

Ramu Comes Home For Christmas

by Richard Rupnarain

The song *I'll be Home for Christmas* is perhaps the inner longing of most people as the holiday season approaches. For Ramu, a Guyanese living in the Bronx with his Puerto Rican wife whom none of his family members had ever met, it was like a dream come through. After ten years in America, mostly as an illegal alien, he was finally going home for Christmas.

Travel with him and his wife as they journey to Guyana and share in the excitement of his family and friends as they prepare to welcome him home to a traditional Guyanese Christmas. With the kids off to school and the workers already in the factories, offices and cane fields, Plantation Annandale should have been a relatively quiet place at that time of the morning. But not that week! It was ten days to Christmas and everyone, regardless of religious persuasion, was frantically trying to get household chores completed in time for the holidays.

It was, after all, impossible to resist the spirit of Christmas. From the two local radio stations that played Christmas carols non-stop to the persistent booming blast of the juke box at Bobby's rum shop (never mind the juke box appeared to be stuck on *Have You Ever Seen a White Christmas*, a calypsonian's polemic against the importation of a European Christmas where snow, 'ice' apples and grapes were staples of the holidays), to the incessant beat of masquerade drums from neighboring Buxton, the air was saturated with the sounds of Christmas.

The fact that local schools were just two days away from closing for the holidays only added to the excitement. During lunch break and after school the kids charged like wild animals to Hardo's Haberdashery where they fought and jostled for position at the showcase to see the vast array of imported toys and to make their wish. Bobby wanted the Roy Rogers cowboy outfit with double-sided holsters and long barreled Smith and Wesson and Balram prayed for the aluminum Pan-Am jet just like the one his uncle Ramu left on for America. But they would have to wait and pray hard that someone would be able to afford the inflated prices of the toys.

It was 11:00 a.m. when the fish lady came by that morning with a fresh catch of catfish, 'Gail barker', and spring 'curass'. Auntie Betia, as she was known, never ceased to marvel the kids with her balancing act, maintaining an oversized basket of fish on her head without the support of her hands and despite having to step at random over potholes and poodles. Elsie Ramsingh was particularly happy to see her that morning as it meant she was spared a two-mile trek to the closest market.

“Faish! Faish! Get your feesh now! Going fast!” Betia crooned in her usual sing-song style.

Although Elsie was a catfish lover she succumbed rather easily to the fish lady's sales pitch for the 'gill baka'.

"See how da belly swell? Feel am gal. Da wan gat plenty eggs. Buy two and me gon give you good price. After all, a Christmas, nah bettie?"

Elsie knew she wasn't getting a deal but nevertheless bought two 'gill baka' and one catfish and proceeded immediately to gut the fish before the unpredictable water supply ran dry. She had just cleaved the head from the catfish when the postman rattled the gate closer. Mr. Ramdat was a morose man who never rang twice and who gave the impression he was doing everyone a favor when he delivered mails to their homes. He called out once in his usual gruff voice, "Mails!" stuck the mail between the gate and the gatepost and continued on his route.

Elsie was in no hurry to collect the mails, as more often than not it was the electric bill. But that midday she saw another piece of mail besides the electric bill. Her eyes widened when she saw the red and blue logo and the words Par Avion preprinted on the upper left corner of the envelope. The scrawly handwriting and the two brightly colored USA postage stamps confirmed it was overseas mail from Ramu, her only son. She flung her hands outwards to rid them of the water and fish scales, grabbed the letter with fingers gloved in the hem of her dress and hastened back into the yard where she plunked herself into the converted rice bag hammock that hung between two greenheart stilts. Her fingers, wrinkled from handling the fish in a basin of water, trembled with excitement as she fumbled to open the letter. Eventually she unfolded a crumpled two-page handwritten letter, read a few lines and then, as if she had a heart attack, held her left arm over her chest and cried aloud to no one, "Is Ramu! Ramu coming! Ramu coming home for Christmas!"

Galo, her eldest daughter, was cleaning up the kitchen when she heard the scream. Fearing that something terrible had befallen her mother she scaled the winding staircase like a triple-jumper with a hop, skip and jump, creating an earth tremor that belied her weight and without pausing for breath, she fired away at her mother, "Mammy, you all right? What happen?" Elsie put her hand at her mouth, almost too embarrassed at her outburst. After she recollected herself she whispered in a more controlled manner, "Is Ramu, girl! He coming home." Galo grabbed the letter, "Na lie to me mammy. Ramu? He coming? When? How you know, mammy?" Elsie gladly extended the letter to Galo, "Here, if you think me trick you, read for yourself." Galo

snatched the letter and squeezed into the hammock next to her mother. She read so fast her head moved from side to side. Then she exclaimed, almost falling out of the hammock, "A for truth, he coming home for Christmas!" Elsie then reached out to recover the letter but Galo pulled it aside. "Hold on," she said, "just now you gon get it back." Her head continued the side winding for a while before she too held her chest and cried, "Oh me gosh, mammy, he coming in next Saturday." Once again Elsie's attempt to recover the letter failed as Galo extended her right hand in front her mother like a conductor holding back an unruly crowd of schoolchildren all wanting to get into the school bus at the same time. "Wait!" she said, "and he wife coming too!"

