

KOPI, PUFFS

& DREAMS

FINALIST



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PALLAVI GOPINATH ANEY

“Aney deftly captures the mood of colonial Singapore through the eyes of two Indian immigrants. *Kopi, Puffs & Dreams* gives us a thoughtful window into their difficulties and hopes as they carve out a new home for themselves, but even more importantly makes us root for their friendship.”

–Warran Kalasegaran, author of *Lieutenant Kurosawa’s Errand Boy*



“A remarkable historical novel about immigration, freedom, setting down roots and creating a new life in Singapore. *Kopi, Puffs & Dreams* also tells a touching story of friendship across class hierarchies; it is peopled with memorable characters and complicated relationships, all drawn with compassion and complexity.”

–Kavita Bhanot, editor of *Too Asian, Not Asian Enough*

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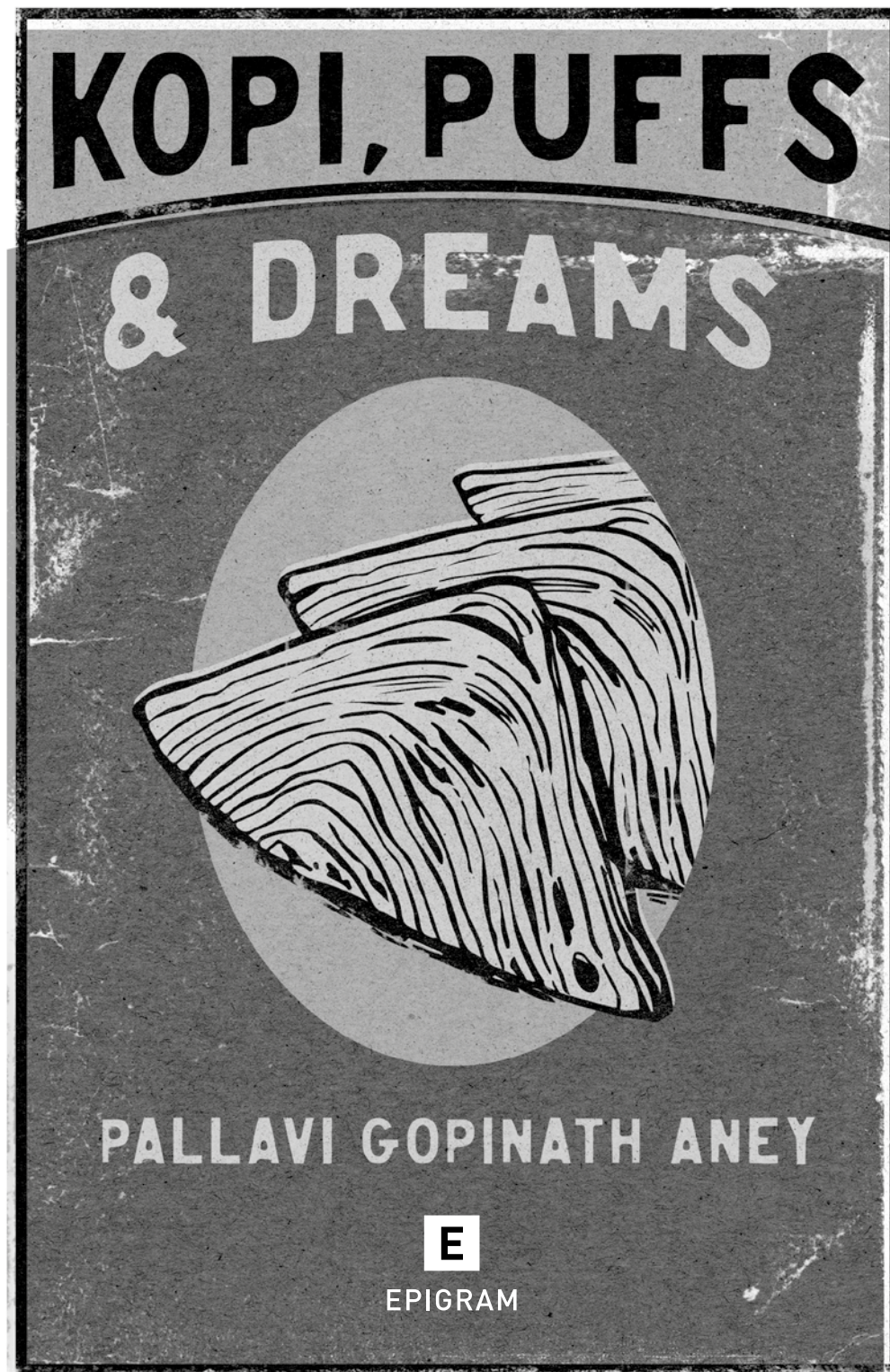
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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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For my parents, Padmini and Krishna.

