

# THE EAST INDIAN

‘Brilliant, highly  
imaginative, and  
vivid ... a stellar  
achievement.’

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author of  
*This House is  
Not for Sale*

**Brinda  
Charry**

SCRIBE



# ONE



The earliest memories I have of my birthplace feature salt—acres of it in translucent flats that glistened in the sun and gleamed in the moonlight, silver mountains of it harvested and brought to the warehouses, and smaller mounds piled in bullock-drawn carts. The only whiter thing I was to see in my life was snow. Even the air was saturated with salt, and the townspeople sweated saltier than any other people in the world.

The journey that led me to the *God's Gift* commenced in that salty place, the small port of Armagon in East India, where I was born to my mother, a Tamil woman who had migrated from further south and who was reputed among the townspeople for her beauty. My father could have been one of the many men who worked in the salt pans in the sizzling heat, or he could have been a local merchant, or he could have been a landlord, or a Brahmin priest. In fact, he could have been anyone at all, although my mother insisted that he was a well-known medicine man and astrologer from another town who had lost his heart to my mother till his wife firmly reclaimed it. I got accustomed to the many men who came to see my mother in the evenings after the lamps were lit and after she adorned her hair with jasmine and patted scented waters on her skin. Every man in the town wanted to claim that he had been with her. She was lovely even in the harsh white light of day, and in the softness of twilight she was transformed into a goddess. We lived with an older woman who I called my grandmother, though she might or not have been related to us. A man I knew as my uncle lounged on the veranda, a wooden club always by his side.

In truth, you could say that my story was set into motion well before my birth, when the English East India Company traders came, dreaming of ventures bigger than anything the world had yet seen. Armagon is on what the white men called the Coromandel, the long, low, scrubby coastline punctuated by the deltas of many broad rivers and the rich alluvial soils they leave behind. For as long as I could remember, there had been light-complexioned foreigners living in the factory they had constructed on the seashore.

“Who are they, Amma?” I asked.

“Just Company men,” she said, distracted.

“Why are they pale like that?”

“For the same reason you are dark—the gods decided.”

Unlike some other people, my mother kept track of the passage of days and years, perhaps because she knew that her days in her profession were numbered. That was why she could tell me that it was about five years after I was born that the Englishmen had first come and asked our local chieftain for land to erect a factory. They could transform our sleepy, salty town into a thriving trading post, they had promised—men and money would flow in from all corners of the world. Taking off their hats, in a gesture our chieftain had come to recognize as respectful, they had reminded him how prosperous Pulicat, just a two-day journey south of us, was under the Dutch traders who had arrived there decades ago. They would make sure our town would benefit from the trade, there would be wealth as never before . . .

However, the chieftain had heard enough stories about how the Dutch had filled their ships with local young men and taken them across the ocean to the Spice Islands. Their families had waited for their return till they gave up waiting. The rumor was that they had become slaves at plantations of clove and cinnamon. When the raja had questioned the English about that, they said no, the Dutch were the Dutch, but they were the English, Englishmen of the *English* East India Company—they would do nothing like that. And they had given their word on that and many more things.

Eventually, the Englishmen were granted land enough to erect their factory and changed the name of our town to Armagon in honor of the local landlord who had advocated with the raja on their behalf. He was called *Aru-mugam*—the “six-faced one,” named for the god Murugan—but the white men got it slightly wrong, and it became *Armagon*. Armagon, the city by the sea, the city of salt, the city with the Company fort.

The factory was a lonely place and we, the people of the town, had very little to do with it. Its stone walls were two stories high and its wooden gates were soon eaten away by the salt-laden winds that blew in from the sea. None of the Company men stayed very long, and as I grew into boyhood, I noticed new faces reddened by the sun replacing the previous ones every now and again. Trade was dull and the riches we had been promised by the Englishmen never came to transform Armagon. The winds that arrived late in the year made it the devil of a harbor, they complained, impossible to dock in. And they cursed their bad fortune in Armagon, in the Coromandel, in East India.

