

"An exciting new voice in literature, a writer to watch!"

—Tayari Jones, author of *An American Marriage*

Regrettable
Things That
Happened
Yesterday

STORIES

JENNANI DURAI

“The stories in this gorgeous collection are complex yet clear, heartbreaking yet hopeful, sharp-witted yet compassionate. Jennani Durai is an exciting new voice in literature, a writer to watch!”

–**Tayari Jones**, multi-award-winning author of *An American Marriage*

“These brisk and clear-eyed stories illuminate both the minor betrayals and the little victories that inevitably define us. Jennani Durai is a disarmingly heartfelt and unpretentious storyteller.”

–**Cyril Wong**, author of *Ten Things My Father Never Taught Me*

“Jennani Durai writes with a confident voice that manages an impressive balance between wry observations and intimacy. Her characters are honestly rendered and they draw the reader into their world with strength and elegance. These stories highlight the pains and triumphs of straddling different cultures.”

–**Balli Kaur Jaswal**, author of *Sugarbread* and *Erotic Stories for Punjabi Widows*

“Jennani Durai’s debut collection is a deft work of mixology. These stories are equal part tender stirrings and sharp ripples of humour. She situates in the centre characters who would normally have been peripheral.”

–**Pooja Nansi**, NAC Youth Poet Ambassador and author of *Love is an Empty Barstool*

“*Regrettable Things That Happened Yesterday* presents a series of regrets about being alive and human, before tickling you to death with its sprightly sense of morbid humour. In ten stories centred on the motif of news and reportage, Durai doesn’t sugarcoat the everyday tragedies of being a minority in Singapore. Instead she brings you tales of how what is reported is often less than what is said, and far less than what we mean to say—a debut collection of immense skill and wit.”

–**Ann Ang**, author of *Bang My Car*

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*For my husband, my co-conspirator
in making unconventional life plans;
and my mother, who is only slightly
alarmed by them*

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Introduction^x

by Ng Yi-Sheng

I FIRST MET Jennani Durai on Saturday, 23 March 2013, at the launch of *Eastern Heathens* at The Arts House. According to her, our encounter was brief: I went up to her, asked, “Are you Jennani?”, thrust a token royalty payment of \$20 into her hand, then rushed off elsewhere to worry about logistics.

Despite my ungraciousness, I was actually pretty delighted to make her acquaintance. I’d seen her by-line in *The Straits Times*, and I’d been charmed by the story she’d submitted for the anthology. My co-editor Amanda

Lee Koe and I had sent out an open call for short fiction inspired by Asian myths and legends. Most of our submissions were works of fantasy, retelling epic tales of gods and monsters. Jennani's was different: "Tenali Raman Redux" was based on one of the fables of the South Indian jester poet and folk hero Tenali Raman, reimagining him as an incarcerated con-man, still merrily working his plots from behind the walls of Changi Prison.

That story was Jennani's first published work of fiction. Back then, I had no idea that it would lead to a solo collection, the very volume you hold in your hands. What binds this book's stories together is the motif of the newspaper—the eponymous compendium of Regrettable Things That Happened Yesterday—an object that exerts its influence in diverse and subtle ways throughout the book: as the site of horoscopes in "Inexplicably", a story contest in "Yours Truly, Vimala", a job advert in "Revelation to Amala Rose" and movie listings in "PG-13". It even shows how a young woman's pride can end up shredded into kitty litter in "Never Have I Ever".

Yet there's something else that draws these tales together. Perhaps it's because I'm still viewing Jennani's oeuvre through the lens of "Tenali Raman Redux", but I can't help but feel she's a bit of a trickster figure herself, rejoicing in the whimsical absurdities of human experience, cleverly delivering us to unexpected conclusions. Her scenarios are often wonderfully bizarre: in "Funeral Gifts", a dead grandfather is revealed to be a gangster; in "The Employee's Guide to Transporting Customers to

Mexico", a restaurant manager pretends that his mixed-race Singaporean waitstaff are Latino. Beneath it all, however, there's an undercurrent of soulfulness: the grief of losing a loved one, the despair of seeing one's dreams come to naught. Tenali Raman may be a master manipulator, but he's still in chains.

