

Lieutenant Kurosawa's Errand Boy

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A NOVEL

Warran Kalasegaran

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Errand Boy**

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A Novel

**Warran
Kalasegaran**



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For my family

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Remember December 8th,
The day world history changed.
The day Anglo-Saxon power
was denied across the land and sea of East Asia.
It was our Japan that denied them,
the small country in the Eastern sea,
the Land of the Gods, Nippon.
Ruled over by a living God.
The power of Anglo-America,
monopolists of global wealth,
was denied in our own country.
Our denial was our justice.
We only demand the return of East Asia to East Asia.
Our neighbours grow thin from their exploitation.
It is we who will break those claws and fangs.
We who build our strength and rise up.
Young and old, men and women: soldiers all.
We fight until our great enemies see the error of their ways.
World history has been severed in two.
Remember December 8th.

—“December 8th” (“*Jūnigatsu yōka*”), Takamura Kōtarō

Dedicated to Papatti

I was born in the year Showa 9 by the Japanese calendar, the year 1934 by British convention, and although I was born in Singapore, raised a Hindu and speak Tamil, I know of no other metric of time that mattered. That was the world I was born into.

My father worked as a coolie on His Majesty's Naval Base in the north of Singapore, then a lucrative British colony. The Englishman, not content with his gunboats and Bible, or perhaps spurred on by them, borrowed the title "coolie" and the indentured labourer from South India to fatten out his dictionary and Treasury, and returned neither. That my father, at the age of seventeen, said *sayonara* to his parents in Tamil Nadu and bought a one-way meal ticket across the Indian Ocean for any work in an unknown country is testament to his faith, infinite as faith must be, that life could only get better. And a repudiation of the hierarchy of the Indian caste system, where rich Indian Brahmins repressed other Indians before the Englishman came along and repressed them all, and at whose bottom my father would have found himself ingloriously squashed in either scenario.

My father's ship moored at Tanjong Pagar Harbour in the south of Singapore during the April of 1928, where a few Tommies herded him and other young healthy males onto a pickup truck bound for

the north, an experience that vindicated my father's religious distaste for eating cow meat. Used to the torrid heat, he slept thinking the journey across the country would take a few days. He woke up delirious when soldiers shouted at him to get off, and he realised barely an hour had passed. They put him to work immediately, instilling in him the industry of the Protestant (because only Protestants could be industrious in those days) and rewarding him with the pay of an Asian.

King George's Naval Base in Sembawang was then half-constructed and the white man taught my father to operate a mechanical crane so he could lay the final stones to cement the Royal Navy's dominance east of Suez. Having accomplished this worthy endeavour, my father swept the Naval Base's pink-cobbled parade square, repainted its white bungalows, fixed the lights in the barracks, and unloaded crates from the ships and stocked them in the warehouses. He did anything the white soldier didn't want to do and reported to him after that. That was a "coolie". But my father loved his occupation and he was a British man—or possession—through and through. At the end of ten years of service, his supervisor, whom we called "Corporal Gibraltar", presented him with a copy of *The Jungle Book*, perhaps unaware that my father and I didn't read, but my father proudly placed the cover of the Indian boy in his loincloth next to our mini statue of Ganesha, even remarking that we looked alike. He called Corporal Gibraltar a "good man".

My mother migrated from the Tamil-speaking north of Sri Lanka and cooked in the Naval Base canteen, where she had the fortune of meeting the hero that was my father. They say necessity breeds invention, which I suppose is the only way I can explain their union. Being the only two civilian Tamil speakers on base, they were naturally drawn to each other. He kept turning up at her stall without money in hand but plenty of love in his eyes, and she kept giving him dollops of rice and beef rendang (that he learned to

eat for the higher virtue of love), until finally *she* had to ask for *his* hand in marriage.

My mother died giving birth to me and I never got to know her and thus cannot say much except this: sometimes, I think I killed her clawing my way out to take my first breath. It was a tragic fact of my world that new beginnings were often sought through violent exorcisms. My father never spoke about my amma except to say that she lived on inside me. He, like any person, spoke his share of crap that held a deeper truth. But from the beginning, it was just Appa and me. He was a hardworking and humble man and I respected him for that. I merely think that whatever courage and pluck I have, I must have inherited from Amma.

I must stop here, for my grandson who is writing this down on his foolscap paper tells me that I cannot talk like this about Protestants and Englishmen and Indians, that people are one and the same. This is all fine and well. But I have had more salt than my grandson has had rice. He doesn't know oppression or division, militarily and hierarchically enforced, where the colour of your skin and the employment of your father decided from birth whether you lived in a brown congested room in a demarcated zone called Little India, or a white bungalow facing the snot-green sea. Where a Briton hurled racist slurs like "Hurry up you *keling!*" while you polished his shoes, and you just scratched the difficult dirt away with your fingernails and called him "Sir" as you stood up with blackened hands. My grandson does not know how it is to feel humiliated, backward and lesser every day, and think that this is your fate in life and that you must accept it. I must treat such a past with a little anger and a little irony, for without the first, the world would never move on, and without the second, I never would. But my grandson lives in a different world and I haven't even started on the best bits of my story yet.

I was eight years old when I encountered War. He was a calculating and unbridled man. The Japanese invaded Singapore from the north

in the February of 1942, raining bombs on a city of bazaars. Appa never thought the Japanese, an Asian army, would dare attack a British colony, so we had barely fled before they liberated him of this fantasy and captured Sembawang. We took with us a second-hand army haversack stuffed with spare clothes, our cash savings wrapped in underwear, a two-kilo sack of white rice, a mess tin cradling some sour mango achar to embellish the rice, a robust iron pot, matchboxes and *The Jungle Book*. We trekked south and southeast towards Singapore city with the battle to our backs, trudging by the edge of long roads rutted by Bren gun carriers and Lanchester armoured cars, ready to dive face-first into the long grass if War flew over us or lobbed an artillery shell, our hands protecting the back of our heads against explosives and metal shrapnel.

One night, Appa and I slept under a stilted kampung house in what would now be called Bishan. I stared up at brown wooden planks with iron nails the size of my eyes and hoped the nails wouldn't transform into missiles and shoot down at us.

Appa had always called me "Thambi" or "younger brother" in Tamil. He had said we were more than father and son; we were brothers and best friends. I had liked that idea. "Thambi. Are you awake?"

I closed my eyes and pretended to sleep.

He patted the dry, packed earth between us. The stray mongrel lying at our feet perked its head. Flies scattered, swollen lumps of black diptera hovering over my skin. You would think that War would at least kill these parasites, but War was unsparing. "Thambi?" Appa said again.

"What, Appa?" I opened my eyes.

"I want you to know—this is the last time we'll run. The British are going to make one big advance tonight and we'll kick the Japanese out by tomorrow morning. You wait and see. God willing, when morning comes, we'll walk back to Sembawang and Appa will go back to work. Okay?"

I kept quiet, knowing he had been wrong before. He had been wrong too many times. Now, whenever he spoke of War as if he knew it, as if he were some Brigadier-General, I felt ashamed of him, and I felt even more ashamed and angry when we quietly packed our things and walked south and southeast every morning. I wished he would just be quiet.

Instead, he said, "The British are fighting hard, Thambi. They'll win, you'll see. How about this? Tomorrow, when we start work, I'll let you climb onto the ships, shimmy up the top deck and jump into the water. Your super dive. What do you say? You can swim in the sea for as long as you want. I'll ask Corporal Gibraltar to let you. I know he will. What do you say, Thambi?"

"I want to sleep, Appa."

"Don't talk like that, Thambi; just pray and it will all work out. Okay?"

"I said I want to sleep, Appa."

He stopped talking, stung. I closed my eyes, unbothered. In the quiet between Appa and me, I heard gunfire and grenade explosions. I no longer knew if I imagined it and I certainly didn't bother praying. *Om Shanti Shanti* wasn't going to save us and if the meek really did inherit the earth, my father would have been Emperor by now.

The next morning, we woke up and walked south and southeast again.

Appa and I finally reached Kallang, a warren of two-storey shophouses ringed by the brown and sullen Kallang River and the bumboats congesting its banks. Colourful bamboo laundry poles jutted out of the shophouses, their paint peeling. The roadside coffee shops were littered with cigarette butts and broken glass bottles and black footprints. A few wooden benches lay on their sides. A rickshaw was missing its wheels, sitting on the road like a duck. Over these, the Sultan mosque with its beautiful golden dome rose, its minarets piercing the sky. Near it was the gated colonial palace the Sassenach had built for the old Malay Sultan.

A Chinese man was trekking south to Tanjong Pagar with his family, and had heard the news from a teashop playing the Malayan Broadcasting Corporation radio. Face to face, he was a carbon copy of Appa, despite Appa's swarthinness. Their faces were tanned and beaten from heavy labour under the sun, and their hair dirtied by sleeping in the jungles. Their singlets and shorts were muddied. They wore slippers, smut caking their toes and spattered on their calves. The Chinese man said in Malay, "They surrendered. In two weeks. Two weeks! They forgot how to fight. They said they won't lose, they said they can't lose, then they surrendered. They only know how to talk. Talk and talk only. They only look out for themselves, because they are fighting in Europe also. But still, two weeks!" He swore in Hokkien, a language whose lewd vulgarity sparkles with its own delight. "They did not even send tanks. Did you see a tank here? There were no tanks, right or not? *Kan ni na!*"

Appa was shaking his head, stunned, as if he had been the one fighting and shell-shocked. "No, they can't lose. They said they can't lose."

"Lose? What lose?" The man spat. A wad of saliva burst onto the sand like a bomb. "Surrendered! My grandma can fight better than them. *Na bei!* It's our fault. We never should have trusted them. You lost your wife already? Go save your son. Okay okay, enough rest. Come, let's go! Come!" He shoved his wife, whose eyes were closing and head was drooping, and she stumbled forward. He carried his youngest son in one arm and prodded her further. The older son, my age, dragged the family's sole portmanteau the way he dragged his feet, and I thought: all over the world, our fathers are leading us to our demise.

Appa chased him. "Wait, are you sure? Are you sure? Where are you going?"

The man didn't stop. "I lie for what! It's over! What more you want? Go save yourself. We are *mati*."

We are dead.

Appa turned. His eyes, disbelieving black orbs, met mine. The family disappeared behind him. "I can't believe this, Thambi. They gave up. How could they surrender?"