Elsie stared into the horizon as if she was hypnotized. She had never seen Ramu's wife and had openly voiced her disapproval of the marriage. But Ramu was tired and fearful of living illegally and sought for a way to become a landed resident. He once wrote to Galo and told her that immigration officers were raiding factories and several illegal Guyanese were locked up at the airport waiting to be deported. Galo had advised him to come home but Ramu had seen the opportunities that were available to make a better life in America and chose to endure the challenges and struggles of the illegal alien. After all, even though he was illegal and working in a factory for a little above minimum wage he was still able to make more money than many Guyanese and acquire luxuries affordable only by wealthy nationals. Besides, he always wanted to study engineering and as a legal resident he could go to college and get his degree.

When he met Carmen at the payroll office at his workplace and discovered she was single he saw the opportunity to gain his legal status. She was an average looking girl, a little on the plump side, with a shrill, annoying voice like Rosie Perez. But she liked him and in the absence of his family and friends he grew to enjoy her company. Months later, when he eventually summoned the courage to ask her to marry him he was honest to let her know he was an illegal alien. But to his surprise she was indifferent to the revelation and even laughed at the notion that she would not marry him because he did not have a green card. Needless to say, Ramu was relieved. However, he would explain to his mother that he was getting married to this Hispanic girl so he could sponsor them all to America. At first Elsie was a bit apprehensive at the news. She was a stickler for culture and tradition and never envisioned her children getting married outside her caste, much less her race. Nevertheless, her concern for her son's happiness was paramount to personal pride, and she gave him her blessings.

Elsie snapped out of her trance-like state.

"I better go out and buy some netting material. That girl na gon able with them mosquitoes," she surmised.

"And you better get some toilet paper too. Them people can't use newspaper," joked Galo.

"Look, gal, go that side. You too lawless," a bemused Elsie countered. Then she turned to Galo as if she saw a vision.

"Come on gal, abie gat nuff wuk fuh duh to fix up this place before them get here. You scrub the floor and nah do none lick-an-a-pramise wuk. Tek you time."

Galo sighed and rolled her eyes up to the flooring. Her mother needed only the slightest excuse to justify her obsession with housework. She would scrub the floors so often that the greenheart boards had now worn thin and creaky.

Back in the Bronx, almost five inches of snow had fallen during the day and traffic was a nightmare. The cross-section between Fordham Road and the Grand Concourse was completely gridlocked, mostly from shoppers heading in and out of Alexander's. At such times it was not uncommon to hear the blaring of horns and verbal powwows combined with expletives in Spanish, Yiddish, Hindi, and the indefinable accents of the borough's West Indian populace. But not that day! After all, it was Christmas, and the spirit of peace and goodwill towards all men was given a two-week moratorium. Besides, Santa with his bell, the Salvation Army with their pots, and the kids with excitement in their eyes were on every street corner, and together they provided an invisible shield against the spirit of meanness and intemperance.

It was the end of Ramu's last day of work before his long anticipated vacation and without wasting any time he embarked on his shopping for the trip home. Fortunately, he lived within walking distance of the Fordham shopping district and did not have to contend with traffic. The next few days he jostled among adults and children, all huddled in parkas and down jackets, as they scoured the shops for sweet deals. His plan was to secure at least one gift for every person he knew back home. Fortunately, A & S stores had one of their perennial "going out of business" sales and he was able to cash in on some real bargains. Under the spell of Bing Crosby's I'll Be Home For Christmas, a song that seemed to be playing in every store, he went on a spending spree, tossing into his shopping cart several pairs of Nike boots, Levis blue jeans, tee shirts with the American logo plastered front and back (the logo was important as it sent a message to the locals that the wearer had friends out away in America). Aware that he wasn't up to date on latest women's fashions he opted instead for jewelry for the girls and was able to cash in on a good deal of a dozen TIMEX watches from a sidewalk vendor. For Galo he purchased a pair of genuine 14k gold filigree earrings and for his mother he acquired a gold brooch that was overlaid with a small map of America. Getting a gift for his father

was not a problem. The old man was never fussy for anything. If he was asked what he wanted for his birthday or for some other special occasion, he would say in disgust, "Nothing! Me got everything! You save your money!" Nevertheless, Ramu later checked out 14th Street in Manhattan and picked up a dozen shirts, a few slacks and a pair of shoes for the old man. He knew the loot would make his father happy and that when he was among his friends he would boast, "See this shirt. I got four more. Me son Ramu bring them for me."

