

BOOK 1 OF THE THRII AND DANIEL TRILOGY

It Had to Be Her



ANITTHA THANABALAN

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EPIGRAM

For Val, Renuks, Prius and Erin

PROLOGUE

Thru

When I hold the threads of my life and try to trace them back through the tangle of my sixteenth year, it's impossible to pinpoint the moment that changed my life forever.

Was it the moment our schools merged? Was it the day I listed Greenleaf as my top pick for secondary school? When Cassie became my best friend? Did it start when my parents moved into the neighbourhood?

These little pinches in time keep flowing further and further back. Each choice seeps into the one before and the one after, like droplets of water that fall into lakes, reservoirs and rivers; everything eventually ends up in the ocean, such that each drop is indistinguishable from the rest.

That's how I like to think of it, anyway. I was always on a trajectory towards him, along him, then to us. No decision would have taken me away from him because that's how it is when you're meant for each other. The Universe pulls at cosmic strings to bring you two together.

Even if you're just sixteen.

Right?

dahulk0503: wah. I hope the drink stall auntie moves with us

1

The news of Greenleaf Secondary’s merger with Longfield Secondary landed like an asteroid in the middle of the South China Sea, swelling into a tsunami of chaos that left a catastrophic trail across all social media platforms.

Responses were largely mixed. Greenleaf Secondary’s social media accounts were overrun with a convoluted mix of grief-stricken and enthusiastic comments. Beneath tweets of links to “Effective Homework Management”, Instagram posts of Principal Pearlina smiling like a beauty pageant contestant in front of the school and TikTok videos of teachers and staff with little to no rhythm doing viral dances were comments like:

wrecku1507: what’s going on??

lluvbts2011: ohmygod please. Why now? I finally found the ideal toilet for number twos

za_69: bring on the hot girls!

ladybug.spots1609: shut up

timmytintim1111: yes! Where the chiobus at?!

puppies_over_kitties: my dad went to the office to complain...

When just commenting proved inadequate, many Greenleaf students took to venting through video. Couples, in particular, bemoaned the loss of the fifth floor’s wheelchair-accessible toilet. CCA groups used to having their own dedicated space were horrified at having to give up their special rooms; the school orchestra coordinated their online attack, simultaneously posting videos of what happened to expensive instruments when left in any space that did not have a dehumidifier. But Kevin Tng outdid them all, taking to TikTok to scream out loud for a minute straight as a form of protest. Behind his thick mint-green glasses, his tears looked giant, his uvula quivering on cue as he grabbed at his hair and wailed. It had gone viral almost immediately, much to Kevin’s apparent satisfaction, because his next few videos had him profusely thanking his new “followers”.

Located just three streets away from each other, both schools were in the same district, sharing a bus interchange that became ground zero for an underlying tension that pulled tighter and tighter each year. Like a red rubber band slowly stretched pink.

It’s not clear how it started, and each school had its own version of the timelines, but at least the core events leading to this moment were agreed upon.

Five years ago, a group of Longfield students said something about Greenleaf’s bright-green uniform bottoms making the students look like the dustbins found all over the island. Standing in the queue next to them, a bunch of Greenleaf students loudly pointed out that Longfield students were only upset because their uniforms—a murky brown that made one think of mud at best and the toilet at worst—made them all look like walking shits. Eric,

Greenleaf's then-largest student, who has since graduated and gone on to play rugby for the national team, shoved a Longfield student hard in the back and roared, "FLUSH!"

The ensuing battle royale was broken up by passers-by still bleary with sleep and bus drivers who had come sprinting out of the breakroom with hot black coffee sloshing over glass mugs, turning the floor into a caffeinated waterslide. Even an old woman with a walking stick got involved, brandishing it like Excalibur and whacking everyone with it in a savage attempt at peace—passers-by and bus drivers included. An official complaint was made to both schools, and every student involved in the fight, easily identified by their torn uniforms, bruises and scratches, was given two full months of detention. Naturally, the story became a legend, whispered at break time during each school's Secondary One orientation like a game of telephone, with laughable results.