Surrender. The word still echoes in my head. To stop trying. But what's the word for not trying in the first place? I am not sure if I thought this then or realised it after, but that Chinese man was right. It was our fault. Appa never fought. I never fought. We never even learned to fight. We just ran and ran from the Japanese like cowards and trusted the British to defend us. We had given up first.

That evening, Appa and I snuck onto an abandoned bumboat on the Kallang River to sleep. The floor bobbed with a deceptive gentleness. There were no gunshots. There were no missiles. Instead, an empty silence hung over Singapore, brooding with the uncertainty of tomorrow, a terrifying sky to sleep under.

At midnight, glass shattered and a baby cried. A saw shrieked through metal as looters tore shutters apart and hammered down doors. I rolled against the damp wooden starboard side and cupped my ears as a man screamed and another man yelled at him. A thump. Then a woman begging. Appa started talking into my ear and I pushed him away. Although the bumboat owner didn't return, I didn't sleep that night.

The next morning, a light blue sky dawned on quiet and empty streets, but the night revealed itself in the brown bloodstains congealed on the road, the crusted glass bits and broken metal jewelling the asphalt, and a parang lying in a drain, crimson-tipped. Watch shops and pawn shops and mama shops were laid open, missing shutters and doors. Their shelves were empty, glass cabinets broken, tin containers toppled over, and leftover rice grains and biscuits trampled over. The people of Kallang had boarded themselves inside the tenement houses above the shops and shut the windows, and no sound came from them. The bamboo poles had been emptied of clothes. Only a

few men like Appa roamed the street in wide-eyed amazement. One carried a butcher's knife. I reached for the parang but Appa told me to toss it back into the drain.

We walked up to Jalan Besar and I tugged his arm. A mama shop stood across the street, four jumbo Chinese characters emblazoned across its peeling iron signboard. Inside the mart, three men hauled a fourth away from his cash register. They wrestled him against a cupboard stacked with Chinese alcohol bottles, and spread his arms like a crucifixion. They stuffed his mouth with cloth and punched him in the gut. His eyes bulged and they punched him and punched him until he sat. A looter booted his privates and his eyes rolled up into his head. They started pulling an empty rice sack over his body.

Appa said, "Mind your business and walk." As if reading my mind, he clasped my mouth and picked me up. Muffled, I slapped his arms and kicked at air as he dashed down the road. He turned into an alley between the shophouses and only put me down in the middle of it. The alley was empty except for a pile of rubbish buckets, cardboard boxes and a grey mattress leaning against the wall at the end. Two alley cats coiled amidst the rubbish and watched us. Appa grabbed my arms. His bushy eyebrows sat heavily above large deep eyes.

I spoke before he could. "Why did you do that, Appa? Why didn't we help him?"

"Help him? How? We would have ended up dead. This is no time to be a hero, Thambi."

"We could have tried. Now he's going to die. For sure." I kicked a loose stone at the cats. They did not move.

"Thambi, stop fooling around. Please."

"I am not fooling around! He's going to die! We must help him, Appa!"

"Stop shouting. Please, Thambi."

I quieted. "I'm not scared. Not like you."

"Well, you should be. There is no law, no police, nothing to save us

now. You saw what those thieves were doing, right? You think anyone is going to punish them for it? You think they would have just done a *namaskaram* for you and said sorry and left if you had told them to stop? Be smart, Thambi."

"Stop talking like you know everything, Appa. You don't know anything. That man is dead because of you. We are homeless because of you. We lost everything because of you. Because of you!" I stuck a finger into his face.

His eyes widened. "So you are going to behave like a little child? You're not my thambi anymore, right? You're a child, right?"

I glared back. I refused to be emotionally blackmailed like this and I shouted, "I am not scared!"

His hands bolted over my mouth. Then a spondaic pulse throbbed under my feet. The street shivered. *Tennō heika banzai! Tennō heika banzai!* Leather boots beat against the tarred road. The sounds grew louder and closer. Locks latched into the doors and clicked into the windows around us as Kallang sprang to life for one second. Then it died away. Appa said, "*Jappankarran.*"

The Japanese.

He grabbed my hand and we sprinted to the end of the alley to see if it was true. The cats, the smarter creatures, slipped past us and ran off towards Jalan Besar.

The Japanese soldiers were marching onto Kallang Road in four columns. The soldiers wore earthy uniforms with peaked caps and gripped long and polished rifles high and still over their shoulders. A blood-red band wrapped each cap and a gold star in the centre of the band glinted in the sun. Rows and rows of thin bayonets stuck out like a field of luminescent silver grass. The soldiers swung their left fists in swift jerks, up and back, up and back. They marched as one disciplined leviathan called War, boots crunching together, advancing furiously. A fluttering flag led this parade, white with a large crimson ball in the centre, a big pottu, burning brightest of all.

Migi! Hidari! Tennō heika banzai!

These were the men who had chased me from my home. These were the men who had made Appa look like a fool. A fury came into me as they advanced closer: anger at them and at Appa. I wanted to show Appa that we didn't need to be afraid. So I stalked onto the street.

Appa yanked me back. I struggled even more furiously against him, and he wrestled me into the rubbish, sitting, pulling me into his clutch, a bucket upturning its waste, the stench of rotten fish and manure rising around us. He hissed, "Thambi. Stop this. Please. Please. Listen to me for once. Please, I'm begging you." I could not speak because his hand covered my mouth. Still I struggled to escape and throw myself at the enemy as the drumming under my feet grew louder and louder, as if the earth itself was churning, and wanted to erupt against the oncoming army. I didn't care what happened to me.

The commands boomed inside the alleyway. The soldiers filed past the entrance and the timed beat of their boots shook the hutong. Left, right. Left, right. Every second, a new soldier marched past the entrance. But he could have been the same tanned clean-shaven face, cropped hair, clenched jaw, pinched eyes, left arm swung to ninety degrees, leg kicked out to forty-five, cold, ruthless, relentless. They looked the same and marched the same. They had no differences. They were one machine.

Then a soldier turned his head. His sharp eyes met mine for an instant, and a cold fear gripped me. He turned back and disappeared.

Appa's grip had become painful, but I had also stopped struggling.

It was an endless parade of soldiers. When the last trooper marched past, desert-green light tanks thundered after him, the same Japanese soldiers standing at the turrets, saluting the flag, proud and confident. Then armoured jeeps and lorries camouflaged in green netting rolled after the tanks. This time, I let Appa cover my ears.

The procession lasted forever. Even after the victory parade moved on to the Municipal Building that is now City Hall, it felt like Japanese

soldiers and tanks still rumbled through Kallang and the ground still shook. As I let the aftershock subside, Appa took a long breath. We knew who was in charge now.

Appa sensed the difference in me and did not press the point. "Are you okay, Thambi?" he said.

I nodded. "What do we do now, Appa?"

"Survive," he said, reaching for the mattress.

Appa and I built a house on a patch of grass and sand between Kallang Road and the river. We propped thin sheets of rusted zinc and tin, cardboard and wood to resemble the four walls of a container, a little shorter than Appa, and nailed them into place. Then we leaned the ramshackle concoction against a tree and nailed it to the tree. We used the spare sheets and enormous attap leaves that had drifted down the river from the mangrove swamps to make a roof. I sat on Appa's shoulders and thatched the roof, alternating long logs below and above the layers of metal and leaves to hold the roof in place. Appa smacked it a few times to make sure it wouldn't collapse under rain. There was no door, only a sheet to be dragged aside for us to enter and leave our new home. It was a small house and it took us two days to cobble it together.

The Japanese patrols started the next day. The soldiers were sharply dressed and carried themselves with arrogance. They strutted in pairs in the middle of Kallang Road, rifles hung in front like warning signs saying "Behave", fingers near the trigger saying "Do not give me an excuse to kill you". They stared disdainfully at the underclothes that had started hanging from the bamboo poles again, at the rubbish thrown outside and at the few boats that had started plying the river in search of work.

The locals started trickling out of their houses to go to work and pretend life could continue as usual. When they saw the patrols, they squirmed even as they tried not to look uncomfortable. Once, a man broke and ran; the soldiers hollered and chased after him and they disappeared around the bend. A brief breakout of chaos, quickly

replaced by the veneer of peace where everyone pretended nothing had happened in the hope that nothing would happen.

Appa noted that the soldiers patrolled Kallang Road at nine in the morning and four in the afternoon, making one pass in the direction of Jalan Besar. During those hours, he hid in a corner of our house and left the door open to show we had nothing to hide. He held me to make sure I didn't do anything stupid, but as the days passed and the patrols continued, I needed less and less warning.

A week after Surrender, I realised our small rice sack was almost empty and waited for nighttime to retrace my steps to the mama shop on Jalan Besar Road. No one had cleaned the dried blood that had spilled onto the street, and I imagined the shopkeeper's assailants dragging out his body in the sack to dispose of it, the blood soaking through the canvas.

I followed the red trail into the shop and it led to an emptied cash register. There were still spare rice grains that had spilled onto the ground. I thought we could boil the dirt away, so I took off my shirt and swept the grains into it, careful to avoid any blood-soaked rice.

I rolled up my shirt and took it back to Appa. When I showed him the rice, he frowned. "Did I raise a thief?"

The Mahatma was balancing the iron pot on four jagged stones, a slapdash stove. He had lit a fire with the broken branches underneath and only its weak orange glow and the moonlight shone upon the dark walls of the house. The haversack lay crumpled behind Appa. A few extra stones, a mound of red nails, a corroded hammer, and our leftover pickles sat listlessly on it. We had lain out the lumpy mattress beside the haversack and piled our clothes at its end. Appa had buried that useless weight of *The Jungle Book* the moment he accepted that the Japanese had won. The house stank of us and the river, but we had become used to it.

I said, "Appa, our rice is running out. I was hungry and I wanted to help you."

"We can find a kopitiam or a market or something. We still have money. We are not a family of thieves. Put that down."

I put my shirt filled with rice on the grass. "Appa, all the shops are shuttered." He touched the pot to feel it warm up and I pushed my case. "And there was no one in this shop. It was empty. The rice doesn't belong to anyone."

"Did you pay for it?"

"No, but everyone else is taking from the shops too."

"Thambi, what are you saying? So if everyone does something, that makes it okay? If everyone kills their fathers for food, will you stab me too?"

"Of course not, Appa."

