowded with people.

The three uniformed policemen on the road, one with a flash light in his hand, the others only their teeth discernible in the darkness trying to push the people away from the premises, showed that something was wrong. Sonia came out of the car and approached the constable who told her that someone had broken into the building and why was she not at home. A huge quantity of liquor was stolen. A pick up van was used. There was evidence of tyre marks and wet clay on the road. When Moylan and Soogrim lifted Gonsang, he seemed confused. He stood leaning on his daughter, perplexed, with his right arm around her shoulder. Soogrim held on to his master’s waist. Gonsang turned towards the car and was lifted to the back seat where he collapsed. Sonia came and spoke to him but he was just silent and not moving. With the help of two bystanders, they were able to take the sick man in to the shop, like a bag of flour, to his room. The officers asked them to stay inside the living quarters and not to touch any thing in the shop. The police officers told them that other police were coming in the morning to carry on their investigation.

Sonia hardly slept, but sat nodding in her chair. Moylan and Moylin were next to their father at his bed side.

“They thief all the cases ah rum and the tins ah money in the store room. All the money gone,” Moylin said in a soft sad voice.

Sonia looked at Gonsang and said, “He go dead when he find out that all the savings gone. That was to take all you to China. All gone, child.”

“I doh know what he go do,” Moylan added.

“They break up the store room door and root out the locks.”

“They forget the iron bar and pig foot.”

“How much?”

“I hear your father say is about five thousand dollars.”

“That go kill him for sure.”

“Is that obeah man.”

“He bring we this bad luck.”

“I can’t say.”

“No we can’t say that yet.”

“All the corn beef and even them pack ah pot scrub and broom they take, too.”

“They damn wicked.”

“Six demi johns puncheon and all the Barbados Mount Gay Eclipse and Sugar Cane Brandy, Gilbey wine. They leave back all the cheap cherry brandy.”

“Smart. The money is the thing. Forget the shop goods.”

Police surveying the damages and losses of the burglary at Gonsang’s shop said that the amount of goods escalated as the finger print experts and senior members of the police detective department became more involved. But the most important discovery was a revolver and a knife they found in a bag in the grassy patch of an abandoned lot next to the shop. And it was suspected that the bag with two colour markings belonged to none other than Maddoo, the shop clerk. When the police visited Maddoo’s home, a decrepit box board and carat building in Somari Trace, his mother said he was not at home. He had gone to Cedros.

The burglary at Gonsang’s shop was more serious than imagined. The police detective said it was a professional job. The thieves had acted with swiftness, with expert knowledge of committing the crime. Apart from the cases of expensive brands of rum and cigarettes carted away and bottles of ladies’ perfumes, they took jewelry and hams, coils of rope and two drums of codfish.

It was coincidental that afternoon that Sumintra had gone home and Moylin had returned home exhausted from work. She went straight to bed without eating. In one hour the shop was emptied of its valuable contents. The burglary was well-timed and planned; Moylin heard nothing. And it was not really a break-in. It had to be someone who slipped into the shop near closing time and concealed himself under the private room table. Or, standing behind the door near the empty cartons of beer bottles. A man could hide himself after the shop closed. He would then open the door for the others to enter and later, for the one ton Ford pick-up to reverse under the shop’s awning, the blue plastic tarpaulin open at the hood over the coil of rope. No shop breaking implements were necessary. The crowbar, pig foot, lchette and garden fork were left in the yard behind a clump of moko trees inside the decrepit tray of an old truck. All this evidence came out during the investigation. The prodding prowess of detective Simpson, a semi retired detective helping in the investigation, further established by an envelope with cash Sonia handed him. This shop-raiding event became an unforgettable

episode in Somari Trace. Many wanted to know whether the culprits would be found.

The raid on the shop made Gonsang behave in a strange manner. He stood on his springless bed nearing midnight to raise both hands and surprised Sonia lying sound asleep. He sang a Chinese folk song which he later said praised the charm of a country girl who planted vegetables in the wetlands of Fushang, China. This song became a memorable ditty for Gonsang. Sonia was perplexed at her husband's sudden change in behaviour. She wondered whether it was either Matoomba's obeah or the burglary now having its effect on him. She did not pause for an explanation but rose up quickly and put on the light. Gonsang jumped off the bed and stood laughing, his face contorted with unexplained glee; his eyes blinked, his arms a churning windmill. The tapping sounds were from his bare feet on the floor boards, as he jived and twisted. Sonia, at first pleasantly surprised at his joyful mood, soon realized that something was wrong. She tried to hold him but the wild, circulatory movements of his arms prevented her from coming near him. He stared into her face and laughed loudly between stanzas of his foreign Chinese song. She was baffled.

Moylin and Moylan came in their nightgowns, knocked on the door and witnessed the commotion. Both daughters stood stunned, alarmed at their father's strange behaviour. They entered the room, holding on to each other and called out to their father who ignored their presence and continued his strange frolic.

"Pa what happen now?" Moylin responded. "That is Chinee dance, Pa ah hope you ent gone mad."

Sonia could only stand startled, her daughters both terrified and amused by their father's outlandish antics. Moylan thought that her father was going off his head, affected by the loss of his money. Soogrim and Sookraj stood in the drawing room peeping in but were asked to stay away. And then Gonsang stopped his wild movements and sat on the floor. With both hands pressed to his face, he was weeping. In a strange sudden twist of conduct, Gonsang started crying and mother and daughters came up and stood over him, confused by his bewildering outburst of this bizarre performance.

It was Martong's intervention that raised hope for the fallen family. He organized repairs, ordered a cartload of lumber and plyboard and called in his carpenters, replenished stocks and assured the customers all would be well. A skinny woman in an orhini standing behind the counter commented, "See how dem Chinee does move."

"Yes, they does help one another."

"You think they easy?"

"We have to learn from them."

"That is teaching from the East."

“They should jail them criminals.”

“I hear is Maddoo, that same man who give he mother so much trouble. He used to work for the Chinee. Hear he even borrow money from Sang, wok and come back to rob the damn man.”

“That crazy Maddoo really mad.”

Other early customers were speaking among themselves as the groceries from the truck were offloaded on the shop counter. Martong had come with the goods truck. He instructed the shop clerks to open the cartons and pack the shelves; the bottles of rum, the tar-skinned picnic hams, numerous tins of meats and soups, the other various brands of food stuff, all were delivered with promptness. Sonia was so pleased that she asked her mother to bring the tea kettle to the counter. She served steamed bakes and urged Martong to sit, thanking him for his kindness. He then asked to visit Gonsang in his room and returned to ask Sonia to allow her husband to rest since the effect of this unfortunate incident was more difficult to endure than his sickness.

Two days later, Martong returned with Assing. The two carpenters accompanied them and began to repair the broken doors and floor boards that were ripped open when the burglars were in search of the money. Someone said a substance was used to prevent the noises being heard. And it could have been obeah, incense or a liquid sprayed on the shop premises. Matoomba's name was called. Sonia expressed surprise, Moylan disgust, and Moylin vowed revenge.