*Thank you for giving me so much, more than any child could ever
have asked for. But most of all, thank you for gifting me your love
of reading and of telling a story.*

1

THE SPARK

Dread, threatening to burst like a delicate ulcer and overwhelm Puthu, felt like the only constant from that moment on.

Conversation often swirled around him, sometimes in crashing waves and occasionally in gentle laps. He wasn't particularly good at it, but he listened. As a child, he had occasionally traded information for an extra sweet at mealtimes or for the marbles with blue swirls that he liked.

Now he stood quietly in the shadowed space between the door and the barred window. He had, over the course of several years, become adept at tiptoeing around and listening to his parents and siblings. Not that he had to use this skill often. Being the youngest of nine children had brought the realisation that his parents rarely ever spoke to him. But they were happy to talk around him and at him. It mattered little to them if he was in the room. Their parenting sensibilities and caution had been dulled by years of watching themselves around his four brothers and four sisters.

But this was different. This conversation was actually about him (and it so rarely was).

“He must go.”

“How can we send him? He is nineteen! He has yet to start a life here. He will lose our caste!”

“He will have no life here, you foolish woman! And his caste will not save him from those who call him a pervert!”

“But people will ask why we sent him! Why would we send a boy of marrying age so far away?”

“Get him betrothed. To that daughter of your friend. The next ship leaves here in ten days. I will go tomorrow and put his name down. We shall tell people the boy wanted to travel and see the world. He can come back in a few months and get married. People will forget.”

“What if they don’t want to give the girl to us...? After what’s happened?”

“They will.”

And they probably would. Puthu’s family was reasonably wealthy. Even a much younger son was a decent catch.

He moved away from the door as he heard the conversation tapering off, replaced by the sounds of his mother’s soft sobs.

He felt despair. He had thought this year, 1902, was when his life would change. The turn of the century had brought a sense of possibility. For the first time ever, his father seemed open to the possibility that Puthu might study further, even go to university. He had always dismissed the idea previously. Investing too much in a youngest son was financial imprudence; he needed to be married off and settled, taught to not crowd his brothers or expect too much of his parents. But his grandfather, feeble as he now was, had planted the idea in his son that an educated Puthu was more likely to move away to a bigger city, perhaps work in a government job. His father saw the potential in that. It would be useful to have a son in government, especially a shrewd one who wasn’t much for hard

physical work in any case. A son who was so little like him or his brothers, who unnerved him slightly with his opacity. Puthu looked down at his hands. Despite scrubbing them, there was soot under his fingernails. His knuckles were scraped raw. His eyes still stung. The air was still heavy with the smell of woodsmoke. The place where the shed had stood smouldered, spitting the occasional spark.



It was a very warm May, always a hot month; this year had been hellish in Palakkad and the surrounding districts. And much dryer than it usually was. People predicted a poor monsoon, a subpar paddy crop and fires. Puthu hadn’t been able to sleep for the last few weeks. He had to go to the kiln each day, where the heat was intolerable. He listened to his brothers discuss the customers and the deliveries. Mostly he helped his father with the paperwork. He was good with numbers, with letters. Better than his brothers, who never really bothered to read anything properly. He wasn’t much good at supervising the labourers; the men never seemed to take him seriously and their boisterous camaraderie left him feeling excluded. And doing paperwork meant he could stay indoors and be within close range of the boy with the fan who stood near his father.

But the days dragged endlessly and each night he came home tired, but restless. Angry even. Unable to sleep, tossing and turning. He was waiting for the right time with his father to raise the subject of studying again, but it was never the right day or time. And so, frustrated, he usually crept out of bed after everyone was asleep and found Muthu. Or Muthu found him by gently throwing pebbles at his window. Sometimes they walked through the fields in the moonlight or went and sat at the edge of the shrunken pond, their feet soaking in the cool water. In these last few weeks, they had

taken to going to the shed, where they lay around talking about this and that, about their future.

Puthu thought he had none at the kiln. It wasn't big enough for all five brothers. It made enough money, but they constantly got in one another's way. And it was tedious work. And he was tired of being the youngest. So he talked of how much he hated the family business, although he was good at it. Bricks bored him. They were all the same, just larger or smaller, in bigger quantities for the British or tiny quantities for the local businesses. Day in and day out, he and his brothers counted, measured, supervised. He often wondered what else lay out there, if there was a way to escape this dullness.

And he had so little in common with his brothers. They were worthy men, content with joining the family business. There were three sisters between the second youngest brother and Puthu, leaving the two brothers fairly far apart in age, as well as in interests. He adored his youngest sister, but she had left home three years ago, to marry. She was now a wife and a mother, and not much of a letter-writer. He was very fond of his grandfather, although the old man had fewer and fewer lucid moments each day, and so mostly Puthu sat with him and read to him from the books that his grandfather had given to him when he was younger. He was fond of his eldest sister-in-law; she was always kind to him, but they didn't talk much. And so Muthu had become his closest friend.