"I raised you to be better than that."

"Then we should have helped the shopkeeper instead of worrying about stealing from him after he's dead!"

"What shopkeeper?" His eyes widened. "You went back to that mama shop. Thambi, that was different."

"Why?"

"What could we have done?"

"We could have tried. We didn't even try."

"Try? You're an eight-year-old boy. You must know your limits. How could we have fought off three armed men, all grown up? They would have killed you and me and strung our bodies upside down outside the shop. My job is to look after you. You are my first and only priority. What does the *Gita* say? We must all do our duty. My duty is to you."

"Why are you always scared? Why are you always running away?"

"Are you not afraid of the Japanese soldiers when you see them?"

"No."

Appa smiled. "Okay. You are more man than me. And I'm proud of you. But maybe one day when you have your own son to look after, you'll be afraid for him. Sit. I want to tell you something."

“What?” I sat cross-legged.

“Don’t be rude, Thambi.” Even his admonishingly arched eyebrow was kind. He was never angry with me. “Thambi, these Japanese are a different species from the British. You heard them going around with their loudspeakers telling the Chinese men to report for screening, for an examination. People say that the Japanese are looking for anyone who opposed them. And some people don’t come back from the screening. You know Appa used to work for the British. Do you think they’ll be kind to me if they find out? The Japanese are ruthless, Thambi. I want us to keep a low profile. This is serious. You cannot go around stealing or attracting any kind of attention, or we are both dead. You must listen to me. Will you do that please?”

The water started to bubble. I was tired of his excuses. “You didn’t help the British fight. You didn’t even help a dying man. And now you don’t want to take free food when you can’t even feed us. Why would the Japanese want you?”

Appa looked wounded that I thought the Japanese wouldn’t want him. I bit my lip. I had not meant to hurt him. He said, “I know what I can and cannot do. You must too.” He extended his hand, producing a packet of pandan leaf wrapped around rice.

He must have hoped to surprise me before we started arguing. I hated myself then. I turned my head away and said, “I’m not hungry.” I didn’t deserve it.

“Take it. I know you are.” He put on his fake parent smile, pretending to be unhurt and encouraging.

“You?” I asked.

“I’ve eaten.”

For as long as I can remember, he never ate without me. “I don’t believe you,” I said. “I’ll only eat if you take some.”

His smile broke out more sincerely. In the end, he was my Appa, and when we got along I felt better. He said, “Okay. But will you behave?”

I nodded.

By erecting our makeshift home on grass, we had also effectively laid claim to some of the land around it, a mini-colonisation, so to speak. But over the next weeks and months, we shared this riverside property with other dwellers who arrived but never left, and I assumed they had fled their homes too. They constructed their shacks around ours and I started calling our shared land Garden Country.

And Appa and I were grateful for the other Garden Country residents. For one, our home blended into a maze of jerry-built houses that blocked our views of Kallang Road, which meant the Japanese soldiers couldn’t see us from the road either. What’s more, Appa didn’t want to collect ration cards from the Japanese administrators because they would ask him many questions. So we planted sweet potato sprouts into the soil and let it rain and shine on it and we urinated on it and shat on it. After two months, we boiled and ate the potatoes. But we and the other residents could never know when our potatoes, tapioca, or anything else we reared in our commons would run out and so we shared our food. The farmers Wong and Chin kept chickens and Uncle Malik fished in the Kallang River. Appa occasionally bartered a potato for an egg or a small tarpon. This was our banana money. And we helped each other to keep an eye on these chickens and vegetables in case robbers had any ideas, and warned each other if a Japanese patrol approached.

However, Appa did not trust the Garden Country dwellers, or anyone or anything for that matter. I sometimes caught cockroaches and grasshoppers, collecting them in glass bottles and giving them to Uncle Wong as chicken feed, in exchange for the tapioca crisps I heard his wife fry. But I lied to Appa that Auntie Wong gave me the crisps for free and did not tell him that I had climbed into the canal near Rochor Road and wandered among the homeless sleeping under sarongs to catch bugs. He would have banned me from leaving our house altogether.

Appa did not even like me talking to Uncle Wong. But knowing interaction was inevitable within Garden Country, he reminded me to talk as little as possible. Which is in general good advice. He said at every dinner, “Thambi, you remember that kampung house that we slept under? Remember, we used to live there. I reared chickens and farmed spinach and we lost everything during the war. Are you listening to me?”

“How do you grow spinach, Appa?”

“You put it in the soil and wait. One day, it grows up and never listens to you and asks you a thousand questions. Now, remember this. Don’t say anything to anyone unless you are asked. Okay, Thambi?”

“Yes, Appa.”

“And if you are asked...”

“We lived in a kampung and farmed spinach that talks back to their fathers.”

“You rascal.” He tried to pull my ear but I leaned away. He laughed. “But Thambi, no joking. There are informants everywhere and we cannot take the risk. Be careful what you say. These guys are scoundrels. Traitors. If I lay my hands on one, I will strangle them myself. Bastards.” His eyes widened and he bit his lips. I was also taken aback by his vehemence. I hadn’t imagined him capable of such intensity of feeling, let alone violence, even towards quislings.

Appa rubbed his callused legs miserably. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have spoken like that. In fact, I shouldn’t speak about these things to you at all. You are my thambi, yes, but sometimes I forget that you are also still a young boy. A big boy, but a young boy. And I should frighten you less with my scary stories. It’s just that I want to protect you. But still, I’m sorry, Thambi.”

“I’m big enough, Appa. Don’t worry.”

Quite frankly, I didn’t see why any of our neighbours would care, and who would tell? I loved and respected Appa, but he was no hero. Why would the Japanese wander through the squalid smelly

slum I had euphemistically named Garden Country to find him? Nevertheless, I promised Appa that I would keep my mouth shut and till today I am certain I kept that promise. I have no culpability for what happened next, beyond the fact that Appa and I had been too weak to stop it.

Seven months into the Occupation, Appa and I sat around the “stove” eating sweet potatoes boiled in coconut milk and water for dinner. We had lost much weight these months. Every time Appa shaved, it revealed a smaller and smaller visage, and his aquiline nose grew more and more bulbous on his face. His rib cage jutted out of his skin like the prongs of a fork and his stomach and arms curved inwards like spoons. But one advantage of being constantly hungry was that our appetites shrank too, so our stomachs required less food to feel full, and on average our state of hunger stayed miserably constant despite the food we had. After we ate, Appa dipped a finger into the pot. Satisfied it had cooled, he said, “Here. Drink the water.” I drank the saccharine liquid, careful not to waste a drop. After three regulated sips, I handed the pot to Appa.

In Garden Country, we were used to slippers and bare feet. So when thick leather boots crunched into the soil with strength and conviction, crushing our sweet potatoes and Kipling, our breaths caught.

An army of boots had swarmed onto our garden. Appa glanced at the shut door. Rising, he placed a finger on his chapped lips before carrying me to the corner farthest from the door, stepping onto the mattress. He sat, sinking into it, holding me in his lap, and we watched the door.

Through the tin wall, men spoke in hushed tones. But one soldier spoke loudly; deep, clear and assertive. He spoke in the guttural harsh chopping tempo of the Japanese language and I was clueless as to what he actually said, but understood that he was broadcasting his authority and impatience for Garden Country to hear. He went on for minutes until it became worse. It became quiet.

There was only the dark. We had thatched the roof so well by this time that even moonlight did not enter the house. I heard only our hearts beating, sensed that beat connecting all of us in Garden Country, throbbing with one question: Who did they come for? It was a waiting game where trying to pre-empt anything would guarantee us the fate we wanted to avoid in the first place, and so we waited. Appa hugged me tighter and his bones pressed against me. His breathing had become straggled over these months and it grew louder in my ear. He said, a whisper, "*Kadavule.*"

God.

A lightning sound sprang from the door. The scrap metal sheet fell back. The house shook and a few loose leaves fell, but the house held. Japanese soldiers poured into the doorway and fanned outwards, yelling and screaming in guttural Japanese. White torchlight burst into my eyes, bright and blinding.

By the time my vision cleared, five soldiers had encircled Appa and me, their round helmets shaking, jabbing their rifles at us, angrily spitting out words, cautioning us, as if *we* threatened *them*. Appa shielded my eyes with one hand and I squinted through his fingers. Two troopers stalked towards us, one foot after another, barrels squared at Appa's face, shouting at him.

A soldier grabbed his left arm and Appa let go of me right away. The soldier pulled him on his side, away from me. The Arisaka rifles swivelled to follow Appa and I was suddenly released and alone in the cacophony of light and shouting. Before I knew it, I was running towards Appa. He shouted at me louder than all the Japanese soldiers combined, screaming in Tamil, "Stay there! Thambi! Don't come! Stay there, Thambi!"

The soldier dragging Appa let go and shoved his muzzle into Appa's face. He barked in Japanese, out-shouting Appa into shutting up. Appa sat on the ground with his legs splayed out and only stared at me and extended a hand. "Stay there! Thambi! Don't come!"

The other soldier let me run past him but grabbed my neck from behind and lifted me up. My windpipe clenched shut and my feet kicked air, trying to kick backwards into his groin. Appa's eyes widened and he tried to stand but the soldier kicked him in the stomach and he sprawled on the ground. The soldier pressed his boot onto his chest, standing on top of him like a statue of Vishnu destroying a rakshasa, the archangel Michael standing over Lucifer. Appa tried to shove that leg off, shouting in Tamil at the soldier, "Let him go! Let him go! Thambi!" He craned his neck to look at me and his words grew strained and breathless as the boot pressed deeper into his chest. The soldier thrust his barrel into Appa's face and yelled back at him. Appa's head fell back against the floor.

I bit into the forearm of the soldier holding me, tasting sour uniform, sweaty meat, the metallic twang of blood. He screamed and dropped me and I ran towards Appa, but another soldier blocked my way. He clenched me just below the neck, fixed me to the spot. I tried wrestling his hand off, twisting away, but his grip never wavered.

Two soldiers sat Appa up from behind and dragged him by the armpits, backwards and on his bum, towards the open door. Appa twisted his torso, bucked his hips, thrashed his legs in all directions, shouting, "Let him go! Let him go!" But the soldiers' faces were dour and uncaring, as if Appa wasn't writhing at all, as if they were just towing the fallen dead log of a tree to the side of the road so a car could pass. They had stopped shouting at him, given up trying to communicate with him.