On Tuesday he continued his shopping spree, this time joined by his wife Carmen. They spent over three hundred dollars at the Super Value supermarket across the street. As they strolled along the aisles he remembered how much Guyanese enjoyed corned mutton, Ovaltine, Marmite, caramel chocolate, sardines and tip-top cheese before the government had placed a ban on these items. He also reminisced on how much he used to look forward to 'ice' apple and grapes when he was a young boy back in Guyana. His mother would take him and Galo to Stabroek market and fill her basket with apples, grapes, dates, walnut and marshmallows. So he packed some seedless grapes, two dozen Macintosh apples, and a few bags of wall nuts, marshmallows, chocolate bars and candy canes.

Buying the stuff, however, was only part of the problem. Getting all the groceries into the suitcase was a bigger challenge as he refused to leave anything behind. But after much shaking and pressing he sat on the suitcase and strained at the zippers to get it closed, and when he was done he counted six pieces of luggage each weighing about eighty pounds. The next challenge was to get the luggage safely to Guyana as some Customs agents and bag handlers were known to slash luggage coming from America and steal the contents.

Carmen on the other hand appeared ambivalent as to what type of clothing she should pack for the trip. Ramu noticed a pair of bikinis on top her open suitcase and shuddered to think what his old fashioned mother would say if she saw Carmen in bikinis. She wasn't a size ten. She was more like a sixteen. "Are you taking that?" he asked.

"Yes! Why?"

"You know there are no beaches in Guyana?"

"What do you mean? Isn't Guyana in the Caribbean?"

"Yes, it is, but our beaches are messed up by the muddy waters from the Amazon River. You can't swim in those waters."

Carmen looked at bit disappointed and she tossed the bikinis off the bed. "Look!" Ramu consoled her, "just pack some clothes and stuff that you would use here in summer time." She finally settled for a few pairs of jeans, tee shirts, and a few dresses for special occasions. He also suggested to her that they pack a few boxes of mosquito coil repellants, some skin lotion and a few cases of bottled water. Carmen looked at him as though she wanted to change her mind. "Mosquitoes? Bottled water? Food? Where in the world are we going? On a safari?" Ramu smiled and said nothing. She began to wonder if she made the right decision to accompany him to Guyana. She had in mind a nice Caribbean Christmas holiday, not a jungle trek but it was too late to turn back. Besides, she had to meet her in-laws.

Ramu, on the other hand, had excitement dripping from his body like sweat after a workout. It was his first trip back home since he came to America ten years ago. How he wanted to go back home sooner but couldn't because of his illegal status in the country. Even now that he was a legal resident he still sweated nervously whenever he saw a police officer or read in the newspapers about any immigration related matter. He was even afraid to go to the airport to see someone off, fearing that he was so close to being deported.

Carmen, on the other hand, had migrated from Puerto Rico when she was six and had never since left the Bronx. She experienced mixed emotions, happy to get away from the Bronx for a while but full of apprehension at having to meet her in-laws and living in a land with mosquitoes. Nevertheless, she had seen the ad on TV that said you never get a second chance to make a good first impression and it became her guiding principle. She wanted to make a good impression on Ramu's family. As she folded and packed her cosmetics into the carry-on piece Ramu sat on the bed and monologued his fondest childhood memories. He didn't even notice she had left the room.

Back in the village, Elsie had doled out specific chores to family and friends alike. Since she received Ramu's letter there was no rest for anyone, including a drunk named Munni. He was an intelligent young man who served for many years as book-keeper at the local office before he was dismissed for rudeness to his supervisor. The story that followed his departure is that one day the accounting supervisor called him to point out that the payroll was off by a few cents and that he should look for the error. Munni on the other hand, convinced that a few cents in a payroll involving hundreds of thousands of dollars and thousands of workers was immaterial, mouthed off to his superior, "The difference is in the net pay, man, the net, and the net got a hole." Unfortunately for Munni, while his line was well received by the office staff who chuckled at his facetious remark, the supervisor did not find it amusing. Rather, he attributed the comments to

disrespect and had Munni fired for insubordination. Nowadays, Munni hopped from bar to rum shop and could often be seen swaggering down the streets or lying off to the side next to the gutter. In the rare instance when he was sober he wandered around the neighborhood offering to run errands for a shot of rum and some food. But he wasn't skilled at manual labor and was rarely of practical use to anyone. Nevertheless the community showed him pity and helped him in any way they could. Elsie handed him a cutlass and asked him to brush the grass on the parapet.