In the many renditions of the story that existed, the walking stick was sometimes transformed into a hockey or floorball stick that always belonged to the other school. Some versions morphed a well-intentioned passer-by into a secret alum from the other school who was always said to have served the most blows. These key points, combined with the shaking of fists and promise of vengeance by the storyteller, were the most consistent elements of what came to be known as the "Bus Stop Beat Down", especially after it was argued that a bus interchange was nothing more than a very large bus stop.

Since then, both schools virtually ignored the other, especially since everyone involved in the fight had already graduated. But the merger was about to pull both schools and historical tensions into much closer proximity. In a strange twist of irony, an upcoming MRT line, the Pink Line (the train map was rapidly running out

of colours) was the reason for their forced union.

Truth be told, mergers were often conducted with more finesse. But falling birth rates and exploding expenses meant that schools were generally below capacity, and in a country so small and devoid of natural resources, inefficiently distributed assets were considered blasphemous. Add this to the pressing need for more easily accessible public transport, and Longfield and Greenleaf found themselves thrown at each other with little regard for life-defining, quake-inducing national exams.

2

Thrii

Almost a full month in and I still hate running.

All this sweating and wheezing, and I still haven't experienced that runner's high I keep reading about online. The only time I've even come close to euphoria was during my first run when a tree stump that was the perfect height for me to collapse on had thrust itself into my vision.

The bright-eyed, smiley YouTuber I follow online records most of their videos *while* they run, a physical feat that I now truly appreciate because even just keeping my head up feels like a monumental effort while I run.

Sweat pools above my lip and I wipe it away roughly, sending a slight spray to my right. Gross, but it doesn't matter. At five in the morning, no one else is around.

The path stretches forward, following the gentle curve of the water flowing in the canal that pushes into the sea. Even while struggling to catch my breath, I can almost appreciate the beauty of where I am. There aren't many places like this here, where trees are allowed to be as tall as they like, grass and plants leaning over the edges of the path, defiantly brushing the shoulders of everyone who passes.

The full moon sits commandingly in the inky sky above, shining so brightly that the streetlamps feel redundant, their artificial light laughable against the moon's silvery power. The wind chases clouds across the moon, but still, its rays cut right through, spreading out on the ground like a helicopter searchlight.

It's impossible to observe the moon without thinking of my older sister, Parvathii. She's always had a mystifying connection to the moon. One of my earliest memories is of her pointing out the moon phase while we were both sat in the backseat of Dad's car, words whistling through the empty spaces where her baby teeth had been, the tip of her finger changing colour from being pressed flat against the window.

All I can think about now while my arms swing back and forth and each foot plonks down in front of the other is the last conversation we had.

About a month ago, when the moon was a silvery sideways smile in the sky, Parvathii and I went for a walk after dinner. We did this whenever we were exhausted from being around our parents. Even just a few hours of being with them was, and still is, draining.

The walk was unusually quiet, empty of the conversation that never seemed to dry out whenever I was alone with Parvathii. The silence was only broken by the crunching of shrivelled corpses of leaves beneath our slippers. The only thing stranger than the silence was Parvathii's outfit choice, a bulky navy sweater that I had never seen before which almost came down to her knees. It wasn't just because the sweater was large, Parvathii is pint-sized, much shorter

than me and our parents. In fact, she is so tiny next to me that despite our five-year age gap, most people often assume I'm older.

When we turned back towards the condo, I finally spoke. "Is everything okay, Par?"

Her eyes looked watery, tilted upwards and absently searching the sky as if she was afraid to look down and spill her secrets onto the ground.

"It's waning." Her usually clear voice sounded rougher, as if her throat was sore. She nodded at the moon. "It'll be gone in a few days."

"Right on time," I replied.

She looked startled, eyebrows instantly raised before asking cautiously, "For?"

"A new cycle. That's what you're always saying, right? New moons are—"

"Fresh starts," she said, cutting me off. Sweat started to bead at her temples, but still, she kept the sweater on. Sweaters had recently become a staple in her daily outfits, a stark difference from the skirts and cropped tee-shirts she used to wear.