Then Appa's eyes met mine, the only human relationship in the house. They grew large and worried and he was crying. He said, "Don't do anything, Thambi! Don't do anything, okay! It will be fine! It will be fine!" He said in English: "I love you, Thambi!"

I bit the hand holding me. But it slipped behind my head and grabbed a fistful of my hair and yanked it. I screamed and found myself staring up at the soldier.

He wore a peaked cap instead of a helmet. His black eyes, hawklike, contemplated me. At the edge of his right eye, a little scar had healed into a soft, white furrow. He had a bridge-like nose and a flat broad moustache and lips so thin they accentuated the contempt in his mien. His mouth sneered to the right in contemplation, enhancing his arrogance. He said in English, slowly and loudly as if it pained him to say it, but intended to be clear with his message. He was the man who had spoken so loudly and boldly outside. He said it in English but they were basic words and I caught them: "This is not your war."

Then he raised his pistol in his right hand, holding it by the butt high above my head. It gleamed, self-assured in all its power. It was as if the pistol had turned on a light and shone on all of us to reveal our strange equality at the bottom, this soldier, me, Appa being dragged away on his bum and shouting my name faintly in the distance. We were nothing without the favour of the gun. I shut my eyes and made to turn my head away, and felt the butt crash down on my nose.

...

When I woke up, I lay horizontal, staring at the blank ceiling. Everything seemed serenely orange. It was quiet. To remind me that I was alive, my nose throbbed. I put two fingers to it and pinched gingerly upwards from the nostrils. At the bridge bone, a sharp pain flared and I cried out. I focused on my breathing to let the pain subside. I could still breathe normally and assumed it was a benign bruise. A face entered my vision, blocking out half the ceiling, peering at me.

He was as bald as the sun on the Japanese flag, with predatory black eyes, a black moustache and a cut by his right eye. I kicked with hands and feet, scrambling backwards until my head hit a wall. I cried and held the injured balakkoo with one hand and looked around me. On my right, a rice-straw tatami mat blanketed the cement floor, a stony bed. Uniforms and white shirts hung on nails above it, the nails drilled in the straightest of lines, the uniforms pressed flat into the wall

like posters. A greenish ochre military fieldpack sat at the head of the tatami, compact and ready to go. A shiny aluminium mess tin lay on its right with a rolled-up tissue like leftover food mopped up inside. On my left, a wide timber board rested on four standing bricks. The papers and pens on top suggested it was a desk that he sat on the floor to use. On the left of the desk lay a Type 99 Arisaka rifle, shortened to suit the close quarters of jungle fighting, cleaned and polished so the brown wood and black bolt gleamed. A pyramid of rolled-up papers rose next to it. On the other side of the desk there were a few patterned sake bottles and ceramic cups smaller than my fists. It was still dark outside and the orange light above us was on.

The Japanese soldier watched me, a shadow of amusement dancing on his lips. He knelt on one leg, leaning an elbow on it. He had removed his boots and had strikingly flawless white socks. A long *guntō*, sheathed in dark brown, hung from his left hip, declaring him to be an officer. He holstered the black automatic pistol he had slugged me with on his right hip, wrapped safely (for my sake) in russet leather. A white armband circled his left bicep and two red Japanese characters were emblazoned on it. I did not need to know Japanese to know what they meant: the Kempeitai—the Japanese Secret Military Police, the ghoulis all-powerful guardian of Japanese Fascism, its power honed into ruthlessness by racial supremacism and religious fervour. The Kempeitai wrote and enforced its own laws while it operated above them. They organised the screening centres Appa had been afraid of, led the pogroms of Chinese nationalists and British loyalists, massacred anyone who disagreed with them, and methodically ran everything in Japan-occupied Singapore from torture chambers to brothels—often using the threat of one to bolster the power of the other. Everyone knew the Kempeitai.

The night came back to me unsequentially, in one rush, beginning with this soldier bashing me with the pistol, the soldiers invading my home, dragging Appa out, the harsh Japanese yelling, the lights

flashing. Memory didn't need to order time and space to know what happened, it just did. But memory couldn't tell me where Appa was. Before I realised it, I had barked at him, my questions sounding braver than I felt. "Where is Appa? Where is Appa?"

He frowned at me and his lips sneered to the right again. "Indo-jin?" he said and I remembered his voice. It rang clearly. He said again, feeling the word as he pronounced it, "Indian?"

I nodded and said again with restraint, "Where is Appa?" I sounded like a beggar.

He tilted his head to the right. "Engurish?" he said.

I had learned a little of the language from the soldiers on Sembawang base. "Father where?"

"Mm." He lifted a hand high above his head, palm faced down as if he gripped a ball from its top. He was indicating a taller person and he said a word in Japanese and I knew it referred to father.

I nodded. "Father where?"

He put on a crestfallen face, more to communicate his message than to express his feelings. He brought his hand down and shook his sad face. Then he raised his eyebrows and shoulders, and lifted his palms upwards. It seemed like his torso had detached itself from his hips and ascended towards heaven. He looked around wonderingly, as if a toy was missing, as if looking for it, and puzzled and sorry, shook his head at me.

I nodded. "You know." Then I said in English, "You know."

He shook his head and raised his palms and searched around again. I needed him to know that I didn't believe him, that I deserved the truth, that I wanted Appa back. I shouted in Tamil, finger accusingly pointed at him, "You know! Don't lie! You know!"

He shook his head sadly. I yelled, a throaty, pitiful war cry of a prepubescent boy. Scrambling to my feet, I charged him. What I was hoping for or expecting, till today I don't know. I didn't find out either. He calmly gripped my arms to my sides and held my body as I ran on

the spot and screamed into his face. His grip was firm and strong and he watched me coolly, as if he were a father waiting for his child to calm down, which enraged me even more—that he presided over me so patronisingly, in a way I had not even allowed Appa to. I screamed louder and thrashed harder to break out of his hold. Tears ran down my face. I felt angry at the unfairness of my impotence. I believed then as a child, as strongly as I believe now, that I had done no wrong and wanted to do no wrong to anyone, whereas he had committed many atrocities and wanted to steal more fathers from their sons. Yet life had granted him power over me. It wasn't fair.

Soon, I stopped flailing and crying. He pushed me downwards, so I sat. He used a strong finger to lift my chin. I slapped it away and looked down, saying in a quiet mumble, "No touch me."

He touched my chin again and I slapped his finger. He pinched my nose at the bridge and pain seared through me. I screamed and swatted at his hands until he finally let go. Then I breathed heavily, exhausted from the pain and effort. He raised a finger at me, like a flagpole stuck out that said, "I am warning you." He lifted my chin again.

I let him and found myself gaping into his eagle eyes. The stinging in my nose ebbed but I was too afraid to touch it. He pointed at his chest and said, "*Rikugun* Kurosawa *desu*." He articulated it slowly and with emphasis, thrice. He pointed at my lips and quacked his fingers.

I said, "*Rikugun* Kurosawa *desu*."

He shook his head. His hand wiped away at the air. "*Desu' ga chigau*." He said in English, "No *desu*. No." He pointed at his chest again. "*Rikugun* Kurosawa."

Later, I learned that "*desu*" was a form of "I am". I had called myself, "*Rikugun* Kurosawa". Having corrected this, he quacked his fingers at my lips again.

I must have pronounced it right because he broke into a smile, flashing narrow white teeth. He nodded gleefully. *Rikugun* Kurosawa.

Lieutenant Kurosawa. Henceforth, I would call him that.

Kurosawa poked my solar plexus. He converted the poke to a questioning open palm. I told him my name. He frowned at me and I said it again. We spent a few minutes where he butchered and mangled my name and I half-heartedly repeated it. Finally, he smiled and nodded. He pointed at himself and said, "Lieutenant Kurosawa." He pointed at me and said, "Nanban."

I presumed he meant "friend" and I did not want to be his friend. I did not want him to baptise me like this. I told him my name again but he shook his head. "No. Nanban."

I shook my head and said my name.

He frowned strictly and crossed his wrists into an X. He brought both hands down and across each other like two katanas. He pointed at me. "Nanban." That was his name for me. No more discussion. What's in a name? Only people with power over others, like colonisers over subjects, slave-owners over slaves, parents over babies, can name them. I was Nanban because he said so. To accept it was to submit to him.

I nodded and he looked satisfied. Later, I learned "Nanban" meant "southern barbarian" in Japanese, which is ironic because I had thought it meant "friend", as "nanban" does in Tamil.

Anyway, perhaps pleased we had settled this matter and not ready for the frustrations of further communication, he stood up, towering over me with his hands on his hips, as if finalising our arrangement. Without irony, he said in English, "You safe here." He grabbed his rifle and left the house and I watched sadly as the Arisaka departed with him. Even if I did not know how to use it, it felt like an opportunity was slipping away into the night. I looked around the room and its alienness and emptiness made me feel lonelier.

But Kurosawa returned shortly, holding a wooden broom my height. He held it out and waited, and I took the broom from him. It was light. He gestured around the stony floor, which appeared clean

to me. He grabbed the back of my neck and shoved it downwards, a quick firm jerk. Under the desk, at the back, a diaphanous cobweb adorned the eave like stage curtains. Kurosawa pointed at the web and the room and drew his slung rifle out. He made a sweeping motion with it and I hoped he would shoot himself in the foot. He said, "Sōji. Sōji." He stopped and stared at me. "*Wakatta ka?*"

We had learned to say "*wakarimasen*" after the Surrender because that meant "I don't understand" in Japanese. It was a handy phrase, but also useful for bootlicking because it demonstrated that we had tried to learn our new lords and masters' language. Power, by its existence, simply demands. I assumed from Kurosawa's questioning face that he was asking if I understood him and swept the floor to demonstrate that I did.

He didn't say anything else. I asked, "Father?"

He shook his head. We were not to discuss this anymore. "Sōji," he said and pointed at the table.

Giving up for now, I crawled onto my belly and stuck the broom into the saturnine crevice between the table board and floor. I heard Kurosawa step out of the room. I was alone again. The broom's bristles dragged the silvery cobweb away from the wall and the board jumped a little. Dust and gossamer swarmed towards my face.

"Appa," I said into the cranny, "where are you?"

I wanted to hear him say, "Thambi."

Nothing.

Appa?