Race also plays a part in these stories. These are tales of the South Indian diaspora, principally—though not exclusively—centred on the Singaporean Tamil experience. As ethnic minorities, Jennani's protagonists lead lives informed by tradition and prejudice. Witness how, in "Yours Truly, Vimala", the *Tamil Nesan* valiantly fights to preserve their mother tongue, declaring, "If young people do not start speaking Tamil in social situations, the language will die a painful death with no one left to mourn it." Nevertheless, these characters are not portrayed as victims of their cultural baggage. They have the freedom and agency to befriend and date people of other races. They are intelligent, foolish and flawed. In short, they're human.

Right now, there's a boom taking place in Singaporean short fiction. A new wave of prose writers has hit our shelves: names like Cyril Wong, Alfian Sa'at, O Thiam Chin, Jon Gresham, Victor Fernando R. Ocampo, Amanda Lee Koe, JY Yang and, of course, Jennani herself. They describe our city-state from hitherto unglimped perspectives, and our world is far richer as a result. However, this phenomenon would not have been possible without publishers like Epigram Books, who

have taken chances on emerging authors, and it could not have thrived without readers like yourself, who are eager to hear these voices.

So thank you for choosing *Regrettable Things That Happened Yesterday*. Jennani's voice is vital, fresh and important. May this be the first of many books to come.

Ng Yi-Sheng
July 2017

Funeral Gifts

IT WAS MY uncle who first made the discovery. As his father's only son, the less-than-pleasant task of ceremonially bathing his corpse had fallen to him. He had wanted to outsource this particular labour of love to the casket company, but my grandmother insisted he do it. When he turned his father over to wash his back, he yelled, dropped my grandfather's lifeless body on the bathroom floor and ran from the room.

I was ordered to retrieve him and so was in a position to confirm it: Thaathaa had a tell-tale tattoo on his left

buttock, identifying him as a key leader of a group I had only heard about in whispers at school until now—“BP Pettai”, or BPP.

Funnily enough, this was the same group that was said to be behind the parang slashings in Bukit Panjang Park the week before. I mentioned this to my grandmother and received a stinging slap across the face. “Don’t be an idiot,” she told me. “Only Chinese people have gangs.”

She assumed no more would be said on the subject to lend the notion any credence, so when my mother and uncle sat themselves around the table to discuss what, if anything, should be done about this surprising revelation, my grandmother entered a state of denial that would have been acceptable had it not also been belligerent. From her wheelchair, she rapped each of her children across the legs under the table for daring to suggest such an alternate reality, and would have started on me too, if I hadn’t cottoned on and addressed her only from afar. My grandmother bellowed that her good husband would be turning over in his grave—had he already been in it—if he could hear what his ungrateful children were now saying about him. Her husband, an honest man who worked hard to provide for their family! She insisted that everyone had misinterpreted what they had seen, that it was not a tattoo but a birthmark, or a liver spot, contoured by the deep wrinkles of nine decades on this earth. What did they know of old age and how a buttock might look after ninety years, she demanded angrily of her children. She asked to be shown the mark,

to disprove this theory once and for all, but then started screaming when my uncle approached the corpse to lift his veshti, saying there was no end to the disgrace her evil children would put their dead father through. She might have continued down this path indefinitely for all I know, if the gangsters hadn’t started arriving.