Muthu talked of getting married. Of a life in Madras. Of having his own home, of not sharing a room with his parents and his three sisters. Or of at least having more rooms to share.

Puthu couldn't quite remember the first time Muthu had reached over to stroke his cheek. It was a few months ago. He did recall feeling startled, unsure what to make of it. Then flattered. But he did nothing, not quite knowing what he should do. But Muthu seemed to know enough to carry them both along.

Puthu grew to enjoy their evenings together. He never quite appreciated the physical aspects of their friendship as much as Muthu did, but he didn't mind much either. It seemed to be a reasonable trade for the friendship and affection that no one else had shown him.

He had always known that he was unusual in this respect. Muthu preferred men, which they both knew was taboo, but Puthu was unusual in not feeling particularly attracted to anyone at all. He had always stood by awkwardly when the workers at the kiln or boys at school talked about girls; he liked girls, but just to talk to, like his sister or his sister-in-law. And of course he knew there were men who liked other men, and had wondered if it were possible that he was one of them. He had concluded, somewhat sadly, that he wasn't.

He therefore wasn't quite sure what he was. And he wasn't sure how he could find out. For all the books he read, none seemed to have the answer to his predicament.

The two friends had been warned to stay away from the shed and the woodpile in the summer, and yet they had gone nevertheless. The heat was uncomfortable and posed a remote risk, but being together was a tangible promise. They had fallen asleep close together despite the sticky warmth, Muthu's hand-rolled beedi still lit.

The heat from the fire woke Puthu, his cheeks flushed from the glow of the flames. Muthu was asthmatically wheezing from fear and the smoke. They could hear shouts outside. Then thuds from wooden buckets sloshing water. Puthu yelled frantically. The shouting outside escalated. They had realised someone was trapped inside. Water was thrown more determinedly at the door and it was pulled open. And in a blaze of orange and thick smoke, Puthu made his way out, crawling past falling beams, supporting Muthu.

Only that it was Muthu's corpse. Puthu couldn't say when his friend's writhing efforts to breathe had ceased. In the minutes that followed, it seemed as if sound met silence in equal parts. Some

shouted in shock. Others remained still, straining to see through the haze. Muthu's father was among the voiceless.

It had seemed to Puthu that all their eyes were looking at him questioningly. Why were the two boy-men in the shed together? The son of the master, the one who wore glasses and always walked around with a book tucked under his arm, the one who always sang with an odd intensity at the temple evening prayers.

And a now-dead servant boy.



Puthu went back quietly to his small room. The smallest in the house. But he was alone now that his brothers had wives. He had been delighted to have his own room. It hardly had much: a single bed, a rosewood almirah and a small desk covered in books. He lay on his hard bed with its thin cotton mattress. Thoughts swirled in his head—of fire, Muthu's shining eyes and bright smile, the questioning faces, the smoke, the sound of a breath catching desperately, the girl his parents intended to be his wife—until he finally slept just as the sun rose.

He awoke late in the day. The house was silent and smelled of stale smoke and the sandalwood incense that his mother lit each morning. He went downstairs quietly. Where was his mother? Gone to the market, said the servant, avoiding eye contact. And his father and brothers? To the kiln and then to the funeral.

For a brief moment he felt the all-too-familiar rage at being excluded. And then it passed, exchanged for despair.

He wasn't brave enough to want to be at the funeral.

His eldest sister-in-law brought him lunch. He didn't care much for his eldest brother, a pompous arse, but he was rather fond of her. She was a quiet woman and kind.

She put the plate of food down on his desk and came and sat on the edge of his bed. "How are you feeling?"

He shrugged.

"You should eat a bit."

"I am not really hungry."

"Still..."

"They are saying they will send me away."

She said nothing. So it was true.

"It's decided then?" he asked.

"I think so... They haven't told me."

"What if I don't want to go?"

"I think you should. You keep saying you want to see the world, not just do the same thing every single day. This could be your chance."

"Yes, I want to go, but not to be banished like this."

"A chance is a chance. Why does it matter how you get it?" She had been a very young bride, barely out of her childhood. And she would get no such chances. She would spend her life raising her children and helping them raise theirs.

"Where are they planning to send me?"

She hesitated. "I heard British Malaya, but I am not sure."

He paused and thought about that. He had read about Malaya, about Singapore. But these were so far away. Several days on a ship.

"Do you know this girl they are planning to marry me off to?"

She smiled. "Yes. She's a nice girl. And you don't have to marry just yet. You can marry her when you return."



Puthu spent a week avoiding his family. He managed it by mostly staying in his room or in his grandfather's old study, which was preserved but unused. He wanted to go see his grandfather but

worried that he would find the old man lucid and aware of what Puthu had done. He wasn't quite sure what he had done, but he knew he might see disappointment there and the thought of that hurt. So he went to the study, which smelled of his grandfather and felt like him, but offered no judgement.