As I think about it all these years later from the other side of the round earth, with New World sky above my head and New World dust under my feet, Armagon is a place visited in a dream, one remembered in fragments: the scented jasmine clambering up the walls of our small house; the salt beds glimmering in the light of the moon; the surf rolling onto the sandy shores; the weeds that grew around the walls of the East India Company factory bursting into bloom after the rains; the river flowing at the bottom of the hill on which the factory was built; and, at night, the white stars wheeling silently over all of it—the factory, the salt, the sea—surely still there, making giant arcs against the inky sky.

Perhaps, in a few years and if my mother had lived longer, I would have learned to blush at being the son of a courtesan. But at that time all seemed well. My mother earned enough to keep us in comfort, she was of lower caste perhaps, but not of the lowest; she was deemed very touchable even by the highest caste men, her presence did not pollute. With her by my side and my paternity obscure, I was one of those few children who floated in the unnamed space between castes.

I was adored by my only parent, who insisted that with my large, watchful eyes and thick, wavy locks of hair, I was the loveliest child in Armagon. Of course, she would say that, but others said it too, showering me with compliments, comparing my looks with this deity's and that one's. Their admiration first pleased me and then made me embarrassed, because were boys not supposed to be strong rather than lovely?

One distinct memory lingers: a snake, gray-gold in hue, slithered into the house on a warm afternoon and was scooped up on the end of a stick and

carried out by my uncle with a stern warning from my grandmother not to kill it. Snakes were wise sages in their previous lives, she said.

“And what were the wise sages in *their* previous lives?” I asked.

She did not know. All she knew was birth followed death, one life followed another, and every birth was not only a continuation of the previous, but also an awakening, a renewal.

“You must have been a prince in your previous life, my darling,” Amma crooned, taking me in her arms.

“And what were you, Amma?”

“I do not know, but I would like to be a bird in the next one—a forest-dwelling one, colorful, swift-winged.”

My grandmother snorted from her corner. *Nonsense—a bird, indeed.*

But the old lady was not always so cynical. I could practically see her heart soar when she told me the ancient legends of the gods—the dozens of them who populated our town, and the country beyond, slipping unannounced in and out of mortal lives, some colossal, some diminutive, some with the countenances of men and women, some animal-featured, most of them multilimbed, all beautiful and terrible and grand—the red-skinned, warlike Murugan, whom she particularly revered, the lion-faced Narasimha, the noble Rama, the mischievous Krishna, the fiery Siva, and the even fiercer Yellamma, goddess of smallpox and sacrifice. My grandmother filled my head with their stories—their epic adventures, their acts of honor and deceit, their amorous exploits, their divinity, their humanity. I devoured her tales with greedy ear, as did Amma and even my uncle. They were the most enduring of the old lady’s gifts to me, and in later years, in America, even when I had largely discarded them, I was to be visited every now and then by those deities of my early days.

One evening, shortly after the lamp was lit, my uncle brought home a white man. As soon as the stranger stepped in, my amma put on the expression that I had learnt was reserved for her patrons, demure, yet bold and flirtatious, her eyes making promises she would not put into words. Sir Francis Day was a slender young man, probably in his twenties. His eyes were blue as the seas he had sailed across, his mouth was small and thin-lipped, his jaw sharp and long. He wore the tight breeches all Company men wore, a coat, a ruffled blouse, and a feathered hat that I coveted right away. His fair, fine hair was slightly limp in the heat and tied back with a ribbon. My uncle brought him to the chamber where my mother sat, as he did all visitors; my

grandmother came in from the back room to scrutinize him, as was her habit with all men. I announced my name to him, provoking a tight smile. He probably had not expected to meet a child in this house. My mother was all large, lovely eyes, scented shoulders, and lustrous locks. She knew all about the fleeting nature of men's desire and how she must snare it while it lasted, and reel it to land.

And then I was ushered away into the backyard, as I always was when my mother had her patrons visiting, and the rest of the evening was no different than one of the many evenings of my childhood—a touch of lamplight, my grandmother's tuneless crooning, and, beyond our walls, the sound of the sea. Master Day might have come several times before, and certainly came many times after, but it is that day that remains in my memories—the white man hesitating momentarily at our threshold, my mother, welcoming and curious.