Meanwhile Galo had completed the daunting task of scrubbing the house clean from top to bottom to the point where the smell of fresh greenheart lingered from the freshly scrubbed floors. Elsie, a good seamstress herself, purchased several yards of white cotton fabric and sewed new window blinds, bed covers and pillow slips. As she strung the blinds unto wire springs that were fitted across the windows she noticed bales of cut grass along the fence and shouted out to her husband, "Hey man, me na tell you fuh burn that grass?" The old man complied without resistance as he had come to learn that it was better to obey his wife than to hear for the thousandth time how his parents had made him lazy. Within minutes the fire crackled on dried grass and twigs and young children playing on the street stopped to watch the flames light up the night sky. By then the entire village was aware of Ramu's imminent arrival.

Hardly anyone slept that Friday night. It was the night before Ramu's arrival and the neighborhood was abuzz just as it would be if there was a wedding taking place that weekend. The smell of black cake and ginger beer filled the night air as every house on the street joined in the traditional holiday treats. In the meanwhile Elsie's house was becoming congested as family members had started to arrive from different parts of the country on hearing of Ramu's visit. They all wanted to go to the airport and figured that if they left from Elsie's home they would save themselves a few hours of travel time. That night they played 'troop chal', ate rice and curry, drank beer, and chatted into the early hours of the morning. The little children played dominoes and amused themselves with games of "hide-and-peek" and "bun house," at times incurring the wrath of Galo who frequently had to chase them from the Christmas tree which she made out of bramble and under which she placed all the gifts. Uncle Munniram was as usual the funny one. He leaned over and rested his hand on Elsie, "Well, girl, you gon finally meet you white dat-in-law." Everyone broke out into laughter. Elsie was still overcome with embarrassment when Galo came to her rescue. "Look, you all leave me mother alone. You all just jealous." Then she placed her arms around Elsie's neck, "Right ma?" Elsie buried her face in both hands and laughed, tears running down her wrinkled cheeks. "Listen," she said, "it's late. You all have to leave for the airport early in the morning, so go and get some sleep. You too Galo. Go! I will lock up." One by one they drifted off to sleep wherever they found a place to lay their heads and within minutes had begun a

chorus of syncopated snoring that brought reminders of the congregation's weekly reaction to brother Kooblall's pulpitry at the Lutheran church.

They were still asleep when Ramu and Carmen arrived at JFK International for their early morning departure on Guyana Airways flight 1624. The estimated flight time was between five and six hours which meant they were expected to arrive at Timehri International in Guyana just before noon. The lanes at the check-in counters were already blocked with oversized and overweight suitcases that belonged to hucksters and traders, the parallel economy that came to life in Guyana after the embargo was placed on food imports. The traders were mostly high school dropouts who figured a way to make quick money. They were a real nuisance at airport terminals and many of them slept in the airport lounges just to save a night's lodging. By daybreak their hair looked like it was styled by Don King, stubbles had overgrown their faces, and their breath threatened further depletion of the ozone. But what made them the disdain of commuters was their belligerence and uncouth mannerisms. They always arrived at the airport on stand-by and then bribed the clerks at the check-in counter for a seat. The protest of confirmed passengers who were bumped for the hucksters always fell on deaf ears as everyone at the airline took bribes. Naturally, Ramu was relieved when he and Carmen finally boarded the 727. Minutes later they were on their way to the "land of many waters". The pilot announced that the weather in Guyana was sunny and in the nineties and that the ride was expected to be smooth.

Back in Guyana, Galo was the first to arise when the auburn feathered rooster started its incessant crowing. It seemed like even the rooster knew it was going to be a special day as it belted out a second bar of notes. Ramu was still hours from home when three mini vans lined up alongside the road in front of Elsie's bungalow. One by one they were being filled. The kids were first to board. They gave nani Punwassie the seat next to the driver as they didn't want to get her all squeezed up. Elsie decided to remain home despite pleas from everyone, including her husband, that she should go to meet her son and daughter-in-law. She insisted that someone should remain to look after things at home, and she stayed back with uncle Sammy whom she had asked to fill the 'bandara' with chicken curry and rice. Elsie remembered how much Ramu loved curried chicken and daal puri and she wanted him to feel right at home the instant he arrived.