I hated my father. He had deserted me. He always justified his actions, telling me it was for the best, it was for my safety. But now, I was in the hands of a Japanese Kempeitai Lieutenant. If only Appa had fought, fought for the 44th Indian Infantry Brigade, manufactured explosives for the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army, anything, we might have been better off. If only he had tried harder. After all, it could not have been worse than this.

I became angry, at Appa, at the lieutenant, at the world. I wanted to escape, to rescue Appa, and build a new life for us. One that I would control. One that would be *right*. I hated him.

I was alone and terrified.

I wiped the tears that started running from my eyes. As much as I hated Appa, I missed him very much too.

After the War

Her name was Papatti, pronounced Papa with a T, with the stress on the second “pa”. It was 1952, seven years after the Japanese Occupation. Papatti didn’t remember the Occupation, and the British ruled Singapore again now.

She was ten years old and tall for her age, but despaired that she still needed to take two steps for each of her father’s to match his stride. Papatti marched between him and her mother along Jalan Besar Road. She was dressed in an azure tunic that matched the free sky, collar stiff to her chin. She had thrown a dark blue shawl over her left shoulder. Her baggy pants were dark blue too. Her snowy socks and shoes, which she had washed and dried twice to be immaculately free of dust, glimmered like the light. Papatti felt older and more dignified in her uniform.

She sidestepped the owner of the Kwong Soon Lights and Fans store coming out to spit phlegm, and almost knocked into a barber shaving a man’s beard. The man sat slouched, falling asleep on the chair installed into the pavement outside the store as the razor stroked his chin. Papatti automatically placed a finger straight over her nose to make sure the pottu on her forehead remained centred between her eyebrows. She checked out the uniforms awash around her as

other children hurried to school—polka-dotted white shirt on black skirt, beige shirt and pants tied with a maroon belt. She recognised a convent school’s blue pinafore with regret. Like Papatti, the smaller children were chaperoned by their parents. The few older teenagers walked alone or in posses, chattering excitedly while their feet led the way they knew so well. Papatti wrinkled her nose at one puffing a cigarette, but envied their independence. One day, she would be one of them.

Ahead on Jalan Besar Road, a boy sat *à cheval* on the main bar of a tottering bicycle. His father sat on the rubber seat and cycled with legs pointed outwards so as not to knock his son onto the road, and Papatti felt relieved her father had not subjected her to that discomfort, even if he loved to cycle.

Some short boys had buzzed their heads bald for the new school year. Papatti understood that schools had strict rules governing hair length, but did these boys have to buzz their heads like Buddhist monks? Papatti released her mother’s hand and reached for her hair. She had pulled her long, ramrod-straight black hair into a thick plait that shone with the oil her mother massaged into it every night. Her ribbon at the end had not fallen off.

“What are you doing, Papatti?” her mother said in Punjabi, hand stretched towards her.

Papatti elbowed a passing man’s briefcase out of the way with a little violence. Body odour sledgehammered her. He peered at her queerly, tripped and hurried onward. The man’s shirt was so damp a singlet showed underneath. She seized her mother’s hand again.

Ahead, a woman was squatting and pouring water from a pail over her two naked little sons, and Papatti and her mother raised their hands like a bridge as the younger boy hollered and ran between them, wetting the corridor with his footprints. Like them, there were other children not going to school. Two girls carried long sticks across their shoulders, rattan baskets hanging off them filled with clothes for the

dhobi, the baskets swinging wildly. Another girl squatted beside her mother, plucking off the tails of beansprouts and pooling them on a newspaper like a mound of white tadpoles, along with water spinach, celery and brinjal. A boy grilled skewers on a low cart, the s-shaped smoke rising. She was glad not to be them.

Papatti’s mother was a skinny Tamil woman called Lalitha, who wore a purple saree that captured the light tightly with a golden hue. The other women walking on Jalan Besar also wore darker shirts—or lighter materials—to thwart the tropical weather from besmirching their modesty. Despite the heat, Lalitha had wrapped a purple shawl around her head like a hood. Papatti’s father was a tall, broad-shouldered Punjabi man called Rajpal, big but lanky. He was unnaturally fairer than her mother, and wore a short-sleeved white shirt and black pants over brown chappals. Papatti had selected, washed and ironed her parents’ clothes the past week with all the diligence she believed a schoolgoing child should muster.

An old man dressed in brown shorts and a smeared white shirt like an overgrown schoolboy pushed a three-wheeled street cart of nasi lemak beside Rajpal and shouted his one-item menu at the oncoming cars, motorbikes and trishaws, and they honked back and swerved around him angrily. His son, of Papatti’s age, was swinging his legs from the top of the cart and shouting Hokkien curses back at the vehicles. Ignoring him, Papatti said in Punjabi, “Amma, Appa, I’m memorising the way already. By next week, you won’t have to walk me to school anymore, okay? I can go myself. I won’t walk close to the road. I won’t talk to anyone. I won’t even talk back to anyone. I promise. Amma please. I won’t. I’m only talking back to you, not to a stranger! This is different. Amma!”

The eponymous Bencoolen Primary School on Bencoolen Road, where classes were taught in the Punjabi language, was a twenty-minute walk from Papatti’s house on Serangoon Road. By the time they reached its campus, Papatti’s sweat had mixed with the talcum

powder on her face to form a creamy lather. Papatti wished she had talked less, a constant refrain from her amma that she never heeded until she was panting, as she was now.

Black iron gates sprung open onto a vast pink-cobbled courtyard. At the end, a three-storey polished white façade rose like a cliff face. Boys and girls in the blue hues of her uniform streamed in, noise billowing in their wake. Papatti had begged her parents for two years for this opportunity and finally, they had given her the chance. Soon, Papatti would attend classes independently, ask intelligent questions, find her clique, and walk between Serangoon and Bencoolen roads without parental supervision. In school, children ruled children.

Her appa knelt before her. Below his black turban, he had hefty round eyes, a voluminous nose that she liked to pull and a thin black beard that she loved rubbing. Papatti skirted his bear hug and pecked him quickly on his cheek. His open eyes and arms implored her still, but Papatti was more worried that her soon-to-be schoolmates had seen the sentimental kiss. He said, “You don’t want to hug your appa?”

Her amma, Lalitha, not one for hugs and kisses, tapped her feet. Her round and fierce eyes, prominently hooked nose and strong cheekbones protruded out of a small, round, tight face. It would have been tight even if the heavens broke and God declared himself to her. A thick ring studded her nose, a bulkier version of Papatti’s. She handed Papatti a tiffin box that shimmered in the torrid sun, reflecting Papatti’s effort the night before to polish it. The tin felt warm and she had done a good job. Rajpal stood and held up a boxy backpack like a jacket for her to sling her arms into.

Lalitha said, “Behave, Papatti.”

“Okay. You can go home now. See you!”

Before her appa could ask for another hug, Papatti ran through the gate and into the swelling throng of new schoolmates. In the courtyard, a turbaned, bespectacled teacher with a sage’s thick beard was saying in Punjabi, “Quietly now children. I said *quietly!* Jaswinder, you know

where to go. Go.” He held a clipboard. A line of ten students had formed in front of him. Jaswinder, clearly a senior student, raised an eyebrow at Papatti and headed straight for his classroom.

At her turn, Papatti said, “Good morning teacher. I am Papatti, daughter of Rajpal.”

“Who? Ah. You are Rajpal’s daughter. Is he outside?”

“Yes teacher.”

“Of course he is. You are all he talks about. Okay, wait.” He unfurled a few papers and thumbed one victoriously. “Here.” He turned and pointed at a block of tinted windows on the second floor. “Class 1B. It’s that one. Can you see it?”

“Yes. Thank you teacher.”

“You are tall for your level, aren’t you?”

Papatti said, “Yes teacher. I—”

“I know, girl. Don’t worry. It’s not unusual for students to start late. Go and meet your new friends. I will see you shortly. Remember, have fun.”

He winked and she liked him already. “Thank you teacher.”

Papatti’s tiffin box swung as she skipped to the staircase. From the second-floor corridor, she saw her appa slouched like a forlorn bear, waving meekly, while her amma had started walking off. Papatti waved once and entered her classroom.

Class 1B was filled with three rows of wooden tables and chairs painted in grey. Students had filled out the back row and sides and stared at Papatti with the hostility of strangers. Avoiding their gazes, Papatti found the table front and centre, as she had planned. She parked her bag against the table leg, pulled out a notepad and arranged two pencils at the head of the table before sitting, vision of propriety. A cinema-screen-like blackboard canvassed her view. A white metal-bladed fan swirled above her uselessly, clicking loudly after every full turn. Papatti puffed air downwards to cool herself. She would not compromise her primness by removing her shawl.

She glanced at the grey-rimmed doorway, anticipating her teacher's arrival. Then she turned to assess her new classmates, to see if she could make friends. They still stared back hostilely. Papatti tried a smile, lips closed and meek, and turned back to face the blackboard.

"Oi, you," she heard in Malay.

A rangy boy with white socks up to his knees sat beside her.

She smiled nervously, her way of saying "hello".

The boy said, "Why are you here?"

"I don't understand."

"Oh. You speak Punjabi? How come?"

Papatti had grown up knowing she was adopted but not realising it, the way a child grows up knowing there are things such as clouds and a sun without actually stopping to stare and wonder what they were and what they were doing in the sky, until an adult said not to stare at the sun. At which point they stopped and stared at the sun, acknowledging the sun, and forever living consciously with the sun hanging over them.

The boy's question in Class 1B, her first encounter with that flat set of opinions sliced out of time called society, awoke her dormant consciousness and reminded Papatti that she was adopted. But she didn't feel comfortable stating this fact and, unsure how else to respond, for once did what Lalitha had taught her was the smartest thing to do. She kept quiet.

A girl behind her said, "Why do you have a bindi?" She had an equally meticulous plait that tossed from side to side with the cadence of her words. She pointed, but Papatti knew the Punjabi word for it.

"Why can't I?"

"You can I guess, but you're not Punjabi. What are you?"

The boy said, "Where are you from?"

"How do you pronounce your name?"

"Pa-Pa-Tee?"

"So you speak Tamil also?"

A round-faced girl with two pigtails hunched at the back with one foot on her seat and said, "You've got small eyes."

A few children laughed. Papatti could not help think that her amma always said never to put shoes on chairs. Lalitha would say, "Did I raise a gangster?"

The other girl with the plait said, "Don't be mean."

"It's just the truth. She's weird."