This was the room he had loved playing in as a child. Its old green leather chairs and large desk were as familiar to him as his own palms. His grandfather had enjoyed his youngest grandchild the most, having semi-retired and handed over the business to his only son. He was happy to let Puthu play in his room as he read. It was only a matter of time before Puthu picked up the books too and started turning pages.

He was four when he heard his grandfather mumbling under his breath, looking for *Nicholas Nickleby*. Puthu reached a lower shelf and handed it to him, which gave the old man pause. He hadn't realised Puthu could read. He had assumed the boy just liked turning pages. He was a gentle boy, he never tore a book or played with it as other children might, so his grandfather hadn't ever had reason to check what he was doing with the books. After that, he asked Puthu to read to him. Sentences at first, then paragraphs. And asked him if he understood what the words meant. The dictionary became Puthu's best friend. Then the thesaurus.

Now Puthu sat in one of the old armchairs, his fingers incessantly worrying a bit of cracked leather. The room was dark. Ordinarily he would have lit a lamp, but darkness felt better these days, friendlier. The sun was going down, and the deep purple light that was seeping in through the high windows would soon fade to complete night.

He was startled when the door opened. No one else came here at all, except a servant who dusted once a week in the mornings.

It was his father. Puthu sensed, rather than saw, the dislike. For

a moment neither said anything. His father had never hit him, save for the occasional childish smack and even those had been rare, given Puthu had been a quiet child. So he couldn't quite explain the physical intimidation he felt.

His father was a big-built man and all his sons but Puthu had his size. Puthu had inherited his mother's slight build and the almost translucent fairness that was so prized among Palakkad Iyer women.

"When are you coming back to work?"

"Do you want me to?"

"No. But you are worrying your mother. And you can do the accounts."

"I thought it would be better if I stayed away, until..."

"Until you leave."

"Yes." He wouldn't beg for grace.

"It won't be long now. But until then, you can work. If you live here, you can work. And stop worrying your mother. She has been embarrassed enough."

Puthu said nothing.

"Be there tomorrow morning."



Puthu left the house early, at dawn, ignoring the smell of freshly ground thosai batter wafting from the kitchen. He didn't want to walk to the kiln with his brothers, as they usually did. He wanted to get there early and be inside before anyone else arrived. The walk wasn't long, less than twenty minutes, and he took the same shortcut he always did, a path that cut behind two lanes of shanties.

He walked fast, head down, his notebook under his arm, and so he didn't see them until he was barely a metre away: a group of four

men, the oldest in his twenties, the rest closer to Puthu in age. They had clearly been out all night, drinking. They were unshaven and looking for some fun.

He tried to step to the side and walk past them, but the path was narrow. One of them pushed him with a palm to the chest. Not very hard, but he was much bigger than Puthu, who stumbled and fell over. And then another recognised him.

“It’s him.”

“Who?”

“Parasuraman’s son. The one in the fire.”

They started laughing. He had dropped his notebook and one of them kicked it aside into the sewer. Another kicked him in the ribs. This time it was hard.

“So you like boys? Servant boys?”

Puthu tried to scramble to his feet, but another kick to the shin caused him to scream and fall over again.

“Screams like a girl.”

“What do you expect?”

One of them raised a hand to hit him and Puthu cringed, tears of pain and fury running down his face. But the punch didn’t land.

“Leave him be. Let’s go home.” It was the tallest of the boys, although he looked younger than the others.

“Why? People like him should be beaten. He got that servant killed.”

“He’s not worth it. And Parasuraman will make trouble. Let him be.”

And they decided to listen to him, just like that. The tall one gave the rest of them a gentle push, said something softly that made them all laugh and they walked off, him last. He glanced back.

Puthu couldn’t have been certain, through his haze of tears and snot, but he thought he saw a glimmer of sympathy.

He lay there, defeated, for a moment. He would have to go back home and bathe again and change. He certainly wouldn’t make it to the kiln early.



A few weeks later, he sat, head bowed, for the ceremony at the temple. He wanted to cringe away from the fire, but he didn’t dare.

The girl was called Gayathri.

Thin, small, brown. Not that he actually saw her or talked to her on this day. This was what he saw across the haze of smoke that made her figure shimmer. Wrists like a bird, with overlarge, over-shiny gold bangles on them. Her face stayed covered. He knew her; they had played together as children. He had always been more comfortable joining the girls at play. Well, them and Muthu.

He had been dreading this ceremony. Not because he would be marrying this girl eventually. But because, after this, there was nothing to keep him in Palakkad any longer. He would have to leave with the next ship. But staying here might be worse.

Exiting the temple, the smell of smoke still on his clothes, he wanted to retch from fear and memory. Holy smoke smelled just like the smoke that haunted his dreams.