After much yelling, pushing and screaming the convoy was eventually on its way to the airport. At first everyone was pensive. Then, as if they were waiting for permission, they all began to speak at the same time. Mostly it was a regurgitation of the same discussions the adults had the night before.

"You all mightn't recognize Ramu. I hear he get fair like white people."

"I talk to him last month at Cable and Wireless. Me nah know America so far away. Me had to shout hard hard so he could hear me."

"Me too, gal! You know me nah recognize he voice. He sound like real American. He seh, 'Hey, sis,' with this American twang."

"And you know how he uses to call me mamee? Natch! Now he a seh, 'Hi auntie. How ya doing, man?' Na mek me tell you how me want to tell am me na wan man."

"Well, hear na gal, he bringing his American wife with him. So you all try and speak properly."

"I wonder what she look like?"

"Na horry, gal, all dem white gal pretty. Just like pon TV."

"A wah he gat fuh marry white gal fuh anyway? Watch how much nice, nice coolie gal abie gat here. Uncle Ramjohn daughter a wan pretty girl."

"A de same thing uncle Daywa said. You have to stick to your own. Besides, he said dem white gal na like fuh stay home and mind pickney. Dem only want fuh for walk and sport all the time and fight for equality."

"Look, na badda wid he. He just jealous full. If he hugly daughter been married wan white bai he woulda play different tune."

"A same ting me seh! And she wouldn't a end up with that good-for-nothing drunk man what she gat deh. You know he get knock off from he wuk again? Hah yah! That man na gat good."

"A true ting yuh talk. Dem American gal want fuh split ebryting down the middle. Dem man gat fuh cook and clean equally with the hooman. Yes, a so buddy boy son tell me."

"And dem want dress like man too. You see how dem a wear pants that spans them batty? Them gal na gat shame."

"Alyou a watch too much TV. Me gon ask Ramu for meself."

"You think he gon tell you that he gat fuh cook and clean? No way, Jose! He gon act like

macho man when he down here but when he go back home the girl gon bust he backside."

"Anyway, all people is the same."

Nani wriggled in the front seat and she spoke up for the first time since they left home, "Nah true! All cassava gat same skin, but all nah taste same way."

When the convoy finally arrived at the parking lot at Timehri, the old man, quiet throughout the drive to the airport, finally spoke. "O.K. Here we are! Everybody out! And try and behave yourself. All of you!"

The airport was exceptionally busy for a terminal that handled only two to three international flights on a daily basis. But the busyness was not abnormal because almost every returning immigrant was greeted by a huge entourage of family and friends. The longer the individual was away the larger the welcoming party grew. They often came dressed with their Sunday best and tried to feign a higher level of sophistication in language and social graces. Some of Ramu's friends from the cricket club came separately in a Morris Oxford hire car. Half of them were already drunk.

The kids were the first to exit the vans. They charged like wild horses straight for the chain-linked fencing where they could have a clear view of arriving aircrafts. The adults followed in scattered groups, some lining up behind the kids and others, including Nani, making their way to the terminal building. Hardly a minute passed when the cry went up simultaneously from Bobby and Balram, "There it is. Look there, far away, the blinking lights. See it? It's Ramu plane."

"I see it first."

"No, I see it first."

"Where? Where?"

"There, auntie, there! See it? It coming in to land. Let abie go!"

The kids galloped straight for the welcome area outside of the Customs and Immigration checkpoint. Balram and Bobby climbed onto the guard rails and strained to peek into the Customs area every time the door was opened as bragging rights awaited the person who was the first to spot Ramu. The adults jostled among the children hoping also to find a good vantage point. Ramu's friends stood back towards the entrance and

discussed the cricket series with England while jingling car keys on their index fingers.

Moments later arriving passengers began to trickle out from the Customs area, lugging several pieces of overweight and oversized suitcases while straining their necks over the crowd to find their families. A young man emerged and Balram and Bobby were convinced it was Ramu until the boy's father and a pretty girl came up and hugged and kissed him. He put his arms around the girl and said something to her that made her blush. She was young enough to be his little sister. A lady in red halter-top and black leather mini skirt followed the young man. She was of a mixed race. A sweet little girl held tightly unto her wrist. "Look at that lady," Pulmattie whispered to Galo, "somebody should tell she fuh fix she dress straps."

"No stupid! That's the latest fashion in America? You na watch Dynasty?"

Nani, obviously agitated at the gossip, chided Pulmattie and Galo, "Alyou come fuh buy milk, nah fuh reckon cow."