Papatti said, "You're weird."

"What did you say?" The gangster put her foot down and leaned forward, eyes flashing menacingly.

She had broader shoulders than Rajpal. The gangster said, "Say that again, small eyes." Papatti didn't want to say it again now that she had appraised the gangster's bulk.

Thick rubber-soled shoes clapped the concrete outside. The teacher with the clipboard drifted like a wraith across the windows. He emerged into the doorway and the students stood up, at attention. Relief flooded Papatti.

"Good morning class," he said in Punjabi.

"Good morning teacher."

He took off his glasses. His grey eyes twinkled as he smiled. "Let's see if that energy lasts till the end of the year. You can call me Mr Singh."

"Good morning Mr Singh."

"Good morning. Sit. Sit. I'll be your form teacher and English teacher. Sorry I'm late."

After Mr Singh left the classroom, the gangster, whose name was Kareena, said, "Oi, you. Small eyes. Did you understand him?"

Papatti didn't turn around. Her amma had said, "Don't talk back to anyone. Don't get into trouble. Keep your head down, study hard, and get a good reputation. Okay, Papatti?" Besides, Kareena, a stocky Hanuman-like gangster, was bigger than Papatti.

Kareena said, "Well if you didn't, I won't help you!"

More laughter.

"Small eyes."

The next day, Papatti first learned about the problems that arise from the democratic freedom of choice when Kareena sat behind her. Papatti would have preferred everyone to be forced to sit in the seats they had chosen on the first day, as she had. Mrs Dhillon, a portly middle-aged woman in a long, swishy skirt, wrote addition equations on the blackboard for them to practise. As Papatti bent forward to write, pain tore at her hair roots and her head was yanked back. Kareena released her plait immediately. A few snickers erupted.

Mrs Dhillon glanced up from three rows down, where she was tutoring Manjeet. "What's happening? Papatti, stop playing with your hair and write your sums."

She crimsoned. "Yes, Mrs Dhillon."

Then her hair was yanked again and she yelped.

"Papatti. What's wrong with you? If you cannot behave you will sit outside and do your sums, do you understand?"

"But Mrs Dhillon—"

"No buts. Now, finish your work."

"Yes, Mrs Dhillon."

The shame of being scolded stung more than her roots. Papatti had wanted to show Mrs Dhillon that she was studious and trustworthy, a class topper. From behind, a whisper, "Small eyes." More stifled chuckles.

Over the next weeks, the gangster teased Papatti. Kareena's sheer loudness and sass and all-round gangsterishness won the admiration of their classmates. Trying to endear themselves to Kareena, to be part of her gang, they called Papatti "weird" and "small eyes". They asked if she was contagious, told her to go home, told her she didn't belong. Papatti became the scapegoat for Kareena's popularity and class solidarity.

Papatti maintained a partially stoic, partially fear-induced silence, trying to focus on classes instead, feeling better for her progress in understanding the symbols on the board and in deciphering equations. She loved Mr Arvinder's art lessons. He drew a tombstone on the board at the start of class and inscribed the time left till the final bell inside it. He said, "Are we dead when we stop learning or do we stop learning when we are dead?" and they all laughed thinking he was silly. Under Mr Singh's patient tutelage, she started reading entire English words at a go. At home, she rewrote her math homework thrice so it flowed in her best handwriting without cancellation marks, even if her teacher eventually planted a giant red cross on the bottom of the page.

But it was the jabs that hurt. She wanted friends too. Only the plait-pruning girl called Jaspreet ate with her during recess. They played hide-and-seek and hopscotch after school before walking home together, since Jaspreet lived in a shophouse on Tessensohn Road, past Serangoon Road.

On the eleventh week, Jaspreet and Papatti walked to the playground near school. They wiped the white pigeon poop from the black rubber swings before competing to see who could swing the highest, judging by the tip of their toes. Jaspreet whooped as her equally scrubbed white shoes nipped past Papatti's, poked a cloud in the sky, and Kareena said, "It's the weirdo! And the weirdo's friend! Weirdo Two? Big eyes?"

The gangster encroached onto the playground with Simran, Jessie and Aksha. Papatti grounded her feet to halt the swing, lurching to a stop. She tightened her grip on the metal chains carrying the seat tighter.

Jaspreet said, "Stop it. Leave us alone."

"Or what?"

"I'll tell Mr Singh."

"I'll tell him you started it. Will he believe the four of us or the two of you? Plus, you have the weirdo on your side. Who'll believe her?"

Papatti said, "Stop calling me that. Why don't you just leave?"

“No. You leave and give us the swings.”

Jaspreet stuck her chin out. “We were here first.”

“This playground is ours,” Kareena planted herself in front of them, hands on stocky hips.

“Says who?” said Jaspreet.

“Me.”

Papatti wanted to be just as brave as her friend. She said, “You are not the owner of this playground. Go away. Leave us alone.”

“Is that so?” Kareena pounced and grabbed Papatti’s ankles.

“Stop it!” Papatti said, trying to kick, but Kareena clenched Papatti’s legs snug to her waist, which was when Papatti realised with mortal fear that her assessment had been right, and that Kareena was indeed far stronger than she was. She was doomed to die that day. Kareena wrenched backwards with a heave and Papatti’s bum lifted off the black saddle. She tightened her hold on the creaking chains and became suspended horizontal in mid-air. “Let. Go. Of. Me!”

“Leave her alone!” Jaspreet leapt off her swing but Simran and Jessie blocked her path. Jaspreet slapped at them, and they punched and kicked back, and in the catlike flurry Jaspreet tripped backwards over the swing and tumbled to the ground, shouting, “Stop it! Stop it! Help!”

Papatti yelled for help too, bucking her hips to try and throw Kareena off.

Aksha tried to prise Papatti’s fingers off the chains but Papatti wiggled her fist up and down the metal links. Then Aksha’s slimy wet teeth bit into Papatti’s hand, and with a scream Papatti let go and fell to the ground, head banging against the stony floor, Kareena also falling. The bigger girl climbed onto her and raised a hand. A hard slap landed on Papatti’s left cheek before she brought her arms up to cover her face. More slaps rained on her arms. Then Kareena pulled her hair up and down and beat her stomach and all Papatti could do was jerk and writhe on the floor and scream.

“Who’s that? What’s happening there?” It was a deep voice. Hurried footsteps nearing. The weight lifted and Papatti blinked. She saw a high and clear blue sky. Kareena and her gang had disappeared. Jaspreet sobbed by the swing, curled around their schoolbags.

Papatti crawled to her hands and feet, and as the adrenaline left, her cheek burned, her stomach ached, her hair felt like nettles, and deep down, in her soul, in that place that belonged to her and only her, she felt as if someone had violated her. She was humiliated. “I’m sorry, Jaspreet. This is my fault.”

“Papatti. Jaspreet. What happened to you two? Were you fighting?”

Mr Singh’s familiar, concerned eyes gazed at her.

“Come, girl. Stand. I’ll walk the two of you home. Slowly now. We can talk later.”

...

Two lines of two-storey shophouses with sloping roofs fenced in and watched over Serangoon Road. The Sri Veerakaliamman Temple and the Masjid Angullia interrupted the shophouses at different junctions, religious guardians of that concentrated Indian community. The open-air Tekka Market marked the beginning of the road, where it shared a junction with Sungei Road. Papatti and her parents lived in a white house with maroon-painted wooden shutter windows and maroon awnings (covered with cardboard and littered with a fallen shirt belonging to Rajpal) on 111 Serangoon Road. The first floor had been converted into Govinda’s Textiles Emporium, so named to convey scale and options and grandeur, even though it was just a small business. On the second floor, Papatti’s family occupied one room of five, and a kitchen and dining table in the middle of the rooms constituted the living room.

When Rajpal returned home, Papatti was slumped over the dining table, hair frazzled, puffy-eyed, dried tears on her cheeks like wax. A warm, pink handprint shone on her left cheek. Lalitha sipped tea and

contemplated her daughter from the stove. Rajpal's eyes widened. "What happened?"

At the distress in his voice, Papatti cried and ran to hug him.

Lalitha said, "Your beiti got into trouble."

"My beiti? No. Beiti, let me see your face. Did someone hit you? What is this? Lalli!"

"Sit, dear. She'll tell you."

He whisked Papatti to the dining table. Between snivels, Papatti recounted Kareena's bullying and assault on her at the playground. Rajpal pulled up her shirt and saw the purple-blue splotches on her waist. His chair fell back with a deafening thud as he stood. Rajpal quivered, fists clenched, and Papatti realised that she had never seen him angry. But his anger comforted her, made her feel like she was in the right, made her even feel better. "Did you see that?" He glared at Lalitha, as if it were Lalitha's fault.

"Yes, I did."

"And you're not angry?"

"Of course I am!"

"Then why aren't you doing something about it?"

"What do you expect me to do?"

Rajpal started pacing between the table and a metal cabinet set against the wall. The doors of the cabinet were removed and it had been converted into an altar that Papatti prayed at (or more precisely, asked a thousand wishes in front of) every morning. Small but elaborately sculpted ceramic statues of Krishna and Radha, Ganesha, Saraswathi, and other Hindu gods stared out of the cabinet. In the centre of the statues, a white wick stuck its head out of a bowl of oil, a curious snake with a fiery head. Behind the statues, larger, faded pictures of these gods stood alongside lifelike prints of Sikh gurus with long, white beards and scarves wrapped around their heads. Above the gods and gurus hung murky grey photos of Lalitha's and Rajpal's parents. The men in the photos wore smart jackets while the women

wore their best sarees, which all only appeared black and white in the photos. Holy ash and vermilion, vibhuti and kungumam, were rubbed onto the glass frame, onto the middle of their foreheads as blessings. Rajpal inspected the photos. "I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I swear on my parents' heads. Your parents too."

Lalitha said, "Don't bring *my* parents into this."

"I will go over to that school, and I will find that Kareena girl and chop her hands off. You mark my words. How dare she touch my daughter! How dare she bully her? Who does she think she is, that little Japanese tyrant? And that Aksha girl. I will rip her teeth out one by one."

Rajpal's rage continued to gratify Papatti, and she felt ever more in the right. She could see Aksha toothless, see Kareena handless, and it felt so right and sweet and good. She felt better. Lalitha said, "Don't talk rubbish dear. You don't mean that. We will go and see the teachers and find out what's happening first."