Master Day, who we learnt was factor of the Company's fort in Masulipatnam, a little further north on the coast, seemed to admire my amma. There was nothing new in that; after all she *was* famed for her beauty. And she did have regular customers who gifted her with jewelry and other fine things. The only difference was that Master Day was her only English patron. Others might have looked down on her for consorting with a white stranger—I do not know. White men were considered unclean meat eaters by the higher-caste people in Armagon, and they would not have anything to do with them. But perhaps my mother was not subject to the same expectations. I could not tell then and certainly cannot now, after all these years. A gambler and adventurer with a flashy smile and sudden shouts of laughter, Master Day was also a most sensible, hard-nosed trader who pored over his books filled with figures in black ink. When he was in Armagon, he would spend his days at the lonely factory supervising the loading and unloading of goods to and from the Company's ships. In the evenings he would usually come back to us, unless business kept him away.

"White man here," my uncle would announce, although he knew our visitor's name, and although Master Day was less white than exceeding red in the heat, which bothered him terribly. I do not know what my mother felt about her Englishman, but she always welcomed him graciously and smiled as he took her hand in his to kiss, a gesture my grandmother thought was not becoming because it was performed in public.

I now wonder what they spoke about to each other and in what language

they communicated. Those details evade me. But I do know that it was from Master Day that I learned English. I had a shrewd wit and a good ear, he said, and very soon I could patter away in his tongue to the wonder of the townspeople. He even wrote down the English alphabet for me and gave me printed books which I would study in the lamplight to my grandmother's exasperation. She said I would go blind if I read in the dark, that learning the white man's tongue served no earthly purpose. Soon my mother, who, I suppose, was beginning to tire of her trade, stopped accepting other visitors; we furnished our house with finer things; and my uncle spent his days smoking hemp or napping on the front porch, his wooden club lying half-forgotten by his side.

Master Day's main business was in Masulipatnam and he would be absent for weeks. By the time I was approaching my eleventh birthday, my mother allowed me to sail in his vessel to his factory up north or on his other voyages up and down the Coromandel. She thought it would allay my growing restlessness at home, a trait she did not know how to deal with. Often Master Day's superior, one Master Andrew Cogan, another Company factor, came with us. I served Master Day and Master Cogan their drinks, fetched them their meals, and cleaned their shoes. We docked at small shallow ports, some of them filled with bustling crowds and marketplaces, others deserted except for the sea lapping against the shore and a few stray jackals that scampered into the scrub at our approach. Master Day and Master Cogan desired to found a new factory, the biggest on the Coromandel, unrivaled in the whole of the East Indies, to and from which ships would sail, carrying commodities between England and the Indies, bringing the Company riches beyond its grandest dreams. To this end, the two Englishmen tirelessly explored the coast. I enjoyed these brief voyages, learning to speak their tongue like they did and learning also to eat their foods, including certain forbidden ones my mother never found out about.

Around that time, my grandmother died of a brief, fierce illness. Master Day had by then determined that Armagon had sadly proved a complete failure, so he convinced my mother, who was grieving the loss of her older companion, that she had little to keep her in the town and promised to settle her in a fine dwelling further south in a place he planned to visit more frequently in the course of his trade.

So, my mother, my uncle, and I packed our possessions and bade farewell to Armagon and that forlorn fort looking over the foamy white Bay of

Bengal, the second factory set up by the English East India Company on the southern Coromandel, the place that the Company men now said was best forgotten, better lost than found. We uneventfully sailed some fifteen sea leagues south and came to the house Master Day had found for us near the Portuguese port settlement of São Tomé. It was concealed by dense shrubbery and fruit trees near a town called Mylapore—the Place of Peacocks. Through the day and sometimes at night the air was punctured by the big birds' harsh, penetrating cries.

Once upon a time, there was an apostle of Christ who struggled between doubt and belief.

It was Master Day who recounted his tale to me. Thomas, *Doubting Thomas*, had insisted on seeing the resurrected Christ's wounds and on handling the soft dampness of torn skin and flesh before he accepted that the Master had indeed returned from the dead.

*Except I shall see on his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe*, he had declared stubbornly. But after Thomas had examined Christ's body for himself, as a physician does a patient, clinically rather than reverentially, feeling the spongy wounds, some yet leaking blood, others starting to crust over with growth, after he had finished, he had marveled. *My Lord and my God . . .* he had declared in a simple affirmation of faith. *My God and my Lord*.