The first of them were on our doorstep within the hour. My uncle and I had already sent the casket company workers away, saying that we wanted more time to prepare and dress the body ourselves, and that we would call them closer to the start of the wake. I searched the two young workers’ faces for signs that they had spotted the tattoo during the embalming, but they looked nothing but sympathetic. We were all taking turns to shower post corpse contact per my grandmother’s instructions when we heard the doorbell. My mother ran to let in the two elderly Indian men, elegantly clad in black Nehru-collared suits with chunky rings on nearly every finger, assuming them to be old friends of her parents. “I’m so sorry, but the wake isn’t for another few hours and the casket isn’t ready yet,” she explained, offering them a seat in our dining room.

“Please don’t apologise,” one of them said. “We know we are early.”

My mother excused herself and left the room to fetch my grandmother, but by the time she had wheeled her in, the guests were gone; the only indication that they had ever been there was a fat envelope of money marked in thick black ink with a symbol we had already seen once

that morning, resting on top of the dining room table.

It was not clear which of them started screaming first, but they both blamed the other for causing my uncle and me to come running. My uncle, who had run out of the shower in a towel with shampoo still in his hair, stared briefly at the envelope before turning his head back to the bathroom, calling over his shoulder to ask his mother if she was convinced yet.

My grandmother, to her credit, managed to calm herself down enough after the initial bout of screaming to wheel herself over to the table—a feat we didn't know she was capable of until now—and reach for the envelope to examine it more closely. "Don't leave fingerprints," said my mother in a screech-whisper, but my grandmother ignored her. She counted all the money, and I waited nearby, hoping she would announce the final tally once she was done, but she slipped the money back into the envelope, and held it in her lap, wordlessly.

She sat in silence until my mother had visibly calmed down too, and then announced that it did not make any sense. "How could I not know," she said, with the intonation of a statement rather than a question, but I guessed that it was a mix of both.

"That Thaathaa was a gangster or that there were gangs at all?" I asked, helpfully trying to clear up the matter, but my mother shut me up with a whack to the side of the head.

"He hid it from us Ma, he hid it from us all," my mother started, but my grandmother interrupted: "He

was not that good of a liar. My husband was not like your husband."

"What?" my mother asked faintly, and I was impressed that even in a moment of betrayal and anguish my grandmother had still found enough malice in her heart to make a jibe about my long-gone father.

My grandmother looked over at me, and then trained her eyes into the distance. "I always knew when he had been with someone else. He would come up with many reasons to explain his lateness, and I would pretend to believe them, but I could always sense a woman's scent on him. I could always tell where he had actually been," she said.

It occurred to both my mother and me that either my grandfather had been the best of liars, inventing one lie to cover another, or that my grandmother had built up an impressive layer of self-delusion. We shared a knowing look but were saved from having to respond by the arrival of more mourners, this time in a group of five or six—youngish men with rat tails and thick gold chains around their necks, who had evidently taken some pains to dress in long-sleeves and button their collars to hide their heavily tattooed bodies. But there was nothing they could have done about the ink on their faces: short, identical lines of dots on their foreheads that even my grandmother could apparently recognise well enough. She sat up straight at the sight of them, and moved as though to get up, before giving up and beginning to cry.

I'd expected her to start yelling again, so the sudden

Regrettable Things

WHEN THE INSTANT message arrives at 6.30pm—**COME OVER PLS**—I close my eyes and will it to be something else. *My editor has a small question about the story I filed earlier. My editor wants me to cover an event tomorrow. My editor simply wishes to inquire after my health.*

I take my pen and notebook out of my bag, which I had optimistically started packing five minutes earlier, and try not to trudge over to his desk. I smile and try to look eager, like a news hound hungry to see my by-line

on the front page. This is what I should look like, or so I've been told.

Gary spins around in his chair and doesn't waste any time. "So I'm sure you've read our story today on the guy who murdered his wife in Clementi while the kids were out," he says. "We ran one yesterday too. Really fucked up case. Guy tried to cover her on the bed with a blanket later, like maybe he could leave and no one would know."

He's watching me carefully, so I nod. Of course I'd read it. Everybody had.

"Yeah," I say. "It was blurbed on the front page."