Papatti only wished her amma would support her more vociferously. When Lalitha had first seen Papatti, she had cursed. Then she shouted at Mr Singh, wagging her finger furiously at him, and Mr Singh nodded and took the scolding like a good obedient student. Only then did Lalitha collect herself and give Mr Singh some tea before sending him on his way. She ordered Papatti to take a warm bath and nap until her appa came home. In this interlude, Lalitha seemed to have calmed down, back into her tight, emotionless self.

"For what?" Rajpal thumbed his fist up and down at Lalitha. Papatti's hope rose, though she did not know what to hope for. "This is my daughter we are talking about. My daughter! I have never hit her my whole life. How dare someone lay a hand on her? How dare she? What kind of school are they running? I will burn the whole compound to the ground. She is my daughter!"

"Dear, you are talking nonsense. This is not the Occupation and you are not Sivaji Ganesan."

Papatti wished it were the Occupation if it meant her father would be allowed to slice Kareena into pieces like that expensive Japanese food. Rajpal said, "Racists! They are racists! Just like the Occupation."

"They are children. Dear, sit down, please."

"How can I sit calmly after seeing that? What did Mr Singh say? Where is that bugger?"

Lalitha said, "He called an hour ago. The other girls—Kareena and her gang. They said Papatti and Jaspreet started the fight. They were in the playground when Papatti and Jaspreet shouted at them and dragged them off the swings. They fought back and ran off. They said Papatti has been calling them names and pinching them and whatnot since the first day of school."

"I have not, Amma! That's a lie!" Tears bubbled up again. The impotence of her truth hurt more than anything.

"Well it's your word against theirs. I am taking your side. Their mothers will take their side. Mr Singh is a good man but he cannot take any side, right or not? What to do?"

Rajpal said, "Well maybe if I knock his head a few times at the kopitiam he will come to his senses. What kind of institution is he running?"

He pounded the cement in quiet, and after long moments, Rajpal righted the chair, sat and released a long breath. "If we file a complaint, the teachers will scold that Kareena girl and our Papatti but after that the students will only pick on Papatti more. The teachers can watch out for her in school, but what if they bully her after school again? At the playground? On the way home? We both have work. We cannot pick her up from school every day. What happens if that Kareena girl decides to go beyond punching next time? And that poor Jaspreet. How is she?"

Papatti didn't understand. Why had her appa mellowed? Why was he admitting defeat? She yearned to see him yell and rage and threaten Kareena. Lalitha said, "Her parents came over just now. They are

okay, but..."

"But what?"

Lalitha glanced her way. "I'll tell you later."

"What Amma?"

Rajpal shook his head. "Their daughter has more heart than them."

"What Appa?"

Lalitha said, "Nothing. Keep quiet."

"They don't want her to play with me?"

Rajpal said, "You don't care about them, Papatti. None of this is your fault. Okay? What do you want to do?"

"I don't want to move schools again."

Two years ago, Papatti's parents had sent her to the Convent of Holy Infant Jesus on North Bridge Road, an all-girls' school where she wore a blue pinafore and classes were taught in English because Rajpal had wanted the best education for his daughter, and the closer it sounded to a British education, the better it was supposed to be. Five months in, during one lesson, Mr Johnson had said, "Come Papatti, you're always so quiet. What's the answer to number two?" He pointed at the blackboard, that perennially imposing screen. Cinemas were so much more fun, and cheaper than studying too.

Mr Johnson was her short spritely English-language teacher who liked to wear chequered shirts. He spoke with a lilt and flair, and grinned at Papatti encouragingly.

She scrutinised the second line on the board, with a long dash running in the middle of it. She scoured it for clues, a T here, an E there. She counted the letters and discovered the first word: *The*. Her classmates watched her, impatient. The rest of the letters were like Chinese characters that she needed to unlock. She leaned forward to demonstrate she was trying, narrowed her eyes, bit her lips. *Umm*ed and *ahhed*. Finally...

"I-I don't know, Mr Johnson."

Two hands shot up, the show-offs.

Mr Johnson's smile widened. "No, no, give Papatti a chance. Take a guess, Papatti. So many words are available. Try."

She shook her head. "I-I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I don't know, Mr Johnson."

"You must at least try."

Papatti took a deep breath. She focused on the white words. *Su.. Tuu..Da..Eh..*

A classmate cleared her throat. Another tapped her table. Papatti was holding the class back, restraining their progress. "I'm sorry. I don't know Mr Johnson."

Mr Johnson's grin vanished, replaced by a blacker frown. The tapping quieted. An icy, brittle silence filled the classroom and the hands went down. "We've been covering adjectives for two weeks now. Have you been daydreaming the whole time, girl?"

His displeased scowl. His jarring tone. Papatti nodded to appease him.

A few girls chortled. A few girls glowered at her even more reproachfully, angry on Mr Johnson's behalf. Mr Johnson said, "Oh for the love of— If you don't want to learn then don't come to school. It's as simple as that. No one's forcing you to be here. Some of the girls have quit. Why don't you?"

"I-I'm sorry, Mr Johnson. I-I want to learn. I want to learn." She had tried reading her second-hand textbook every day at home. But her parents couldn't help her. They spoke Punjabi and Tamil but not English, and read none. So she would stare at the textbook, hoping that flipping the pages and identifying random letters would somehow and someday produce a grand clarity. She wanted to ask questions in class, but that would attract this very type of attention, and she didn't want to be the class idiot. She sank into the chair and bowed her head. "I'm sorry, Mr Johnson."

"Ladies. Can someone educate Ms Papatti here on the answer?"

More hands speared the air. Stephanie Vijendran Anthony didn't

wait for Mr Johnson to select her. "A *dumb* student, Mr Johnson!"

Uproar in the classroom. Chair legs screeched back. Students clutched their stomachs and laughed, pointing at her. Papatti's eyes pricked with embarrassment. She shut them. Tsu Ting said, "Stephanie was rude, Mr Johnson."

"Yes Stephanie, that was rude. Oh no. Papatti, don't cry. It was just a joke. You poor thing. I'm not angry anymore. See? Come, why don't you take a break? Go to the toilet and freshen up." He was in front of her, smiling sympathetically, pointing at the door. He circled his hands to pretend to wash his face and said, "Toilet? Wash face? Don't worry child. Go on now."

She swept her notebook and pencils into her boxy bag and sprinted out, a wet film blurring her vision, a glimmer of Mr Johnson's amazed countenance, flashes of faces staring at her in shock. She didn't return.

Papatti had asked her parents to send her to a Punjabi or Tamil school instead. She begged, whined, pulled her hair and cried for two years. She wanted to study. She wanted to learn about the world. She wanted to have friends and play catch and share secrets with them. Her amma didn't see the need for her to attend school, especially since she had already failed once. Finally, Rajpal had coaxed Lalitha to let Papatti attend the school his friend taught in. Now, after her second disastrous attempt, Rajpal said, "Do you want to try the Tamil school on Victoria Street, Beiti?"

"You spoil her," Lalitha said.

"No Appa, it will be the same thing."

Rajpal said, "What same thing? This Kareena girl won't be there."

"No one there will know me either. They will call me weird and tease me. I don't want it." Papatti shook her head.

"You are special, Beiti. Come, sit on Appa's lap."

Lalitha rolled her eyes. "Yah yah so special she must go to school. None of the neighbours' children went to school. Why does she need to? She'll wait another year to enrol and if she quits again then *I'll* be

the laughing stock. She might as well stay at home and be useful.”

“Who cares about you, woman? Come, Beiti. Don’t listen to your amma.”

Papatti hopped off her chair and Rajpal picked her up tenderly. “Does it hurt?”

“No Appa. But Amma is correct. If I fail again, people will call me stupid. And if I wait another year, I’ll be a giraffe in class.”

Her amma grunted affirmatively. Rajpal laughed. “A very pretty giraffe. Beiti, don’t care about what people think. That’s your amma’s bad habit. Do what you want. Do you want to stay in Bencoolen Primary School?”

“No.”

“Why?”

Papatti slumped. “If Jaspreet won’t play with me anymore, I will have no friends. Why doesn’t anyone like me?”

“They are silly children. What’s more important is that you enjoy studying. You stood on one foot demanding to go to school. I come home and see you poring over your papers like my own little scholar. I am so proud of you. If you want to study, study. We’ll figure a way around this Kareena girl. I will pick you up every day from school if that’s what it takes.”

“But Appa, I want people to like me.”

“They do, Beiti. Your amma and appa do.”

“That’s not the same.”

“Why?”

“You have no choice.”

He chuckled. “Beiti, people will come and go. Forget them. The only important people are those who stay. And the only important thing is that you follow your heart. Now, what do you want to do? Do you want to study?”

She caressed his beard gently and felt better. “It’s okay, Appa. It wastes your money.”

“You are too young to be worrying about money.”

Lalitha said, “Eh. Listen to your beiti. She’s got more brains than you. We are not printing money in this house. We’ve tried, two times. Nothing’s come of it. She doesn’t like it anymore either. Let it go. Why does a girl need to go to school anyway? What will a book teach her about marriage and housework and making money? She can be a good girl and stay at home and help me.”

Rajpal gently tilted Papatti’s chin up. “Beiti?”

His large eyes beckoned. His soft smile said be not afraid. “What do you say?”

She couldn’t find the words to express this conflict within her, between the ease of giving up and letting go, and the feeling that the right thing to do was to stick it out in school. To grit her teeth and confront the bullying and the seeming impossibility of acquiring an education. Her bruises still throbbed. She just didn’t know. Papatti toyed with her fingers. She wanted her parents to make the right decision for her, insist she stay in school, tell her they would support her fight through it, like her appa had been defending her all this while. After all, they were the only ones who cared about her and she couldn’t do it without them.

Lalitha said, “That’s it. She will stay home. No one will touch my daughter in my house.”

Papatti frowned. It felt easy when Lalitha said it, but also wrong. A dulcet whisper surrounded Papatti. Rajpal’s voice. “Beiti. Are you sure?”

Papatti started crying. She wanted to go to school, but she was scared.

“Uh oh. Uh oh.” Rajpal hugged her, made soothing noises. “Don’t cry, Beiti. Don’t cry. You don’t need to go to school. It’s okay. I love you, Beiti. Don’t worry. No one will hurt you. I’m sorry I pushed the matter. It’s okay now. I love you.”

She hugged him.