She tapped the condo access card against the reader, holding the gate open for me. In the security post, a square air-conditioned space with windows on three sides, sat Uncle Mani, the security officer who has worked at the condo for as long as I've been alive. He slid a window open and waved at us, his smile brighter than the heavy-duty flashlight that all the security officers wore on their belts.

"Getting taller ah, Thrii? Next time you can help me change the lightbulbs in the lobby. No need ladder," Uncle Mani called out before laughing at his own joke. I stuck out my tongue, my usual response to all his jokes and comments.

It was only when we were in the lift going up to our floor that Parvathii spoke again, words rolling heavily out of her mouth. "Sometimes, fresh starts mean a total destruction of everything before."

The lift doors sprung open at our floor, and the only thing there was time to say was, "Uh-huh."

If I had known then what I know now, I might have made her stop, made her explain. Now, it's just another regret in the towering pile confined to my mind.

I start running back home, my thoughts fuelling my legs to go harder as if my body is trying to outrun the memories. But even as I urge myself to run faster, I know that it isn't enough to wipe away how much I miss her, or the way the house now echoes without her laugh like a cross between an old man's creaky knees and a ship's horn. Worse still is the unshakeable feeling of how I could have done more, a truth that stops me in my tracks. Gasping to catch my breath, I slowly walk back home.

It's a testament to how little my running has improved that the walk back home takes barely fifteen minutes. I tap my card to enter through the gate and almost slam into Uncle Mani on his way back home. He looks at me, gives me a tight smile and keeps walking. No smile or tall joke. It's been like that for a while, ever since he helped Parvathii into the Grab a month ago. The idea of Uncle Mani being upset is another reminder of what happened, of all the different things that I could have done. The need to explain myself rises like a hot air balloon inside me, expanding till my skin is taut, filled with shame. But I force myself to keep walking, hurrying past the

meandering swimming pool bustling with early morning swimmers hiding eye bags behind serious black goggles.

In the lift, I fish my key out of my sports bra. The removable cup option meant that there was a very handy little slit at the side that transformed my sports bra into a roomy purse.

Before I can even turn the key in the lock, the door is pulled open. Amma is on the other side, dressed in an elegant grey shift dress, diamond studs winking in her hand.

“Where have you been?” she demands as she puts on her earrings.

I push past her and slide off my shoes and socks, relishing the feel of the cool tile against my bare feet.

“Running.” I walk into the kitchen, turning the electric kettle on before pulling down the green tin of Milo that is fastidiously replenished every time it is about to run out. It is the only thing I drink, in the mornings or at teatime. Coffee and tea shrivel my taste buds.

“Since when do you run?” Amma asks.

Of course, she hasn’t noticed. Imagine having children and not knowing their daily routine.

“Practising for NAPFA.” A total lie, of course. Who gives a shit about NAPFA?

“Since when do you care about NAPFA?” Huh, maybe she isn’t as oblivious as I thought.

“Last year. I want to get a gold,” I say, finally turning around to face her. We haven’t spoken much at all in the past month. Though the house looks fine—sofa cushions in place, surfaces free of clutter, floors practically sparkling—it still has a post-war feel to it. As if the dust is still settling. Now that I can finally take a good look at her, I can see the eye bags that her concealer has failed to hide and

the white showing at her roots—she is usually meticulous about not missing her hair appointments.

Is it awful that I feel happy that she’s suffering, at least a little?

The kettle screams into its crescendo, snapping Amma out of her reverie.

“Any plans for today?” she asks with feigned nonchalance.

Trick question. I’m not allowed out unless Amma is informed at least two weeks in advance. Dad hasn’t bothered with anything as trivial as his children’s whereabouts in years.

“Just studying.”

Satisfied, she nods, and I assume she’s leaving. Instead, she pulls out a rather flat-looking box, wrapped in pink paper and adorned with a deep-blue bow, from her handbag.

