“Il faut passer á la machine,” said the doctor in a rather casual way. He seemed oblivious to the fact that his words struck fear in me, especially the word ‘machine’. I leaned ever closer to my Ma’s saree and peered wide-eyed at the man in the white coat. In my dirt-stained shorts and my flip-flops, I must have looked like a poor boy from a disadvantaged neighborhood. The doctor stepped forward to examine my swollen arm and used a triangular bandage to make a sling. He repeated the words as if to confirm his initial assessment, “Oui, il faut passer á la machine, Madamme.” He spoke directly to my Ma and insisted on using French words even though my Ma spoke to him in Mauritian Creole. Neither of them said anything to me although my Ma referred to me as her brave little boy. “Hari is only six,” she said. “Nearly seven,” I piped up. In that moment, I knew that I had to live up to being brave.

The day had started so well. It was a Saturday and we always loved Saturdays not only because there was no school but because we got to indulge in our favourite pastime, tree-top picnic. Kishan always led the way, being the older and much taller brother. The mango tree in the back yard had low easy-to-reach branches and it was our favourite. We would fill our pockets with little newspaper parcels of salt and dried red chilies. Kishan also concealed a small pocket knife rolled up in a dirty handkerchief. He used it for slicing up the half-ripe mangoes. Branches running parallel made surprisingly comfortable seats and Kishan and I spent hours up the tree. On this day however things were destined to be different. Vishnu our eldest brother was due to go to Scout Camp and we were keen to see him before he left. Suddenly, there was a call from Ma, “Hari, Kishaaan… come and say goodbye to Vishnu.” Kishan, tall and nimble, swung from a branch and ‘Tarzan-like’ jumped to the ground and in a matter of seconds had legged-it into the house. Eager to follow and in a slight state of panic, I dropped the contents of my lap, the chilies and the mango peel, reached for the same branch as Kishan and swung heavily. Disaster struck. Within seconds, everything changed. First the popping sound of the branch snapping like a dried up twig, then a crashing through leaves and branches as my disoriented frame hit the ground with a ‘thud,’ exploding a cloud of dust.

The impact forced a cry from my lungs, “Aaaahhh.” I lay stunned, motionless, conscious but feeling foolish. Whatever made me think I could be as good as Kishan, follow in his footsteps, swing and jump? Nothing could have been simpler, done countless times before. How could I have been so let down? Slowly, I gathered my body, my face wet with tears. My arm felt heavy and numb as if it didn’t belong to me. I held it against my chest and walked towards the house. The tree-top picnic had ended abruptly, a glorious tropical afternoon ruined. And now I was facing my biggest ordeal, the prospect of going through the ‘machine’. Listening to the exchange between Ma and the doctor, things were beginning to make sense. The doctor suspected a cracked bone in the arm. I understood that it had to be mended using a ‘machine’. The only ‘machine’ that I knew of or had ever come across was a ‘sewing machine’. I had seen my Ma and my older sisters use a sewing machine. My six (nearly seven)-year-old logic was telling me that the doctor was planning to use a special sewing machine to mend the cracked bone in my arm and I was expected to be brave. To make matters worse however, there were no such ‘machines’
in the hospital. This was a small community hospital specialising in treating patients with Tuberculosis. My Ma brought me here because it was close to Goodlands, our home town and also because she only had a few rupees for the bus fares. We were now required to travel to the big general hospital in Port Louis, the capital city, which was twenty miles away. We had no money and had not eaten anything for hours. Luckily there was a hospital minibus on its way to Candos Hospital and the driver agreed to give us a lift. I sat next to the window looking out and thinking to myself, “I must try and be a brave little boy for my Ma and once my arm has been through the sewing machine everything will be fine again.” Although the journey took over an hour, it felt like an eternity and all the time I never uttered a word. I was glad to have my Ma sitting next to me. I can still remember how comforting her cotton saree felt next to my skin.

Finally we arrived. I have little recollection of the hospital except for the never-ending corridors. I do remember the kind smiling face of the lady who greeted me at the door. She asked my Ma to wait outside and guided me in. My Ma asked me to be a brave little boy. The lady removed my sling very gently and asked me to place my arm on a glass plate which rested over what looked like a couch. She then swiveled a metal plate from above and asked me to stay still. “Is this the sewing machine?” I asked. “No,” she said, “Not a sewing machine. It’s what we call a ‘machine radiographic’ (an x-ray machine) and it takes a picture of the inside of your arm, that’s all.” “And it doesn’t hurt,” she added with a smile.

This is a true story from a distant land and a distant past. It could never happen now or could it?