He pauses. I realise I'm holding my breath.

"Jess," he says. "Why didn't you tell us you knew the family?"

My held breath drops into my stomach like a stone. I wish I'd thought of what to say before coming over to his desk.

"I don't know them that well," I say. How in the world did he find out?

Gary reads my mind as always, and shakes his head. "Brian saw on Facebook that you're friends with the daughter," he says. "Close?"

I shake my head. I'm not friends with any of my bosses on social media, but Brian had been a regular journalist until just two months ago. That's what you get for thinking your friends don't change when they get promoted to assistant editor.

"No," I say. "We haven't talked in years."

This is one hundred per cent true. We haven't talked

since primary school, in fact. But a more honest person would also add that when Nithya and I were in primary school, we were extremely close.

“Still,” Gary says, and that one word tells me all I need to know about the rest of this conversation. “You have a connection to the family. The family that has been stonewalling us and every other publication for two days.”

For good reason, I want to say. Why would two siblings whose father just killed their mother want to talk to a newspaper?

“I think I remember them being quite private, in general,” I say. Not only is this true, it is an understatement. In primary school, I was one of only two friends Nithya ever let inside her family’s flat.

Gary immediately takes my vague explanation as yet more evidence of my lack of go-getter attitude. “It’s our job to make private people, talk, Jess,” he says. “And while the family may be private, the case isn’t anymore. A man killed a woman, and the police are investigating. The whole country is reading about it.”

He stops again. “I think there’s more to this case,” he says.

A hazy panic takes hold of me. *He’s not a mind reader*, I tell myself. *Calm down*.

“It doesn’t add up,” he says. “A couple is separated for, what, years? The guy comes over casually, neighbours say it’s not uncommon for him to come over. That’s in our story today. So the couple had an amicable split, but not a divorce. Over what? We don’t know. Then one day he

kills her, runs off, but just goes right back to where he lives like nothing happened?”

Gary’s still studying me, as though I might offer a clue. I pray I don’t. We stand in silence for a while.

“Police say he put up no fight when they arrested him,” he says finally. “They won’t tell me more than that. But a source says he’s saying a lot of weird shit.”

I nod, and start writing everything he said down in my notebook, my pen shaking a little more than it should.

“You know what I think?” he says. “I think the guy had some sort of mental illness. A long-term, chronic one. Like schizophrenia.”

I keep writing.

“Police won’t tell us that,” he says, more carefully now than before, if that were possible. “No one will tell us that till a psychiatrist testifies during the trial.”

He waits for me to stop writing.

“But a family member can.”

I take a deep breath. “You want me to ask them if their father has schizophrenia?” I say.

“I want them to verbally confirm their father has schizophrenia,” he says. “Because you already know that.”

Any control I thought I had of the situation slips out of my grasp, as does my pen, which now clatters to the floor. I bend down to pick it up, trying to steady my heartbeat, which seems to have raced ahead some place else and left my body behind.

“The family is very private,” I say again when I stand up, and my voice sounds like a desperate whisper. “They’ll

never tell a newspaper that.”

“That’s why they’re not telling a newspaper,” Gary says, and I don’t know if he doesn’t understand or understands perfectly. “They’re telling a friend.”

It may be career suicide, but I have to at least try to get out of it.

“I’m not sure I’m the best person for this job,” I say, in the most confident voice I can currently muster. “I may be too close to the story.”

I realise this is the exact opposite of what I’d said before—that I wasn’t close to the daughter at all—and hope against hope that Gary doesn’t notice. But of course, my luck is never that good.

“Jessica Joseph,” Gary says slowly. “Are you a journalist?”

He doesn’t wait for me to nod.

“Do you like this job?” he continues, almost casually.

No, I want to say. *I write about dead people for a living*. But I don’t want to be fired, so I open my mouth, ready to be as enthusiastic as he needs me to be, but he cuts me off.