“I wanted to give it to you last night, but I don’t think your father would have approved. Happy birthday, Thrii. The boy at the shop told me it would be useful for all your revising.”

I turned fifteen yesterday, the last one in my entire class. Dad actually made the effort to come home early from the hospital, though he stared at his phone the whole time while Amma sped through the birthday song on her own. The whole thing was so awkward that I blew out the candle and drove the plastic knife into the little sponge cake before the last line even began. As birthdays go, it was absolute shit.

Carefully, I take the box from her. “Thanks. You didn’t have to.”

“You deserve it. Your report book was perfect.” She moves towards me, and for a moment I think she’s going to hug me, but she just reaches past my shoulder, rooting around in the little bowl on the shelf by the door and fishes out her car keys.

I lock up behind her before taking my present to the kitchen. Between Milo slurps and banana biscuit dunks, I carefully unwrap

the present, letting out a surprised gasp when I see the box. It's the latest iPad, complete with an Apple pencil. I take a picture and send it to my best friend, Cassie, before lifting the lid. The iPad has a screen protector already applied, and a simple case. I look over every inch of it, cradling it in awe.

I check my phone but it's barely seven. I would call her right now, but Cassie would still be fast asleep. I take my breakfast and present and go to my room, checking to make sure that Dad has already left. Both his office and my parents' bedroom doors stand wide open, which means I'll be the only one home till at least eight in the evening.

My room is the smallest bedroom in the house, an operational hazard of being the younger sibling, but it's enough for me. Though there's only a very small gap between study table and bed, there's a window that stretches across the entire back wall, letting in plenty of natural light during the day and giving me excellent views of the canal. A long, cushioned bench sits beneath the window, and when it isn't covered in notes, clothes or other junk, Parvathii and I used to hang out there. It had the bonus of having the best lighting for photos in the house.

I pull my phone out and open Telegram, the only platform on which Parvathii hasn't blocked me. Initially, I was relieved that she'd missed it and spammed it for days. But now, I know that she's done it on purpose; leaving my messages unread is a special kind of hell.

The entire thread is a chain of messages from me dating back a month. Stupidly, I thought that she would text me for my birthday as if turning fifteen was some magic wand that would pull my family back together.

I sink onto my bed, thumbs hovering over the keypad.

Me: I miss you, Par

Me: Hope you're okay

I hit send. I consider telling her about how my birthday went, but I have no business making anything about myself.

I scroll up the thread, looking at all the messages I've sent previously. Maybe it's bordering on desperate, all these unanswered messages, but I don't care. She's my sister and not knowing where she is or if she's okay feels unnatural. I had hoped that this silence would thaw out sooner rather than later, but it feels like all the cold blank space of Antarctica is separating us.

I've modified my strategy slightly in the past few days. I send her fewer texts now. The last thing I want is for my incessant texting to push her into also blocking me on Telegram.

I chuck my phone aside and flop back on my bed, staring at the ceiling fan as it spins like a propeller. The wind makes the DIY O-Level exam countdown on my wall flutter repeatedly. Next to it is my revision timetable, carefully set up to cover every chapter of every subject at least four times before the exams. I believe in planning and making firm decisions to reach goals. Academically, these things have never failed me. Near entranced by the twirling fan, I commit myself to one more thing: I don't care how long it takes, I'm not giving up on Parvathii. I will keep trying until she responds.

3

Daniel

Mai is pissed.

Her fists are balled on her skinny hips, head leaning to one side from the weight of her annoyance. Her huge eyes take up a lot of real estate, cramming her nose and lips into the lower half of her face. The way her eyes are locked on me could make a fighter pilot jealous.

I lift my phone, holding it just below my chin. I take a picture of her while maintaining eye contact the whole time.

Mai's intensity spills over the edges of the screen, as threatening in pixels as it is in real life. I show her the picture. "We could call this: *Girl Can't Take No for an Answer.*"

She wrinkles her nose. "Yuck. That sounds weird."

"So weird that you'll take no for an answer?" I flop back on my bed.