2

SURVIVAL, MALAYA

The first thing Puthu felt in Singapore, that he would remember for many years to come, was the incredible heat, far worse than in Kerala. Cloying, claustrophobic, like being smothered with a wet towel. A time would come when he and the heat would become one, when he would stop noticing the ever-present sheen of sweat on his face. But on that June day, he felt like he had never breathed in air like that.

And then there was the stench. The docks stank. Imagine the wet towel being draped over rotting fish before being used to smother you. It was the smell of the nearby fish market, decaying vegetables, of bowels loosened and of the unwashed bodies that were everywhere. He felt bile rise, and if there was anything in his belly to bring up, he would have. But the days on the ship had left him weak and hungry, so he stood there dazed, watching the swarming crowds, the blurred colours. He saw so many Chinese people. He had never seen any before boarding the ship.

A sharp push propelled him towards a red-faced man in a suit. The man held a roll of papers under his arm and a cardboard sign

that said *Maxwell Plantations*. Puthu looked around frantically to see if Krishnan was with him.

He was. Just behind him.

Krishnan, the tall boy who had stopped the others from beating him on that morning he returned to work, was Puthu's first proper friend. Muthu had been his friend, but it had been an unequal friendship, always with the unspoken knowledge that they were master and servant. They had laughed at the similarities of their names, but they knew the boundaries of their relationship. When they were little, they played what Puthu wanted to play; he decided if he wanted ball or stick. If he tired of running after the ball, Muthu would bring it back. Once, he got bored with looking after a stray cat and it was Muthu who took care of it, played with it, fed it scraps from the kitchen. If Muthu called on him at night, he could have always said no. If he went looking for Muthu, Muthu always came. Not so with Krishnan. On that hideous boat, they had been equals. Krishnan was from a poorer family in Palakkad, that much was clear.

They had seen each other on the first day, right after they boarded the ship at Negapatnam. Puthu had a small cabin that he shared with three others. Krishnan had no cabin and slept on the open deck, alongside the luggage and animals. They recognised each other immediately, but said nothing. In any case, there were others swarming all over the deck and it was sheer chaos. It was a few hours later that Krishnan found Puthu hanging over a railing, bringing up his last meal.

Krishnan just stood there sympathetically. "It feels better if you don't look at the water. Just look straight ahead."

Puthu barely had the will to nod. They stood there in silence for a few minutes, staring at the horizon.

"Shall we go find some water to drink?"

Krishnan shared his story matter of factly. He had stolen rice for his family and been caught. The manager of the tharavad from which he stole was a crook. He offered Krishnan a choice between prison and going to the Straits Settlements to work. All Krishnan had to do was pretend to be freely travelling and seeking work. The manager got paid a commission for "finding" Krishnan and Krishnan avoided jail. Krishnan was no fool. He had no expectations of being a free anything. He knew he would probably work for little or no pay, but prison held much less appeal. And there was nothing for him in Palakkad except poverty, boredom that his quick mind was ill-suited to and a propensity to get himself into trouble. And he had seen the advertisements about "the land of opportunity and plenty" that was the Straits Settlements. He had figured that even the land of far, far away and ever-so-slightly-more would work quite well. And he could always get away once he got there...

Krishnan couldn't read or write. But he was clever. He listened and he remembered things. On that wretched boat, he had learnt to get better food for both of them.

"So did you get sent away because of...the fire?"

"What do you mean? I wanted to go." Puthu felt instantly defensive, annoyed by this lower-class boy's assumption that he was somehow similar to him or, even worse, to the men who were statute labour, destined for a life of thankless and back-breaking work.

Krishnan grinned. "Why? It's hard work. You don't look like someone who knows hard work. Soft, soft hands."

Again, Puthu bristled. "I used to work in my father's kiln. He thinks it's a good idea for me to see the world and then come back. He knows Mr Oliver's brother and they arranged it. The fire had nothing to do with it. It was an accident."

He wanted to make it quite clear that he was here because he

knew someone important, who had personally arranged his passage. He wasn't someone who had bartered one kind of imprisonment for another.

"Mr Oliver?"

"The man I am going to be helping. He also runs a brick factory."

"Hmm."

"What?"

"Nothing. Have you met this Mr Oliver?"

"No, of course not. He doesn't live in India."

"Hmm."

"Now what?"

"All these men around us are going to work on a coffee plantation. Even me."

"How do you know that?"

"I heard them talking. It's a big plantation, a day away from Singapore."

Puthu felt something approximating fear, but he decided to tamp it down. "Well, I am not. I am meant to work with Mr Oliver. He is to teach me the newest techniques they are using. We will use those at home."

Krishnan just nodded.