Lalitha stood up. “Come, I will teach you something they won’t teach you at school.”

Papatti perked up. She dried her eyes against her appa’s pocket, sniffing. Rajpal was caressing her hair, singing a Punjabi folk tune into her ear. She asked, “What’s that, Amma?”

“How to survive.” Lalitha went into their bedroom and Papatti followed, chucking academics at the door.

A primrose yellow wardrobe stood opposite the door, three rolled-up rattan mats leaned against it. Every night, Papatti unfolded the mats for her family to sleep on and their three bodies would fill up the small floorspace. Next to the cupboard, a single maroon shutter window had been set into the wall, slats of white moonlight falling upon the grey floor.

Lalitha turned on the light. A wooden Singer sewing machine stood at the end of the room, with a low wooden stool before it like a temple and devotee. The machine consisted of a swivelling pedal beneath to control the speed of the needle, a chestnut wooden tabletop in the middle to lay cloth upon, and an L-shaped instrument above that stapled down the needle. A row of square, pocket-sized drawers lined the front of the tabletop, holding bobbins, needle sets, pincushions, a measuring tape, spare buttons and endless stacks of safety pins that were the house’s back-up plan for every contingency. A yellow wooden metre rule jutted out from behind the machine.

Lalitha walked to the stool. She said, “Sit.”

“Amma, you’ll let me touch your sewing machine?” The Singer looked intimidating in that big and confident American way.

“Can you do one thing without talking back? Now sit. This is what you do. Listen carefully and don’t talk back.”

...

Every day, first thing before a dosai or uppuma breakfast, Papatti sat in front of the Singer sewing machine, and Lalitha trained her in the

basic stitches and principles of needlecraft. After breakfast, she went to the shop below to observe Lalitha help Govinda with tailoring, alterations and repairs for his textile business—an individualised vocational training programme.

From Lalitha’s long ruler, Papatti learned the conversion ratio from centimetres to inches and honed a surgeon’s eye for marking and cutting length. Her vocabulary expanded to include technological nomenclature like “take-up lever” and “presser foot”, and she talked back to her amma in these terms too. Within weeks, Papatti learned the physics behind the basic lockstitch so well that she could subconsciously time the milisecond in which the hidden rotating hook of her machine caught the thread from the needle and carried it one full circle around the bobbin case before pulling it up into the fabric with a satisfying click. Progress.

Downstairs, in the violet-curtained fitting room, Papatti learned that an armcye should end right over the shoulder and men’s trousers should fall at the anklebone to sit weightlessly on shoes. She observed that women were varyingly comfortable about the amount of skin they showed on the back of their bodices. Whampoathai liked a “window”, Rani liked a “door”, and Veena kept an “open house”. She also learned never to tell Veena this, but Lalitha had already lost a customer by then. Nevertheless, within a few months, Lalitha and Govinda deemed Papatti competent enough to let her poke her needle into garments that would actually be sold, and Govinda paid Papatti a commission (and Lalitha, of course) for helping with his “Emporium”.

When Papatti turned 11, Govinda walked her around his shop like they were touring an art gallery. Rolls and rolls of bright saree fabric covered the walls, with wooden counters in front of them to spread the sarees out in layers so customers could compare them, feel the materials and inspect the colours. At the entrance, three female mannequins showed off Punjabi suits. Two rows of hangers ran down the middle of the store, with readymade shirts, pants and Punjabi

suits hanging off them. Papatti tended to linger at the back during working hours, where the cashier and fitting room were. Govinda took one roll of carrot-orange garment from the shelves. He placed the triangular end over a roll of deep cobalt blue. It looked like an early sunrise. Govinda said in Tamil, "These are complementary colours. They contrast and create space and depth in between the colours. This captures your gaze in this space, in this depth. Do you see?"

Papatti nodded, wide-eyed and indeed captured. She made a mental note to stitch a turned hem that would reproduce this delightful contrast for her appa. Govinda took a pink shirt off the rack and laid it over his lap behind the cashier. "This is a good example. It's not ours, but I use it to explain how high our quality is to customers." Papatti appreciated that he now called the shop, "ours". Govinda's dark bony finger followed an inseam from the waist up to the armpit, and stopped. He had a tailor's sure and steady hand. At the ring around the armpit, the seam zig-zagged an inch before running down the sleeve. Govinda slotted two dark fingers into this mismatching inch. "Do you see? Obvious right? Look at this."

He deftly inverted the shirt. The inner seams were red instead of pink. "They think no one will know. But it's in the places no one knows that you discover the true quality of a garment. Tsk. See. I just noticed this." A thread was loose and he pulled it out. He shook his head. "These details make our shop better than the rest. Including those fellows on Buffalo Road. Ah, a customer. Time to make money, eh Papatti."

Papatti rose from her stool to be polite. But this time, Govinda stayed seated. "Papatti, why don't you talk to the customer?"

"Really, Govinda mama?" Uncle.

"Yes. Why not? I've prepared you for this, right?"

"I don't know, Govinda mama."

"Yes, I have. You can do it. Can you do it?"

Hesitantly, she nodded. "Yes, Govinda mama."

"Remember, no colour, pattern or design matters if..."

"The clothes don't fit you perfectly."

He clapped. "That's my girl. I told you you're ready. Now, go. Shoo." He waved his hands like chasing away mynahs.

A lithe lady had stepped in, fingers flicking through the dresses on the rack, eyes running across the saree walls. She was so tall, so fashionably dressed, so independent. Papatti felt that this woman must be a somebody who had plenty of somebody friends. She nimbly stepped around the cashier, walked up to her and gave her best smile. The lady looked at Papatti curiously, but Papatti said in Malay, "Welcome. My name is Papatti. Can I help you?" The lady beamed and her smile lit a warm glow within Papatti.

It struck Papatti then that this lady could actually like her, that her somebody friends and other people could also like Papatti, if she was useful to them, and that sewing could empower Papatti to be useful to them, to help her be liked and accepted by the strange world that lay beyond 111 Serangoon Road and Govinda's Textiles Emporium, a world that she had only had unfortunate glimpses of at school. Whatever her heritage, whatever her lack of education or riches, people would flock to her for sartorial ideas and to see these ideas materialise in cotton and polyester thread counts, because she would attend to them with diligence and a practised genius. Even Kareena would one day knock on her door to apologise and ask to be friends with Papatti and have a baju fitted. So as Papatti guided the lady across the gallery of fabrics the way Govinda had toured her, she determined that once she made this sale, for she would make this sale, she would throw herself even more earnestly into her needlecraft and brand a name for herself in the rag trade.

She sold the lady not one, but two sarees, and became even more confident that she could learn and improve every gram of value that Govinda's Textiles Emporium offered its patrons. So when Papatti watched customers argue with Govinda about paying extra to return

their clothes to their original sizes, Papatti asked her amma to teach her to weave the hem stitch such that it tucked away the excess cloth instead of cutting it out, so that if her customers put on weight or their children grew older, she could just unpick the stitches with a needle's tug. When coolies like Rahim complained to Govinda that they were losing wages per hour away from work because they had to keep getting their tattered work clothes darned, Papatti scoured the markets for thick interfaces to back and strengthen the clothes so they ripped less easily. At night, she sketched new saree designs on her old school notebooks to propose to her customers, depending on their skeletal frames. Govinda praised her initiative, and for the first time, someone who was not Rajpal had complimented her. Govinda then followed this by giving Papatti a larger commission, and she took it as affirmation that she had won her first fan and was on the right track.

In between, when Lalitha chastised her for not holding the loose thread as she started pedalling the machine, or when Lalitha brought idli downstairs for their short lunch break, or when they discussed how Papatti could have haggled better with a sarcastic customer, Papatti also managed to ask her amma the questions she had wanted to ask at school. Like:

“Amma, how does the first bus driver go to work?”

“Amma, why are they burning the buses?”

“Amma, the Indian philosopher who said that a mother is happiest hearing her son praised—why doesn't he mention the daughter?”

“Amma, did you want a daughter?”

“Amma, why am I adopted?”

“Amma, where is Japan?”

Dedicated to Papatti

I swept Kurosawa's room, gathering the dust and trash into a knoll by the door. Then I went outside. A soldier sat on the porch, inspecting his nails, his squished peaked cap resting on a knee. He was a shorter, portlier version of Kurosawa, with a rounder face and stubble staccato over his head, and he wore no sword. Kurosawa was nowhere in sight.

I realised where I was: Jalan Besar, not a few hundred metres from Garden Country, and down the road from the mama shop that Appa and I had argued over, an incident that now made me feel so foolish. Kurosawa's house stood at the end of Jalan Besar Road. The road and its adjoined pavement curved into a kerb around his house, and while the road transformed into Perak Road and drove east again, the kerb melded into a grassy patch like a backyard. A few Angsana trees festooned the patch, thunder-trunked and crowned with thick bushy leaves, obscuring Perak Road from Kurosawa's house, which I assumed was a relief for the people staying on Perak Road.

My chappals lay by the side of the door, next to two pairs of straw slippers and dark brown military boots, all lined in strict attention, toes to the wall. Above the doorway, a dark cedar structure was set into the wall. The structure resembled a mini Japanese mansion, with a gable pagoda-like roof on top of two small, ornate and open doors.

PHOTO BY: ENG CHUN PANG

About the author

Warran Kalasegaran studied Politics with International Studies at the University of Warwick. He graduated with a Master of Public Policy from the University of Tokyo, where he wrote *Lieutenant Kurosawa's Errand Boy*, his first novel. He recently started working at Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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During the Japanese Occupation of Singapore, an eight-year-old Tamil boy is separated from his father, forced to work for the Kempeitai and renamed Nanban. From Lieutenant Kurosawa Takeshi, he learns their language and customs, studies their martial arts and prays to their Emperor. While watching the cruelty with which the Imperial Army rules Singapore, Nanban becomes just as ruthless to survive.

Twenty years later, a young misfit strives to make a successful living as a seamstress. Papatti is swept up in her ambition, trying to drum up crowds and get featured in the national newspapers, when she meets a cunning politician and an eager dockworker who both try to win her attention. Then she is faced with a harrowing loss, and is forced to find her place in a new world.

Over decades of tempestuous history, the lives of Nanban, Papatti and Lieutenant Kurosawa intertwine in surprising and powerful ways, and beg the question: how is reconciliation possible in the face of war and heartbreak?

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