Galo and Pulmattie turned away and buckled over in laughter as a gentle cool breeze wafted through the terminal building and brought with it the acrid odor of stale urine. The beer drinkers were the culprits. At night, with no one watching and being too lazy to go to the washroom in the terminal, they would urinate against the walls of the building. Galo was embarrassed.

"Oh gawd, the smell terrible! What Ramu wife gon think about abie?"

The girls looked at each other and laughed helplessly. Eventually the traffic slowed to an infrequent trickle and consternation arose that Ramu might not have made the flight. But Ramu had given way to the herd of hucksters and actually was the last passenger to deplane. He stood for a moment on the threshold of the moving stair and surveyed the land of his birth. Ah! Guyana! Land of many waters! But alas, he thought, putrid waters, as the stench of stale urine bombarded his olfactory senses and made breathing more of a challenge than he ever experienced on a smoggy day in lower Manhattan. Nevertheless, he was home and it was Christmas.

Clearing customs was no picnic. The hucksters and their gargantuan luggage jammed the passage ways and held up the lines as the traders argued with customs officials over duties and taxes. Ramu noticed that those traders who handed over a few items to the customs officials were given easy and hassle free passage through inspection. So he reached into one of his suitcases and grabbed a tee shirt as a contingency. From what he saw in the opened suitcases he could tell that the streets of Georgetown would

look just like Fordham road at Christmas time.

Balram was the first to spot Ramu as he emerged from Customs and Immigration. Carmen lagged behind.

"Uncle Ramu! Here! Is me, Balram!"

With that, Balram, with Bobby on his heels, scaled the rails and collapsed simultaneously on Ramu's arms, one on either side. Balram grabbed his carry-on luggage.

"Come, let me help you with this," Bobby offered as he unhooked the camera.

"Look how big you guys have become. You been yeah high when I left. Where is everybody? Where is ma and pa?"

"Look, all of them right there by de railing."

Galo came up shyly and hugged her brother. Tears welled up in her eyes as she asked in an obvious loss of anything else to say, "How was the flight?" Then, before he could answer her the entire gang of beer-drinking buddies piled upon him as if he was a running back with the pigskin. They hugged and shook hands. Everyone was so consumed with Ramu that they forgot about his wife. But Carmen was not upset and she stood at a distance and watched the reunion with an infectious smile. She was genuinely happy for Ramu and didn't mind the inattention. Ramu then became a victim of the familiar and often redundant refrain that bombards the returning immigrant.

"So how was the flight?"

"You had anything to eat? We bring some roti and curry for you."

"So what time you left?"

"It hot here, na boy?"

"Look how big you get."

"You get all your luggage? Better check. Them a proper thief down here."

"So how long you staying for?"

"When you going back?"

"You must come visit me before you go back."

"You look fat and shine, boy."

"You remember me, auntie Mousie?"

"You get fair, you know."

"Here, look your daddy."

"By the way, where is your wife? Introduce us."

Rabat, lurking at a distance with Hanuman, spotted Carmen when Ramu introduced her to his father.

"A da the gal? Oh me muma, that gal like uglesha. A what wrong with Ramu, he choice box bore or what?"

"You gat to go to America fuh gal like dat? Ramu could get the best coolie gal in Guyana. Remember uncle Manu daughter? That bini sweet and she been like the man bad."

"Them gal gon like any anybody who can carry them overseas."

"No fool! She like the bai since small school."

"Me hear she is Hispanic."

"And you know me want fuh seh da gal na Merican. Dem good looking white gal na married coolie boy. Watch Hoori son! He married that big fat ugly white lady that can be he mother."

"But all them nice coolie gal gat white man husband."

"For truth! Like Shakira Baksh, right? She married that Michael Caine man. Abie dese na good enough."

"Well, watch yourself! You gat beer belly, bald head and you drive hire car that belong to somebody else. Which gal gon want you before somebody from out away?"

"Anyways, where is Hispanic? Me never hear about a country name Hispanic."

"Because you dunce. It deh in Europe."

"Oh, that communist country?"

"Yes. The same place Columbus come from."

"Watch, bannas, it na matter, just as long as the man happy with de gal. He gat for live with she."

"A fuh truth! Every moldy biscuit gat he own vum vum cheese."

Ramu came over and broke up the conversation. "Oh, man, you guys haven't changed at all. So what's up? By the way, meet my wife Carmen."