Much as Krishnan irked him, they did become friends on the boat. When they played cards, Krishnan didn't turn a blind eye to his cheating, as Muthu had done. He was the one who befriended the cooks and brought Puthu a few bits of better food, skimmed from the officers' table just before they ate. He showed him where to stand on the deck at dusk while the officers were eating, or at daybreak, to enjoy the twilight. Standing there together, with the pink and orange skies above and the never-ending golden water before them, Puthu felt life was full of possibility. Nothing else mattered. Not that he didn't know exactly where he was going, not that the only friend he

had was a thief, not that his family had banished him and, most of all, not the memory of Muthu's smiling face.



At the docks, Puthu and Krishnan stumbled towards the red-faced man. Puthu had never seen anyone quite that colour. His cheeks were almost puce.

"Name?" the man said in English.

"Puthilath. Puthilath Parasuraman," he mumbled.

The man peered at his unrolled sheets of paper. "Okay. Stand there."

"Is Mr Oliver here? I am meant to meet him."

The man stared at him, then he grinned and wrinkled his nose. "Stand there. Next! Your name?"

"Krishnan. Krishnan Mahendran."

Puthu stood quietly to the side. He wanted to say more, but the memory of the man flinching at his stench stopped him. He knew he smelled. He who was used to a home with the fragrance of incense and two hot baths a day. Perhaps it was his command of English. The man might not have understood. Best to wait and see.

They were lined up in two rows and there they stood for an hour, although Puthu didn't mind. He stared at the Chinese men, moving busily around. He stared at the white women, with their peculiar little umbrellas and the dirt on their pretty sandals and the muddy hems of their trailing dresses. They were there to say goodbye to various men: husbands, sons, brothers. He stared at the dozens of boxes that were unloaded from the Straits Queen (the ambitiously named vessel that had brought him to Singapore).

The red-faced man disappeared, but eventually came back with two Tamil men, one of whom was larger than anyone he'd ever seen, who directed them towards the large carts standing outside the docks.

After they had climbed into the cart, Puthu tried to ask the red-faced man once again if he knew Mr Oliver, since he had clearly made this journey before and appeared to be acquainted with the captain. The man just laughed and pushed him away gently. The man laughed a lot, jowls and belly wobbling. He clearly ate well, not the thin gruel that all of them had been eating.

The ride lasted for what felt like days, although he only saw the sun go down once. No one bothered to tell them exactly where they were going or how long it would take. He tried to sleep, but the jolting of the wheels meant that he woke every few minutes. He got very little to eat, some rice and a strange porridge, and he still stank. He was tired and covered in dust. Finally he fell into a deep and exhausted sleep, slumped against the side of the cart.



Puthu would never forget the first time he saw Jacaranda House, silhouetted against the pink dawn. He had never seen a house like this; he had, of course, seen large houses before, even lived in a reasonably spacious and refined one, but the majesty of this one was undeniable.

The heavy iron gates were pulled open by four men and a long, wide path led up to the porch. The house itself was white, only two storeys, but the building was gracefully long and sprawling and each floor was the height of at least three men. It seemed to lounge comfortably, confident in its elegance. It was largely in darkness for the moment, save for a porch light that illuminated the lower veranda and hinted at the graceful balustrade that framed the upper veranda. The ground floor had black and white chequered tiles, and beautiful archways ran the length of the veranda. Big windows along the top floor were covered in bamboo blinds as a shield from

the heat. Each door and window was framed by elegant pillars.

But most of this Puthu would find out later; on that first day, they went nowhere near the house. It remained a mysterious outline, some details visible, but most not, like a picture that had only been partially coloured in.

The carts veered off to the right and kept going. He craned his neck until the house was but the faintest outline and then gave up when he could barely see it. Krishnan grinned at him, amused by his interest in the house.

They were among the coffee bushes; this was a smell he recognised. It brought back a sudden, sharp memory of eating at his mother's table. They stopped outside rows of long tin sheds. There was a man waiting for them, a foreman of some sort. He spoke in Tamil, though a Tamil that was slightly different from what was heard in Palakkad. This was where they would live. Today they would be given clothes, bathe and be registered. They would start work that afternoon.

Puthu looked at Krishnan as they collected their clothes: two sets in coarse cotton, a mundu and a loose shirt. They were to wash their own clothes and hang them outside to dry, always making sure they had clean clothes to work in. If it rained, which it often did, that was their problem. If the clothes tore, they would wear torn clothes.

“Where do you think Mr Oliver is?” Puthu asked.

“Who knows,” Krishnan said. “Does he even exist?”

“Of course he exists!” Puthu was annoyed at Krishnan's implication that he had made up a tall tale.

Krishnan glanced around. “Look at this place. All built by people like us, people who never live in places like this. We are all going to stay here for at least five years.”

“Why would my father send me to work as a servant for someone else?! He arranged it with Mr Oliver's brother. I was to come here

and help him at his brick factory!”