Master Day told me this when I questioned him about the gods worshipped by the Portuguese in their temple—the one not far from our new home. They had called their settlement São Tomé after the doubting saint, and it was the base from which they explored the Coromandel looking for the riches that trade would bring.

My mother was content, I believe, in the year or thereabouts we spent near São Tomé, the year that turned out to be her very last. Master Day sailed north to Armagon and further up the coast, to solicit the paramount ruler of the kingdom, a sultan, for trading permissions. We waited for him to return to us, watching the tides rise and fall, the crabs scuttle on the sandy shores, the fishermen set out on their long, narrow catamarans, singing plaintive airs.

I wished to go with Master Day, but he never took me on these longer journeys. However, I was allowed to accompany him to the Portuguese temple, which he instructed me to call a church—an imposing white structure

standing tall in the burning sun. Like Master Day, Saint Thomas, I learnt, was destined to be a wanderer. He had been reluctant at first, this time caught between belief and doubt in his own ability to confront the unknown. But he could not ignore the insistent voice that whispered to him night after night: *Fear not, Thomas . . . Go away to India and proclaim the Word, for my grace shall be with you.*

Hence, Doubting Thomas had come to East India to tell people about his One God. He had eventually perished on a hillock some leagues from São Tomé, pierced in his side with lances by heathens (which was another word for people like me). I heard that the soil of the hillock was still red with the apostle's spilt blood. His body was moved to the seashore and interred. Centuries later, the Portuguese traders had built the church over his tomb, which was revered by them, as well as by some of the Muslims who lived in Mylapore.

Master Day was not a man given to enmity, but he disliked the Portuguese. He told my mother and me that they were godless idol worshippers, which bewildered me, because I thought that they worshipped the same gods as the English. But no, Master Day firmly insisted, the Portuguese were papists, thugs, and boors to boot. I suspect the main reason behind Master Day's aversion was the success of the Portuguese merchants, who had grown rich on the trade in fine chintzes, pepper, and indigo, who had managed to arrive at profitable agreements with the local chieftains, who built large houses with balconies overhung with whispering trees, who were brash and arrogant, and who scorned the plodding English. Sometimes he and I would walk through the fortified Portuguese settlement together—tall white man, perspiring in his finery, and young Tamil boy, wearing little more than a piece of plain cloth wrapped around his waist and a gold stud adorning each earlobe. I would hold up a palm leaf umbrella to shelter Master Day from the sun. A few of my people strolled about the streets, but most of the people I saw were Portuguese. I remember passing men conversing outside a drinking house.

"What are they saying?" I whispered to Master Day.

He shrugged, and I realized for the first time that all white men do not speak the same tongue. We visited Dom Castalino, whom Master Day knew fairly well because he had an English mother and had dwelt in England for some years. A young woman came out and served the two men wine and gave me a drink made of mango pulp.

"Yours?" the merchant asked, raising an eyebrow and gesturing towards me.

“No, sir,” Master Day said stiffly.

“The local ladies are sooty of hue but yet fiery hot, my friend, like the chili and pepper they eat with their victuals . . .” Dom Castalino said, smirking and winking meaningfully, and although I was but a boy, I knew exactly what he was talking about. “I would not hold it against you if he were yours, my dear sir,” the Portuguese gentleman added.

Master Day changed the subject. He was not of the mood to discuss romances with Tamil ladies.

“One day the English Company too would like to establish a trading factory hereabouts . . .” he said. “I must say this is as incommodious a place as any on this dratted coast, but better than some others. Andrew Cogan and I have been working on getting the necessary permissions.”

I was surprised he was confiding in Dom Castalino, but perhaps he had his reasons. The gentleman smiled and listened till the afternoon heat and the wine made him lethargic, at which point Master Day signaled that we should leave. As we walked out of the dwelling I glanced up and saw the maiden who had served us drinks draped over the balcony. I realized she was neither white nor brown-skinned but both. I could not tell if she was Dom Castalino’s lover or his daughter.