“Your job here is to get the story. And because you’re close to the story, you’re going to convince this family that news is going to get out anyway, and it might as well be told by the most sympathetic ally in the Singaporean media industry they will ever find. Got it?”

This time, he waits for me to nod.

*

Gary makes me go immediately to Nithya’s family’s flat in Clementi. My feeble protests that it was too late in the day to show up at a grieving family’s house were dismissed with a wave of his hand and a disappointed shake of his head. The disappointment was, of course, that I’m not the sort of reporter to be ready at all hours of the day to stake out a murder victim’s residence.

So I take a long taxi ride over, my stomach roiling the entire time, and I rehearse what I’m going to say when I get there. The language of death should be familiar to me by now after nearly two years on the job, but it still doesn’t come as easily as I need it to. I’ve said at least one thing I regretted at every interview with a grieving family, and I can’t afford to do that this time.

As we enter Clementi, it startles me how easily the directions come to me even after moving out of the neighbourhood 12 years ago—*straight here, Uncle, turn left at the Shell station, yes, near the kopitiam, not this building, the next one*.

Nithya and I lost touch after we went to different secondary schools, the same year that my parents decided to move to the other end of the island. But before that, we lived just one bus stop away from Nithya’s family, and I had walked this route to her flat enough times for it to have taken hold in my memory, and for that memory to have taken on the sepia tone of nostalgia. At first, she hadn’t invited me into her family’s flat, suggesting every time that we stay in the playground, or walk to get ice cream from a nearby shop. I hadn’t found it strange until

I suddenly did, and then it was as if she sensed the shift too. When she finally invited me up to her family's flat, her mother warm and fussing over us to eat a snack, her brother desperate to play with us, her father awkward and distant, I understood instinctively whom it was that she was trying to shield me from. She never had to say anything to me, or I to her, so that the first time her father locked himself in his room and started screaming that the man reading the Tamil news on TV was spying on him—while her brother whimpered and her mother darted between calming her husband through the door and reassuring me that nothing was wrong—I grabbed Nithya's hand and squeezed it, and we both knew that whatever this was, I was never going to talk about it.

It was a conspiracy that had begun on the very first day of our friendship. It was the first day of Primary 3, and everyone was in a new class, sorted according to how well we'd done on the final exams in Primary 2. I already knew who Nithya was due to an administrative mishap at the end of the previous year. I'd placed into the best class, and had been able to be proud of it for a full week, before being called to the principal's office with my parents during the December school holidays and told the scheduling just wouldn't work for students who took Tamil as their mother tongue. "But we can put you in the second-best class, and you'll be the smartest of all of them!" said the vice-principal brightly. I nodded, already deflated, as my parents argued. I wished they wouldn't make a scene, and noticed Nithya and her mother, called

in for the same meeting, quiet as I wished my parents would be.

As each class formed two lines that first day before going up to our new classrooms, I found myself standing behind Nithya, mesmerised by the navy blue ribbon knotted neatly around her ponytail. When we arrived at class and she turned around, I noticed she had a bandage over one eye. Some of the other kids were already giggling about this, when Nithya's mother arrived in the classroom. I immediately felt sorry for Nithya as their giggles intensified, realising that probably none of them had mothers who looked anything like this petite, dark-skinned lady with thick, curly hair hanging loose to the hem of her salwar kameez.

"Hello, Miss Wee?" she said, her voice surprisingly sweet. "I just wanted to explain about Nithya's eye."

The teacher's gaze travelled over to me, and upon ascertaining I looked normal, searched the room for the other Indian girl. Miss Wee got up uncertainly and started walking to the doorway, but Nithya's mother continued talking, loud enough for the class to hear.

"We went to a crocodile farm, over the holidays. She had an accident there, but the doctor said she will take her bandage off by next week," she said. "She may have some trouble seeing the blackboard, or with her work for just this week."