“How do I know why he sent you? Only you can know that. But I don’t see a brick factory here.”

Puthu turned red, and moved away from Krishnan’s steady gaze. They had never really discussed the fire or Muthu on the ship. Krishnan was probably the only person here who knew who Puthu was back home. A pariah.

“I am going to ask that foreman.”

“Leave it be for now, Puthu.”

“No! You be a slave. I am not going to stay here. Either I meet Mr Oliver, or I go back home!”

“Later, Puthu... Let’s just look around the place first.”

But Puthu stormed off. He went up to the foreman, who was talking to two workers. Puthu waited patiently. He had manners, not like these uncouth men. He didn’t belong here. Finally, the man turned to him.

“I want to meet Mr Oliver.”

The man just stared at him. “Why?”

“He is expecting me. My father wanted me to meet him.”

The man stared at him with the same unnerving, blank expression. Then he smiled slowly. Puthu barely saw the fist as it slammed into the side of his face, sending him sprawling. He could hear the three men nearby laughing, but he could no longer see them. The world seemed hazy and warm blood dripped from his nose.

“He wants to see Mr Oliver...bloody son of a dog.” More laughter.

And then they walked off. It was Krishnan who came and helped prop him up as they walked over to the tap to bathe. His nose was probably broken, but it would heal, Krishnan said. He had had his nose broken twice, so he was a bit of an authority on the subject. Not much other damage. A black eye that would stay for a week or so.

Did Puthu understand that he needed to stop asking for Mr Oliver?

They were here to work, and men like them were not treated kindly if they were thought to be troublemakers. Puthu nodded dully.

Did he really understand? Krishnan was unrelenting. Puthu knew nothing of men like this. Many, many workers died on plantations like this. Of disease, of snakebite, of injury. A troublemaker could conveniently die. He needed to fucking understand what might happen.

Another dull nod.



The work was exhausting, and Puthu was not a good field worker. He wasn’t particularly strong, and he resented physical labour as being beneath him. He had thought they would at least stay in the coffee fields, which was tolerable. The smell still reminded him of home, although the images seemed harder to pin down after a few weeks. But he did remember a time, from another life, when he drank the sweet filter coffee his mother made. A time so far removed from when his hands were covered in calluses and cuts.

But after two days with the coffee, the foreman lined them up one evening. There was a new crop that needed more labour. It was a very important crop for the estate. And then he started singling out men. He smiled faintly as he picked Puthu, still easily recognisable with his swollen face and black eye. Fortunately, he also chose Krishnan.

The new crop was rubber.

The plantation owners in the area had planted a few trees some years ago as an experiment, and because the British thought it was important for burgeoning industry. Rubber had never yet been sold in any considerable quantity or for a profit. But the owners increasingly regarded it as the likely saviour of their struggling coffee plantations.

How Puthu hated it. It smelled terrible. Extracting the sap was

hard work and their hands were always raw afterward. The stink stayed with them, no matter how much they bathed. And at night they rested in the tin sheds, lined up like biscuits in a tin. The sheds barely had any ventilation. Puthu couldn't sleep for the first couple of nights. And then exhaustion won, and he slumbered deeply each night, waking early covered in sweat.

His life was bearable because of Krishnan. Krishnan finished his work faster than the other men and then discreetly helped Puthu. He was an excellent worker, and yet he was also popular with the men. Always up for a prank or a laugh. It turned out that he was also an excellent cook.

Puthu was mystified by this. "How did you learn to cook?"

In his home, men had had nothing to do with the kitchen. His father had never so much as entered the kitchen to return a used utensil. That was his mother's domain, helped by her army of daughters-in-law. He had seen rice boiled. He might have been able to boil some at a pinch. But Krishnan could actually cook.

Funnily enough, this was the one subject Krishnan was less than forthcoming about when the men asked him. He would always smile and shove them playfully; weren't they lucky sods that he could?

He did tell Puthu late one night though, as they sat quietly poking the embers of a dying fire. Just the two of them, as the other men had drifted away. This was Puthu's favourite time of the evening.

"Had to learn."

"Why?"

No answer.

"What about your mother? Sisters?"

"No sisters. Mother couldn't cook."

"Why not?"

Silence.

"Why not?"

All the mothers Puthu knew could cook. If they hadn't been able to, their husbands would have thrown them out.

"Drunk. Used to drink and sleep. Good thing she didn't cook. Would have burnt the house down."

Nothing more was said as they sat there in silence, staring at the embers.



It was a few weeks later that Justine and Oliver Maxwell sat down to breakfast, glad to be back home and in a routine they enjoyed. Breakfast at the Jacaranda was always served on the veranda. They ate early, before it became too hot. Life on the plantation started early. Justine didn't mind. It was her favourite time of the day. This and dusk, but dusk in the tropics also brought the mosquitoes along with its glorious light.