Overhead, the old ceiling fan rotates slowly. No matter what setting I turn the knob to, it just goes at one speed: pointless. A few months ago, Mum bought me a standing fan that is way better at keeping my room cool, but I still get a kick out of watching the ceiling fan do its geriatric dance every now and then.

Mai's face hovers above me, blocking the fan. From this angle, she looks like a witch staring into her cauldron. I tilt my phone up.

"All you have to do is take a shower and put on what I lay out. I'll pick out your socks, lay out your shoes... Do not take a picture of me right now, Danny. I mean it." Her finger jabs at my phone. I lower it obediently.

"Why don't you go with Santhosh? His dad got him new shoes for his birthday. You know he's just waiting for a chance to show them off."

"I want *us* to hang out. *Come on*, Danny! We never do anything fun. All we do is watch Netflix and Disney+ or play games. Let's do something that doesn't involve a screen."

"That's because N-Levels just ended. We deserve a break."

"That was three months ago! We did it, we made it to Sec Five. It's time to celebrate properly!"

The N-Level results had been released almost two weeks ago now. Progressing to Secondary Five wasn't a surprise, because Mai kept us on a revision timetable so strict that Mum stormed into my room at two in the morning, caked in a face mask, and demanded that I go to bed. Still, I was so nervous while waiting for my results that I had to distract myself by taking a bunch of pictures of students in states of distress, nausea, joy and horror. There was one on my Instagram of a queasy Santhosh, bent over, hands on knees, trying very hard not to throw up on his mostly-white Jordan III's, his middle finger weakly extended as he looked up at my camera through his eyebrows.

Once the results slip was safely in my pocket, I spent the rest of the time taking pictures of Longfield. It was still hard to believe that I would never be back there again. You don't realise how much a place has become a part of you until you can't go back.

I left Mai to her parents. There's only so long you can laugh at your best friend getting repeatedly hugged and kissed, and being forced to video call with relatives back home, before it gets old. I had to decline having lunch with them four times before they finally let me off. Mai's parents are the best, but I didn't want to get in the way of such a big family moment.

I walked through the school, taking pictures every now and then. The corridors were quiet, all the noise confined to the hall two floors down. Tables and chairs stood like terracotta soldiers, lifeless and silent, never to be scraped against floors or rocked back on two legs ever again.

Merging with a new school after four years suck, because of the inconvenience of the whole thing; having to learn a new school layout, finding new favourite hangout spots and figuring out which canteen stall has the best food. Strangely, the silver lining is the O-Level exam, which turns every student into a volcano, pressure building in their heads till they erupt. Being on this eruption track means I will only have time for my friends, schoolwork and photography. Just the way I like it. There will literally be no time to even think about the merger.

The distinctive sound of the lock turning in the front door brings me back to the present.

I sit up. "Mum's home early."

Mum works a lot. She is an assistant manager at a major department store. After almost a decade there, she was finally promoted this year.

I hear her relieved sigh as she places her heavy bag on our dining table outside and I listen as her footsteps get louder.

"Hi, guys. Have you eaten?" she asks as she comes into the room. She's still in her work shirt, two small holes puckering the cloth

where her name tag usually is.

She side-hugs Mai and asks how she is, gently stroking the top of Mai's head. Mum and Mai love each other; I think Mai fills some need for a daughter Mum's always had, especially if the baby photos of me in a frilly blue dress are anything to go by.

"How come you're home so early?"

"I'm working on Christmas, so Hem let me leave early to spend today with you."

"We don't celebrate Christmas...or random Tuesdays," I joke, pushing myself up on my elbows.

Mum flops down on my study chair. The base stays rigid but the chair careens to the right, making Mum scream like she's on a derailed roller coaster. I quickly roll across my bed, jump up and steady the chair, letting her weight rest against me before pushing her back upright.

Still standing by the side of the bed furthest from us, Mai has her arms outstretched like she's Professor X—if Professor X swapped his bald head for long black hair that hung down to his waist.

"Thanks for the help, Mai."