Miss Wee nodded, clearly taken aback by a conversation she thought should have been had in private. Nithya's mother smiled shyly, a contrast to how confident she had

been so far. “I just wanted you to know what it was,” she said, before waving goodbye to Nithya, and leaving.

Nithya’s falling star suddenly burst into a supernova. She had been injured at a crocodile farm. To nine-year-olds, that could only mean one thing: a crocodile had tried to eat her eye. Miss Wee lost total control of the class as everyone burst into easy chatter. Boys started re-enacting what they imagined had happened. Girls now crowded around her, brimming with concern that had been noticeably absent before.

If Nithya was shocked by the change in her fortunes, she didn’t show it. She caught my eye with her one good one across the room, and gave me a small, shy smile, before turning back to the others’ attentions.

At recess, later, I caught up with her as we both walked towards the chicken nugget stall. “Did you really hurt yourself at a crocodile farm?” I said.

The directness of my question may have caused her to read a knowing look in my eyes.

“Yes,” she said, with no trace of defensiveness. She then lowered her voice: “But not in the way people think. I was running and crashed into a tree.”

I started laughing, both from the absurdity of the situation, and the delight of someone trusting me so quickly and completely. She started laughing too, and it was the first of many things she never had to tell me to keep a secret.

*

I walk through the void deck of Nithya’s block and press the button for her floor as if on autopilot. I am struck again at how familiar and strange these motions simultaneously feel. The familiarity of the neighbourhood, the block, the buttons in the lift, almost lull me into believing Nithya would be familiar to me too, but the feeling comes to an abrupt halt when I arrive at her flat. The front door is open, but the gate closed, and through it I can see Nithya on the couch. She rarely posts pictures of herself on social media, but even without them, I feel sure I would have been able to recognise her immediately. The whole interior of the flat intensifies the senses of the familiar and the alien battling within me—there’s a new red couch, but that dining table with the scratches on the legs is the same; I recognise an antique chest of her mother’s that we had to be extra careful around, but the framed photographs on the wall are all different; the gate in front of me is a shiny, new-looking green-and-gold contraption with bars formed to resemble creeping ivy, but the heavy front door behind it still bears a dent that looks like a smile.

I stand in front of the open door for too long. I’m half-hoping Nithya will look up from the book she has in her hands and see me, but she never flips the page.

I smooth my hair and push it behind my ears. I straighten my skirt and adjust my handbag. *I’m going to get through this by being professional*, I tell myself. *I’m not here on a condolence visit. I’m here to get the story.*

“Nithya,” I say, and my voice sounds surprisingly sure

of itself.

She looks up and I watch as her face passes through detachment, puzzlement, recognition and surprise. “Hi,” she says and gets up to come to the gate. She stares at me through the locked gate for a second. “Jess?” she says slowly, as if to make sure, and I nod.

“Hi, Nithya,” I say, and I can’t remember if I’d rehearsed what I was going to say to her in the taxi.

I should have prepared better. The words tumble out of me: “I’m so sorry for your loss.”

I want to kick myself. It was one of the first things my colleagues on the crime beat had told me when I started: *Don’t talk in clichés. It makes you seem inauthentic. People can always tell when you don’t mean what you say.*

I expect Nithya to withdraw, but she just nods and unlocks the gate. I step inside and we both stare at each other for a few seconds. She’s not quite the picture of grief, but close: her curly hair is pulled back in a ponytail, she’s wearing pyjama pants and a faded NIE T-shirt, her eyes aren’t red but darkened at the peripheries, as if weary of crying. Still, she looks just like the friend I remember from primary school, and I am overcome with an urge to hug her. I am suddenly acutely conscious of my chemically straightened hair, my overenthusiastic application of mascara, my carefully pleated skirt: all markers of how much time has passed. I assume I look almost foreign to her, but she says: “You look exactly the same.”

“So do you,” I say, relieved.

She half-laughs and shakes her head. “I don’t even want to know how I look right now,” she says.