Justine Maxwell was a woman who minded very little. She had a unique quality of always being willing to go with the flow and assess things for herself, rather than following the herd. And yet she was a good listener, with a sympathetic manner, which made her likeable to those with less placid temperaments. She had adapted fairly easily to life in the tropics and she thought herself lucky. She knew that many other plantation wives suffered terribly, from heat, from loneliness, from the wearying illnesses that life in these parts brought. Malaria could kill a young man or woman. It could also leave you wilted and weak for life, a desperate shadow of your previous self. A snakebite could take a child. And in the cities the diseases were even worse.

She had more than adapted, she had come to love the wildness of life here. She was fond of her husband, Oliver. She felt genuine affection for him and she was grateful for their life together. But the

passion she felt for this land was tremendous, its force occasionally surprising even her. This house, these grounds, the glistening mornings and the smell of petrichor, the dusks that looked like blood oranges; this was where she was meant to be.

“More juice?” she asked Oliver.

“Uh huh.”

She gestured to the servant and turned back to her husband. “Are you going to the plantation today?”

On some days Oliver went to the plantation and on other days he worked from his office at the house. She much preferred the former, because it left her mornings free to read in the library or visit her friends. She had no close friends here, but she got on well with the other ladies at the handful of neighbouring plantations. They were fond of her and she didn’t mind them. She had intended to visit Becky Templeton this morning, to look at some fabrics that Becky had brought back from Singapore.

“I should probably go down there,” Oliver said. “A new lot of workers has arrived. Hopefully no troublemakers.”

“Is there going to be trouble?” The worry of a worker uprising was ever-present. Some of the plantations had had problems last year. They had not—so far—but that could easily change.

“There is always some trouble. They are all fine for the first year or so. Then they want more. They speak to the older men here, then they speak to the men on the other plantations, and think they can squeeze us for more.” He sighed deeply. The last few years had been difficult for the plantation owners. They had had a shortage of labour. And three years ago, they had had the dreaded coffee rust. The very sight of the rust terrified workers. They now watched carefully for it and, if it was spotted, they burnt that portion of the affected crop. If it eluded them, it could spread through the crop like wildfire.

A few acres of their plantation were now covered in young

rubber trees. The Chinese plantation owners had been quicker to adopt rubber. Tan Chay Yan had been the first to start a rubber plantation, upon the recommendation of his friend, Henry Ridley. He had then convinced Tan Kah Kee and others, including Oliver, to not be dissuaded by Ridley’s quirky personality and somewhat alarming passion for rubber. It was unclear to many of them how rubber could replace coffee, but Tan Chay Yan was well respected, a prominent member of their community, and his belief carried them. And so they all humoured Ridley. Oliver had even grown fond of the man. Ridley certainly knew his stuff when it came to the cultivation and care of rubber trees. Only time would tell if he was right about its commercial value.

“By the way, Ridley will visit next week,” Oliver said. “He wants to see the trees. He will probably stay a couple of days. Will you arrange a dinner?”

“Of course. The Templetons and the others? The usual?”

“That should be fine. A dinner party *will* be nice. It’s good to be back.”

She smiled. This they both agreed on. They had been in England for three weeks and had hated it. Each time they had visited, she thought she would like it better this time. And she didn’t.

She wondered why she had bothered to go. Family and memories of a happy childhood, she supposed. Now she found it dreary. The streets were wet and dirty, the weather too cold. And the people even chillier. Here she had her beautiful home, her beloved, wild Jacaranda. She was the wife of a wealthy man, mistress of a prosperous estate. In London, she was once again the inadequate daughter of a newly wealthy businessman. Beautiful, but therefore once viewed as a title hunter and now seen as a social climber.

She looked up. “Thiruvar is walking over.”

Oliver sighed. He didn’t like the foreman. A big brute of a man,



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pallavi Gopinath Aney is a partner at an international law firm in Singapore and enjoys writing and participating in diversity and inclusion conversations in a changing world. Originally from Kerala and Delhi, she has called Singapore home since 2006. Her writing often tackles the immigrant experience. *Kopi, Puffs & Dreams* is her first novel.



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AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, TWO YOUNG MEN FROM INDIA, PUTHU AND KRISHNAN, MEET ABOARD A SHIP BOUND FOR MALAYA, AND STRIKE UP AN INSTANT CONNECTION. OVER THE NEXT TWO DECADES, THEY SET UP A RESTAURANT IN SINGAPORE SELLING CURRY PUFFS AND KOPI, BECOME SUCCESSFUL, GET MARRIED AND START FAMILIES. HOWEVER, KRISHNAN HARBOURS A DARK SECRET THAT THREATENS TO DESTROY THE DREAMS HE AND PUTHU HAVE BUILT TOGETHER, A SECRET THAT ONLY CARELESSNESS CAN REVEAL.

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