"I sent you positive vibes," she says, lifting her nose into the air.

Mum slowly gets up from the chair. "We really need to get you a new one."

"No need. There's a trick to it." I gently pull her out of the way and sit in the chair myself, carefully shifting my weight to the left till there's a click. "See?" I wiggle around. "Completely fine."

Mum looks unconvinced. "My bonus is due soon. We'll get you one of those big chairs. Hem's son bought one. She says it looks like a race car seat."

I'm already shaking my head before she even finishes her sentence. There's no need for her to spend unnecessarily. "No,

Mum. If the chair does break, I'll just use a chair from the dining table."

She opens her mouth to say something else but Mai cuts in. "Do you need help with dinner, Auntie? I'm already thawing the chicken from the freezer. We could have your chicken soup noodles." They walk to the kitchen, Mai chattering away about the deliciousness of Mum's noodles. That's the great thing about Mai, I can always count on her to read my mind, like redirecting Mum's attention away from the chair.

I drape an old tee-shirt over the offending chair and go to set the table. I'm useless in the kitchen. Mai often has dinner with us, because both her parents work at an engineering plant on the west end of the island and come home very late in the evening. Mai has two older siblings but they're both in Vietnam, married with children. A few of our schoolmates have told Mai and I that we actually look like siblings. We do have the same thick black hair and the same scowl, but that might have more to do with the WWE wrestlers we tried to imitate in primary school.

December is always cooler, a rare treat that I try to take advantage of by placing our little folding table against the wall of windows in the hall. I push each window open fully, instantly feeling a chilly breeze blowing through my hair and into the house; I close my eyes, enjoying the wind brushing against my skin for a few seconds before arranging three wooden stools around the table. Home is a mid-floor four-bedroom flat with generations-old furniture and walls covered in photos. I've lived here my entire life, and cannot think of any other place that has as much warmth and memories.

On the rare occasions when we have visitors, usually Mum's colleagues or distant relatives, they are treated to overexposed

twenty-year-old photos of Mum and Dad affixed to the walls. All their wedding photos are of them mid-stride or standing uncomfortably as the sun beat down on them, because clearly, no one had thought to get a picture of them seated. I still look at those photos all the time, trying to catch some detail in them that I might have missed before. In the photos, they look so young, almost too young to be married.

Past the IKEA shoe cabinet, the pictures morph, showing a pregnant Mum sketched into the blank canvas of the flat, Dad carrying a large cardboard box that blocks all of him except his hands and his bare legs, and a couch being carried in by sweaty deliverymen in bright yellow tee-shirts. A picture down is the first picture of me ever taken, a grumpy bean in Mum's arms; then several of me at different ages, pulling off a bib, bald and in a highchair, standing, crying, naked in a bath, walking. Mum and I argue about my naked baby photos all the time. *Why not move them? Where? Into the bin? Crazy. Or over a flame? No!* Then the subject would be dropped, waiting to be picked up again next year, our tradition.

My favourite pictures are past our little hallway. Six specifically, three on each side of the kitchen entryway. They are all of Dad, standing proudly outside his carpentry shop, Lee's Fine Woodwork. There is one of him taking his first step into the store, another of him with his first customer, the order receipt held up between the two of them; then there is a picture of him filling that first order, a coffee table with the client's family name etched into the corner. On the bottom of one of those table legs, Dad engraved his name and the date of the finished product. It was something he did with all the 243 pieces that he made.

There's a picture of six-year-old me in Dad's shop sanding a table

leg with a piece of tissue that Dad convinced me was the same as what he was using. It's the only picture in a photo frame; the rest have been slotted into thick plastic folders and stuck onto the walls. Dad's laughing as he watches me. Already the laugh lines have formed, white dotting his hair like snowflakes. Who would have known it was the oldest he'd ever look?

"Daniel," Mum pokes her head out of the kitchen, a ladle raised in one hand like a ruler, "why are you forcing Mai to go to a Christmas party alone?"

"Not true. She's going with Santhosh."