São Tomé bustled with rambunctious life. The narrow streets were filled with Portuguese gentlemen dressed very elegantly, their mustaches and beards combed, and their hair in dark brown curls. A quarrel erupted outside a wine shop. *Corno*, one man cried out to the other. *Filho da mãe*, spat another—and neither Master Day nor I had any idea what they were saying. A group of women with lips and cheeks stained red, clad in European dresses and bonnets, tumbled noisily out of a house. I noticed that some of them were neither black nor white, just like the damsel in Dom Castalino’s house. They turned the corner, shrieking with laughter.

I was ready to return home to my mother, but Master Day had one more stop to make. Once we got past the cool, dark entryway of the house, we saw an old Portuguese dame dressed all in black, sitting at a table with a small heap of delicate bones by her side. A young man lounging on a chair jumped up when we entered.

“Dona Mascarenhas, the famed fortune-teller, at your service,” he said with great aplomb, bowing low and speaking English in the manner that Portuguese men who knew the tongue did.

“Pleased to meet you, Dona. I am Francis Day, English East India Company factor,” Master Day replied drily, as if he were there against his will. We had fortunes told by Dona Mascarenhas that day. She did not read the bones, as I’d hoped she would, instead she took Master Day’s hand in her own, like any palmist at the marketplace would. Her many rings gleamed in the light of the candle, and I noticed scars on her fingers, as if reading other men’s fates had marked her own. She smoothed Master Day’s red palm as if it were a piece of fabric, and began muttering in Portuguese. The man by her side translated:

“The Dona says you will find a city that has long been waiting to be found.”

“What does that signify?” Master Day asked, feigning disinterest. The man asked the dona, who shrugged.

“It will be on a strip of land; it will grow to be the largest one in the Comorandel, and it will be filled with merchant-kings.”

Master Day looked doubtful at that and I knew he was regretfully thinking about the little English factory at Armagon, so desolate and so pointless.

She might have spoken to him further—I cannot remember now. But she picked up my hand eventually.

“And you, little heathen boy,” the man said, translating for the Dona. “You will cross all the seas in the world and go to the place where the sun sets.”

I glanced at Master Day. His face was impassive.

“I do not wish to go anywhere,” I said sullenly. “I do not wish to leave my mother.”

The man laughed at that. “Foolish child—all boys must fledge and leave their nests,” he said.

The Dona continued as if she had not been interrupted: “You will go. But mind you—” she said. “All the roads you travel will eventually bring you home.”

She might have divined further, but Master Day stood up. He left her a coin, bowed, and we went to look out into the bright streets and towards a small, clear spring that gushed from the earth near the church.

“The bones of the saint are said to be buried just here,” Master Day told me. “That is why the water is of the purest.”

I wondered aloud how the saint’s remains beneath the red earth would look now.

Master Day was barely listening to me. He had grown very quiet and I

wondered if he was praying. But his mood of contemplation lasted only for a short while. On the road back he dwelt on how the old Portuguese dona was a superstitious gypsy.

“So, you will not find that city she was talking about, Master Day?” I asked.

“Tis doubtful,” he said gloomily.

“That means I am not going towards the sunset either,” I concluded. “Which is really for the best.”

I heard of George Bishop before I met him. The marketplace in Mylapore was filled with vendors, jewelers, street acrobats, workers of charms, dispensers of herbs—all of them engaged in loud conversation. Some of these men talked of the young Tamil man who had voyaged to Master Day’s foggy country. Many years ago, when he was but seventeen years of age, George Bishop had been taken under the wing of James Rynd, a Company padre posted in Masulipatnam, who had schooled him in the Bible, English, and Latin, and taken him to England to teach him more. There, he had become a Christian and taken a new name. A few gossipers clicked their tongues in disapproval at his crossing the oceans, the black waters, as some people called them, and so losing caste; at his abandonment of the ancestral gods, but mostly they were indifferent. There were other local Christians, after all—some of them had been converted by Saint Thomas and had been Christians longer even than the English and Portuguese.

I met George one morning when I was out buying medicine made of frankincense and *brahmi* for my uncle. Of late, partly because I had been told that my father might have been a medicine man, I had grown fascinated by the *siddhar* or herbalist’s wares of roots, leaves, pastes, and powders. The herbalist claimed to heal headaches and stomach ailments, diseases of the skin and the heart. He also sold a decoction of saffron to make men joyful, though an excess of it could make them too joyous, he warned.