They shook her hands awkwardly and muttered an inaudible "hi" as they feigned a reluctant embrace. Carmen appeared disoriented. Maybe it was the effect of the stale urine, or the long wait at JFK coupled with the five-hour plane ride. Maybe it was culture shock. After all, she was the only white-looking person in the entire building. The girls grabbed her hands and escorted her out to the parking lot as if to save her from the crassness of the lecherous and uncouth drunks. On her way out she looked like a death row inmate walking the "last mile." With Carmen out of the way, Rabat and Hanuman, the self-appointed leaders of the group, pulled Ramu to the side and congratulated him in speech that was rehearsed for the occasion.

"Nice girl, buddy."

"She's like a beauty queen," they lied.

"Come, have a beer for old time sake."

"Not right now. I am a little tired. Later, maybe?"

"Aright buddy, abie gon check you out this weekend."

"Cool!"

Ramu had never before received such a reception and all he had to do to earn it was to go away and return home for a visit. It felt good to be this honored and he was determined to enjoy every minute of his stay.

Back home at Annandale, Elsie was getting ready to greet her son and daughter-in-law. She wore a pretty red and green dress that Ramu had sent her last Christmas. She glanced at her gold-plated watch. They were expected home any time. Her heart raced faster than the mini vans. What will she say to her daughter-in-law? Will they get along?

Uncle Sammy had long finished the curried chicken and was cooling off in the hammock with a cigarette. All the while he was listening to Elsie's soliloquy and finally gave his unsolicited wisdom. "Don't worry Elsie. Everything gon wuk out fine. Just tek it easy and be yourself." Elsie felt a slight throbbing in her head and decided to rest a bit on the sofa.

Back at Timehri, and after much shouting and yelling, pushing and shoving, the mini vans were once again loaded and on their way home. The crux of the row this time was nani's refusal to surrender the front seat to Carmen. She eventually conceded her privileged place but not after mumbling a string of words that sounded like expletives, even in Hindustani. Carmen on the other hand was not in the least bothered about where she sat as long as she was next to her husband. She was more enthralled when the convoy was brought to a standstill by a herd of cows that took refuge on the warm asphalt road. With the dam-less Demerara River inches to her left and cows everywhere she felt like her safari had begun.

Half an hour later Elsie's doze was broken by a shrill voice she recognized as belonging to auntie Baba. "Them come! Them come gal! Your son here!" Elsie sprang out of the sofa with ease that belied her age and headed for the washroom. She tied her hair in a bun and splashed water over her face to erase traces of sleep. Then she darted out to the gate. Ramu spotted her and dropped the suitcase he was unloading from the van. "Hey ma!" he cried, "you looking good." Both of them wept and hugged for what seemed an eternity until auntie Baba intervened, "All right, son, my turn now." She kissed him and he could smell the tobacco in her breath. "You look nice. And where is the girl?" Just then Ramu realized he had forgotten to introduce Carmen to his mom. "Carmen," he called out in to the dark, "come, meet my mom." Carmen appeared out from the crowd, slowly and shyly, feeling awkward and elated, but Elsie eased the discomfort by advancing to her and clutching her to her breast. She welcomed her to Guyana and to her family with a kiss and a glass of water. Galo grabbed her luggage and led her

inside.

Once inside they began to talk about the flight, the hassles at the airport, the hucksters. The conversation then moved to how everyone had changed and grown. Elsie offered to dish out some curry and rice but Ramu said he was full. He wanted just a glass of water. Then the time everyone waited for finally arrived. Some of the relatives were ready to leave but Ramu stopped them. He had brought gifts for them. Soon suitcases were opened everywhere and clothes littered the living room, dining room, and kitchen floors. As the adults caught up with the latest news and happenings in the life of each other the kids scrambled for the apples, grapes and candies. Before long the rooster started crowing and everyone had fallen asleep with smiles on their faces and with their gifts tightly clutched in grateful fingers as Nat King Cole's version of Little Christmas Tree played repeatedly on the gramophone.

Over the few days Ramu and Carmen visited all the places he longed to go but could never afford to when he lived in Guyana. He had read about Kaieteur Falls in the hinterland and saw the majesty of its drop in geography books and postcards but like most Guyanese he could never afford the trip. Now he could and he took full advantage of the mighty greenback. He took Carmen and Galo on a Twin Otter flight and explored the area of the Falls, the Potaro, Rupununi district and even passed over the Mount Roraima. Between his Sony Handycam and Yashika SLR camera he was able to capture those special moments and extend his vacation with Kodak memories. Galo was ecstatic. She had never flown before and glued her face to the window throughout the flight. She was convinced she saw Mamoo Daywa's house from the air although she was hundreds of miles from where he lived. Carmen dozed off in the plane. In the Bronx she always went to bed early and woke early to catch the 6:45 am train to Manhattan. Now she was kept up late every night, listening to stories about Ramu's childhood and pouring through old photo albums. She was greatly amused at some of Ramu's photos taken when he was younger. In particular she broke into hysterical laughter after Galo showed her a photo of Ramu in hippee hairstyle and bell bottoms and said, "Watch your sweet boy before he went to America. And check out the 22 inch bells." Ramu peeked from a distance and cracked a smile. "Hey, that was cool then."