"Shouldn't her best friend be going with her?"

Mai slips into view behind Mum. She turns her eyes up towards the ceiling and cackles silently. Pure evil.

"I don't think Mai has a best friend anymore."

Mai lets out a shocked gasp, clutching at her chest before slowly feigning sinking down to the floor. Not cool. She's lucky Mum didn't notice.

Mum points the ladle at me. "You're going. I do not want you here by yourself on Christmas. Go out. Meet some new people. Eat something other than leftovers. Drink alcohol—"

I raise an eyebrow.

"Go out and be a teenager, Daniel," she continues gently. "The house will still be here when you get back."

"I know. I just don't want to talk to people I don't know."

"You can talk to me!" Mai calls out.

I ignore her. But Mum says, "See? There's always Mai."

"Fine. But going is my Christmas present to you, Mai."

"Oi!" Mai cries out while Mum's laugh tinkles through the house.

4

Thru

Cassie and I are texting, something we do almost all day, every day.

Me: You know I won't be able to

Cassie: OMG

Cassie: Screw them. Just ask. Clari would tattoo my name on her neck if I ever brought home straight A's

Clari, short for Clarissa, is Cassie's mother. She calls her by her first name because Clari doesn't really act like a mother. Cassie's mother has asked me to call her Clari many times, but the best I can bring myself to do is Auntie Clari. She dresses super fashionably and lets Cassie talk to her about anything. No topic is off-limits in their house. Once, I went over to complete some assigned pair work for social studies, and Auntie Clari was midway through showing Cassie how to roll a condom onto a banana. I politely declined the banana and condom that was offered to me.

Me: Doesn't she already have a tattoo of you

Cassie: Just my birthday

Cassie: Anyway, O-Levels are next year

Cassie: We will have no life

Cassie: It's going to be non-stop notes and textbooks and
extra lessons and tuition

Cassie: We need this. It's ONE party.

Cassie: Plus, we've gone to Chi Ying's Xmas party before

Me: I'm not in a partying mood

I haven't told Cassie about Parvathii, I just can't bring myself to. As soon as it happened, I'd grabbed my phone and started typing, detailing everything in a text to Cassie that was less essay, more novel. But when I was done, I couldn't bring myself to hit send. What would Cassie think of me and my family once she read that text? Cassie doesn't have siblings, but she's always wanted one. So badly that she used all her birthday wishes on a baby brother or sister when we were in primary school. I couldn't imagine her being empathetic about me turning my back on my only sibling. I deleted the entire text, responding as merrily as I could when she texted me the morning after. Still, it feels weird not telling Cassie about such a huge thing. We tell each other everything. I mean, we track each other's period cycles for god's sake.

Cassie: I'll sneak us a bottle of champagne from Clari's liquor
cabinet

Cassie: She won't even know it's gone

Cassie: Instant party-mood maker

Cassie is determined to have her first drink before eighteen. Actually, she's determined for *us* to have our first drink before we're eighteen, because apparently, drinking when you're legal is lame.

Me: I really don't think our first drink should be a whole bottle
of champagne

Cassie: Is that a yes???

Cassie: Come onnn

Cassie: You'll come over. We'll get changed. Take a bunch of pics

Cassie: It can be a girls' day out

Me: Every day is a girls' day out for us

Cassie: That's cause we're still weighing our options

Me: Really? What options?

Cassie: Well, there's this cute boy I've been seeing at the
coffee shop near my house

Cassie: We look at each other sometimes

Me: Wow.

Me: Hot.

Cassie: Shut up. It's not my fault Greenleaf has no cute boys

There's a fair few actually. Some have even tried to ask Cassie out, but she turned them all down. Cassie is tall, taller than me, even, and thin, with an assured confidence that was light years ahead of all the students (and even some of the teachers) at our school. She is absolutely sure of herself. I think that's what made me say hi to her in Primary One—I wanted some of that coolness to rub off on me. But nine years on, and none of it has.

Cassie: OMG

Cassie: I forgot to tell you

Me: What?