“How much joy is too much?” I inquired. “And who determines the right amount of it?”

But before the herbalist could reply, a short and stout man, about thirty years of age, with a pitch-dark face and large, mournful eyes, came by to purchase something. I lingered, but after the stranger had secured his items the herbalist got busy packing up, so I reluctantly moved away, with the stranger by my side.

He seemed eager to talk. "I have heard of you," he said. "Are you not the boy who speaks the English tongue?"

I nodded. I was proud of my prowess.

He introduced himself: "My name is George."

It sounded odd. Men who looked like him were not supposed to bear English names. But his name, he told me, was conferred upon him by the king himself.

"Which king?" I asked.

"King James of England, Scotland, and Ireland," he said, and I had to laugh because it sounded so pompous and George was so solemn about it.

"Three kings in one?" I cried in amusement.

But George *had* been to England, and the king of that country *had* given him a name. George Bishop, it appears, had seen the One God the same instant he had clapped eyes on Chaplain Rynd. It appears that the good chaplain had seen great promise in him and trained him to be quite the scholar. George could read the Bible, could tell stories of the god who turned water to wine, preached on a mount, and finally (quite inexplicably to me) died on a cross.

"Why did he die if he was a god?" I asked, and George launched into a response so long that I wished I had not asked at all.

I soon learnt that George's tales were dismissed by most people as the ravings of a lunatic, but I still liked whiling away the long days with him. Over the course of several conversations, I learnt that Master Rynd had seen in George an opportunity to bring East Indian heathens to the light, had taken him to London, and eventually christened him at the Saint Dionis Backchurch. Later, when I was in London myself, I visited the neighborhood near Eastcheap and saw the streets filled with merchants and sailors of every complexion. I imagined the curious bystanders watching as the young East Indian man was led up to his christening.

George told me he had dwelt in England for a year after his baptism, continuing his studies under Master Rynd. And then it was time to return home. He had been solemnly charged to carry on the Lord's work in India and put on a ship. The Honorable Company had paid his fare back.

When I asked George how many people he had won over to the Christian faith since his return, he was evasive. He preferred to talk about the sluggish, brown river in London alongside whose banks he had lived, the chill that never left the English air, the short winter days, the long summer ones, the

wonder and glory of his baptism. He spent his days doing nothing, in fact, but remembering his time in that place, and living off the wealth his merchant father left him. But he was still the first person I met, other than Master Day, who had been to a country as far as England. My uncle said that George Bishop was a madman and I had better stay out of his way if I did not desire to be abducted and taken to England myself.

“But I would certainly voyage there if I could return in a short while,” I said. “And if my amma comes with me.”

My uncle chortled. He was in good health and spirits now, having taken the herbalist’s prescriptions. “You are not going anywhere,” he said, “and your mother certainly is not.”

“A Portuguese fortune-teller told me I will travel to where the sun sets,” I said defiantly.

“And I tell you that you will be dead in a month. It is damp and disgusting everywhere else in the world but here, and you would starve because there would be no rice to eat.”

I knew such trivial things as the weather or a bad diet would not hurt me, but I was not certain if I would venture anywhere without my mother. I was the center of her world and she was of mine—even on those days when boyhood yearnings led me to leave her side and explore the groves of banana and mango or the red hills around São Tomé. I also wondered if all travelers became a bit like George—gabbling on about lands they would never return to and kings who might be real or imagined, a disappointment to his English mentor, forgotten by the other Company officers, dismissed as an eccentric by the locals, forever dispossessed.

One day George disappeared from Mylapore, and no one could tell where he went to.

“Maybe he has traveled back to Masulipatnam, where he came from,” said the barber.

“Or to London,” guffawed the herbalist, “in order to . . .”

“Become a Christian . . .”

“Or to visit the white men’s king . . .” said other men in jeering chorus.

But before he left, George had handed me a cross of wood, which he had said was the idol Christians worshipped, and also conferred on me a new name.

“The world is a big place full of wise people, but they might find the name your mother gave you too difficult to utter,” he had said, leaning against the

trunk of a tree, watching as I strove to bring down a ripening mango with a stone.