The days that followed were hectic as family and neighbors dropped by to see Ramu and his American wife, and his old buddies dragged him off at every opportunity to the local nightclubs and discos. They came in late most nights and surfaced close to lunch time next day. Carmen had by this time been showered with quite a few belated wedding gifts and had acquired a collection of indigenous crafts from the gift shop on Main Street. She especially liked the pork-knocker that was crafted from purpleheart wood. It would look exotic on her centre table. Consumed with visits from family to

family and the cheap shopping she completely forgot about beaches, bikinis and mosquitoes. She was having the time of her life and nobody was happier for her than Ramu.

On Christmas Eve Ramu took her in a hire car down to Georgetown to pick up a few gifts for family members they had forgotten or overlooked. When they stepped out of the taxi they were immediately confronted with the masqueraders and the infamous bull-cow. The head dancer, dressed skimpily in a red and black costume, pranced around Carmen, shaking the elongated bull backwards and forwards in synchronicity with the beat of the samba drum like he was performing some kind of ritual. The burgeoning crowd looked on at the bashful white girl in the ring.

"Give him some money, girl!" someone shouted.

"Go ahead, give him some money," Ramu reiterated.

Carmen handed the dancer a \$20 bill and was puzzled when the man dropped it to the ground. "Twenty Guyana dollar?" he screamed, "you tek you eyes pass me? Twenty dollar can't buy black pudding."

"Give the man twenty US," shouted another dancer.

By then the crowd had swollen to thrice its size and to avoid any altercation Ramu flicked a twenty US into the man's hand and beat a retreat into Fogarty's store. The bull-cow continued its march down Main Street and Carmen watched with childlike awe until it disappeared in the crowd beside the vendor's arcade. She was glad it wasn't one of the bulls of Pamplona.

Christmas day was spent opening gifts, trying on American clothes, and eating curry and roti with black cake and ginger beer for dessert. The poor dropped by as usual and were given food and money. Out on the streets the kids mimicked John Wayne in their cowboy suits and hats and by noon the air was already saturated with sulfur as dozens of toy guns hammered incessantly at caps amid the occasional explosions of home made rockets. Ramu watched the kids at play in the streets, extremely gratified to know that he was able to bring a little joy to their lives. That night they danced to Jim Reeves and the girls taught Carmen how to dance to Indian music. At first she was shy but after a few swigs of Banks beer she was unstoppable. They awoke late on Boxing Day and had garlic pork for appetizer and pepper pot and hard bread for lunch.

Before they knew it the days had vanished and it was time to return home. They arrived

with seven suitcases and were returning with two empty pieces. Carmen had fallen in love with mango achar and wiri-wiri pepper sauce and Elsie made her a few jars. Ramu wanted nothing to take back home as he could buy the other stuff from the West Indian grocery on the Grand Concourse. The return trip to the airport was on a Friday morning as they wanted to get home for the weekend in time to prepare for work on Monday. Ramu's buddies and most of the family and friends were at work when the solitary mini van left for the airport. This time the atmosphere was sullen. Throughout the trip to the airport Elsie held her son close to her and neither of them said a word. When the van rounded the final turn into the airport and Elsie saw the huge billboard with a BWIA jet in departure mode she began to cry. Then all the women began to wail in solidarity. Even Carmen could not keep the tears back. She had grown to love them, especially Galo. They were just two years apart but had developed a special bond in those two weeks. The pain of parting was minimized only by the promise of reunion. As Ramu hugged his mother and sister one last time he made a solemn promise to sponsor them as soon as he obtained his citizenship and perhaps to ease the sadness he saw in his teary-eyed sister he promised to find a white boy for her. She slapped him in jest on the shoulder and wiped her tears.

An hour later, Elsie, Galo, the old man and their close relatives stared into the skies as the jet streaked into the clouds and disappeared. Elsie broke down and cried, "Me Ramu gone." Galo looked at her and she also began to cry, "Don't cry mammy; he tell me he coming back August." The old man put his arms around them both and comforted them.

Aboard the aircraft Carmen snuggled up to her husband, squeezed his left arm and closed her eyes as she whispered, "What a Christmas! The best I ever had! Thank you, darling." Ramu, still staring blankly at the passing clouds muttered pensively, "Me too honey, me too!"