I think briefly about protesting this politely, but remember again the directive not to be inauthentic. I change the subject. “Are you the only one home?”

She motions with a tilt of her head to the three closed bedroom doors. “Karthik is in his room. My aunts were here just now, but they just went out to get some drinks and snacks,” she says with a grimace. “Always so hospitable, even in the middle of something like this.”

I nod, unsure if I should roll my eyes along with her. I look towards the couch, and she invites me to sit.

“Have a lot of people come by already?” I ask as I sit down. I want to keep this conversation as normal as possible, for as long as possible. I have no idea how to tell her this isn’t exactly a compassionate visit on my part.

“Yeah, I think so,” she says. “I don’t really know. Karthik and I have been in our rooms most of the time. I think some relatives from my mother’s side came by, some neighbours.”

“Your friends?” I say, and immediately catch myself as Nithya visibly tenses. “Karthik’s friends?” I add, to take the focus off her.

“Some people I work with wanted to come, but I told them not to. I don’t really want them in my personal life. I mean, I don’t even know if I can go back to work after this, with everyone knowing everything...” she trails off.

“Where do you work now?” I say.

“I’m teaching,” she says. “I have a Primary 5 class this

year. At our old school, actually.”

I feel a twinge of embarrassment that I did not know this. “Wow,” I say. “I had no idea.”

“Yeah, it brings back a lot of memories,” she says. “And I don’t have to ask what you do. I see it every day.”

It always stuns me a little that people recognise my name from the newspaper, and the jolt is doubly severe when Nithya says it now.

“Yes,” I say, struggling for something more to say. I settle for: “Unfortunately.”

She studies my face. “Is that why you’re here?”

My breath catches, startled by the very topic I’d known all along I had to broach. It was silly of me to think even for a few seconds that I had seemed to Nithya like a concerned friend paying her a visit because of her murdered mother. We hadn’t seen each other in years, and she’d seen right through me from the start.

I let out the breath. “Yes,” I say, and debate saying more, but decide against it. Better to keep this forthright.

She nods and looks away from me. “I thought so. Karthik was the one who first mentioned it, actually. We had some reporters in front of our block, and one of them somehow got hold of Karthik’s mobile phone number,” she says, and looks at me, as though I could divine how this happened. I shake my head, both to say I had no idea how, and to express my disappointment with some colleague of mine for ferreting out Karthik’s number.

She sighs. “He was so out of it he didn’t even realise

the person on the other end was a complete stranger. I guess they must have asked him how he was, and he said ‘fine’ because that’s just what he always says, you know?”

She pulls up a copy of the Local News section from underneath the end table and reads from the page it’s already flipped to: “Online searches revealed that Madam Reena had two children with Mr Mohan, a 25-year-old daughter named Nithya, a teacher, and a 22-year-old son named Karthik, an undergraduate. When contacted, the victim’s son said that the family was ‘fine’.”

She looks up at me. “It makes us sound like monsters. We’re doing just fine after our father murdered our mother?”

I know what Gary would say right now. He would jump at the opportunity and say: “Do you want to set the record straight? We can do that right now.”

But I can’t. I don’t know which of my colleagues wrote that story, but I can’t imagine it’s something I could ever have done, using the monosyllabic mumble of a grief-stricken person for a reaction quote.

I say: “That was wrong of them. I’m really sorry.”

She stops for a second, and seems to lose some of the tension that I didn’t realise she had been holding. “It was really horrible to see that. I couldn’t stop reading it, you know. Just kept reading it over and over. And Karthik has been beating himself up about it all day.”

I nod, wondering how much further my shame could possibly deepen at this point, and then remember I haven’t even started the interview.

“Has he been in his room all day?” I ask.

Nithya nods. “He told me you would probably try to call me. He reads all your articles, you know,” she says. “He said you only write about ‘bad things happening to people’. So I asked him why you didn’t call me when my ex broke up with me last month.”