Cassie: Chi Ying texted me earlier to invite us

Me: And?

I wait for Cassie to respond. But no little bubbles appear on the screen. Thirty seconds later I text back.

Me: Cass?? Did you die??

Cassie: Oops sorry. Clari was asking my opinion on a dress

Cassie: Chi Ying invited some of the Longfield students

Me: No way

Me: WTF

Me: Why?

Cassie: Turns out she has a cousin at Longfield

Cassie: Anastasia something

Cassie: They decided to “bridge the gap” by throwing a joint Christmas party for both schools

Me: Someone needs to bridge the gap in their brains

Me: What if this doesn’t go well? Is that stupid bus interchange brawl still a thing?

Cassie: Who knows?

Cassie: But this is why we have to go! We need to see this for ourselves

Cassie: Plus, Za will be there

Me: Ugh

Cassie: You have to give love a chance

Me: LOVE??

Me: EW

Cassie: Why are you so unromantic?

Me: I’m too young for all that

Cassie: Romeo and Juliet would disagree

Me: Romeo and Juliet are fictional characters who died because they were both so dumb

Cassie: Whatever. Come over 3pm tomorrow?

Cassie: Clari said we can take anything we want from her closet

Me: Yay!

Cassie’s mum has a closet that is literally the same size as my room. Except for her shoes—she has extraordinarily tiny feet—we’re the same size; she never gets rid of anything until Cassie and I have had a chance to pick our way through everything.

Me: That’s so nice!

Do I really want to spend Christmas in this house? With my parents?

Me: Fine, I’ll tell my parents the usual

Cassie: Yesss

After years of my begging, my parents had finally relented to me staying over at Cassie’s house last year but only if Amma could drop me off, walk me to the door and pick me up. It was embarrassing, but at least it meant a minimum of twelve hours away from my parents.

Me: See you at 3!

Cassie: Yay!!!

Cassie: CAN’T WAIT

Me: Cass

Cassie: Yeah?

Me: No alcohol

Cassie: Boring

I immediately text Amma.

Me: Hi Amma. Can I stay with Cassie tomorrow? We want to do a little bit of revising then maybe go to a friend's house for teatime on Christmas Day

Amma is perpetually in meetings, so it's surprising when she responds almost immediately.

Amma: You don't want to spend Christmas at home?

Hell no.

Me: I've gone out for Christmas before. Cassie's mum will take us there and pick us up. I'll be back by 9am on Saturday

Amma: Ok. I'll tell your father

Me: Thanks, Amma

Amma: Have you eaten?

Me: Yes

Amma: What would you like for Christmas?

This stuns me. I never get Christmas presents. It just isn't a thing in our house. Usually, we sit around the TV and watch Jim Carrey's *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*.

Me: Nothing. The iPad is hard to beat

Amma: You're using it then?

Me: Of course

Amma: Ok, good

It's the most we've spoken since the day she gave me the iPad. Speech bubbles appear, disappear, then appear again. She's typing. I tighten my grip on my phone, wondering if Amma is going to say something about Parvathii, about anything that happened.

But after the speech bubbles disappear for the third time, they do not come back.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anittha Thanabalan's debut novel, *The Lights That Find Us*, was published in 2018. Her writing has appeared in *Mahogany Journal*, the fifth volume of *Best New Singaporean Short Stories* and *How We Live Now*. When she isn't working or writing, she can be found either walking her poodle, Dino, or attempting unnecessarily difficult jigsaw puzzles. Anittha is currently working on the sequel to *It Had to Be Her*.

Meet **THRII**, the brilliant girl everyone believes has it all together—but her poise belies a turmoil within.

Enter **DANIEL**, the gentle boy with an artistic soul and passion for capturing life through his lens.

When Thrii and Daniel's paths cross in their final year of secondary school, their initial friendship becomes romantic, laying bare the chaos of Thrii's home life. As Deepavali approaches, coinciding with the start of the O-Level examinations, things start to collapse. In the whirlwind of their own lives, how do two hearts learn to find solace in each other?

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