“Do you know of a better name?” I asked, only half-interested.

George thought for a moment. He was taking this seriously. “We will call you *Tony*.”

I bit into the mango. It was not quite ready, and the sourness the sun had not yet drawn from its flesh hurt my teeth. I made a face.

“You do not like the name?” George asked anxiously. He was a gentle man who liked to please.

“Not very much.”

“I will think of another one,” he promised.

“Oh, never mind,” I said impatiently. I did not really care.

“Tony!” George called out, as if I was some distance away, and not standing right by him. “Tony . . . !”

And that was the first time someone called me by the name I came to be known by in America.

Before that year drew to an end, an epidemic of cholera took my mother, loveliest woman in the Coromandel and the whole wide world. She was there and then gone, and the silence she left behind was almost unendurable. My uncle had gone before her. At nearly twelve years old, I had no one left in the world but Master Day, who gave me coins enough to buy food, who visited sometimes, but who was mostly away. Sometimes, on the days he was in the house, he looked at me as if uncertain how I had got there and what he would do with me.

A few months passed that way. My grief sat heavy in me, like a stone I could not stir, and when I was not mourning, I was afraid and lonely. Master Day came and went; the December rains came, bringing a little coolness to Mylapore; the peacocks displayed themselves in all their gaudy brilliance as the clouds thickened. One evening, when Master Day was present, I lit lamps in the front chamber of our house so we had light enough to see our hands before our faces.

“On days like this I feel like your mother is back with us,” he told me. He seemed genuinely sorrowful and that moved me, although I had heard that he had now taken a lover in the Portuguese settlement, another very beautiful lady, because that is the way Master Day liked women.

“Indeed, I wake up at night and hear her walking about the house,” he continued.

I listened, torn between apprehension at the idea of phantoms in the house and resentment that my mother had not shown herself to me first.

“’Tis my fancy,” he said, as if guessing my thoughts. “The imaginings brought about by grief that no physic can cure . . . *Doctor, canst thou not minister to a mind diseased, pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow . . . which weighs upon the heart . . . ?*” Master Day murmured, and I was certain that he had had a little too much wine. “You know those lines, boy? They were by this fellow called William Shakespeare, whose plays were all the rage in London when I was there.”

“George Bishop has been to London, sir.”

“Yes, indeed he has. He is among the first East Indians to be baptized there.”

So, George had not been telling untruths after all.

Master Day and I looked at each other in the dim light of the lamp. I realized that I did not know what he thought of me. He had probably resigned himself to my presence only because I was bound to my mother. If he wanted the woman, he must take the boy. Now, with her departed, he could get up and walk into the evening, leaving me entirely alone.

“And what of you, boy? We must do something with you,” he said.

“I do not know what is to be done, sir.”

He smiled at that. A little sadly, I thought.

“Why don’t you go somewhere too? On a great adventure?”

I stayed silent. I was not inclined to agree right away to any plan he might have had. Stories of the men from Armagon who had been shipped to the spice plantations flashed through my mind. But it did not much matter what I said or did not say, because Master Day had decided that something must be done with me. He was not a heartless man, but I was a small piece on the big chessboard of his dreams and I would have to be moved to make place for other, more important things.

Although I did not know it then, that rainy evening in Mylapore, Master Francis Day would go on to make history. Decades later, when I had been in Virginia a long time, an old sailor who had been to the surf-washed Coromandel and seen the bobbing catamarans setting out at dawn told me that Master Day had gone on to found a successful factory just north of São Tomé. Under

him and Master Andrew Cogan, a small fishing village named Madrasapatnam had grown into a bustling trading center that the English called Madras. Master Day had publicly declared that he had selected the spot for the safe harbor it afforded East India Company ships, but the common report was that he was enamored by a lovely lady who dwelt nearby and had chosen that spot to build the factory so his interviews with her could be more frequent and uninterrupted.

No, I thought, the loveliest of ladies was long gone by the time Master Day founded his city. It was the memory of her that kept him there, her shade that he desired to visit, never mind if he took another woman after her.

So, as it turned out, it was the Englishman, Master Day, who remained in the Coromandel, in that particular place by the sea where a wandering apostle of Christ had bled and where peacocks shrieked. I was the one who left.