She gives me a weak smile to let me know it’s okay to laugh, but I am past the point of being able to smile back. The thought that Karthik faithfully followed the articles of his sister’s childhood best friend and knew to expect my visit when tragedy struck makes me feel like dirt.

Nithya is studying me. “So, that’s true, is it? About what you write?”

I clear my throat. “He’s not wrong,” I say, my voice catching on the last word.

She raises her eyebrows. “What a horrible job,” she says, and the emphatic way she says it makes me shrink. It’s a thought I have almost every day, but hearing her say it somehow underscores how objective the statement is. “I guess you don’t have a choice in what you write about?”

“Not really,” I say. “We get assigned different beats when we start and don’t really get to switch until we’ve been there a while.” Professionalism seems to have gone out the window at this point so I add: “It really is horrible. I would love to write about anything else. Literally anything else.”

She looks confused. “There’s a beat that’s just about people who died?”

Kind of, I want to say, but instead say: “It’s not sup-

posed to be. It’s called Crime, so it should be about any sort of criminal activity. But there’s not that much crime in Singapore, I guess, so we end up spending most of our time writing about...people who died.”

She pauses. “Not everyone who died, right?”

I try not to chew my lip as I struggle to find the right words. “No,” I say. “People who died of unnatural causes.”

Those were not the right words. They hang ominously in the air between us now, these words Nithya has probably only ever heard on TV or read in newspapers, now used to record her mother’s death and file it away somewhere by impassive hands.

She nods slowly and I feel the distance between us start to expand again. “I guess I didn’t know there were that many murders in Singapore.”

“There aren’t,” I say, remembering that this was one of the first questions I had asked another reporter. “We write about accidents, natural disasters, things like that, too.”

The death beat, I remember thinking when I’d first heard this exact answer, and it seems to me to be what Nithya’s thinking now, too. Any familiarity or warmth I thought I had gained so far seems to be draining away in Nithya’s face, and she is silent for a long time while watching me, as though deciding what to do with me. I can’t hold eye contact, and look down.

“Regrettable things,” she finally says.

“What?” I say.

“That’s what your beat should be called,” she says.

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A note on “Tenali Raman Redux”: this story is based on the folktale “Tenali Raman and the Thieves”, one of the tales of Tenali Raman, a court jester-poet from 16th century India. Many tales are still told of his legendary cleverness and wit. One day, he spied some thieves lurking in his garden, waiting for him to go to sleep so that they could break into the house. He thought about how he could use it to his advantage and called out loudly to his wife that due to a spate of recent house break-ins, they should hide all their valuables deep inside the well. He then brought a box from inside the house and made a great show of lowering it into the well. When he went to bed that night, the thieves ran into the garden and began drawing water out of the well, pitying Raman for his stupidity and rejoicing that he had made their job so much easier. The thieves spent the entire night drawing water from the well, which they then poured into the garden, watering the plants in the process. When dawn was about to break, the thieves were still working tirelessly and the well was almost empty. Raman came out of the house and called out cheerfully to the thieves that they could stop now, as the whole garden was quite well irrigated by that point. The thieves heard this and ran away.

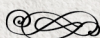
About the Author

Jennani Durai is a former journalist, a VONA/Voices fiction fellow for 2016, and a co-author of the official commemorative book of Singapore's 50th birthday, *Living the Singapore Story* (2015). She was selected for the Ceriph Mentorship Programme (Prose) in 2014, and won both third prize and an honourable mention in the 2015 Golden Point Awards. Durai currently lives in Guatemala with her husband, and *Regrettable Things That Happened Yesterday* is her debut collection of short fiction.



“These brisk and clear-eyed stories illuminate both the minor betrayals and the little victories that inevitably define us. Jennani Durai is a disarmingly heartfelt and unpretentious storyteller.”

—Cyril Wong, author of *Ten Things My Father Never Taught Me*



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