

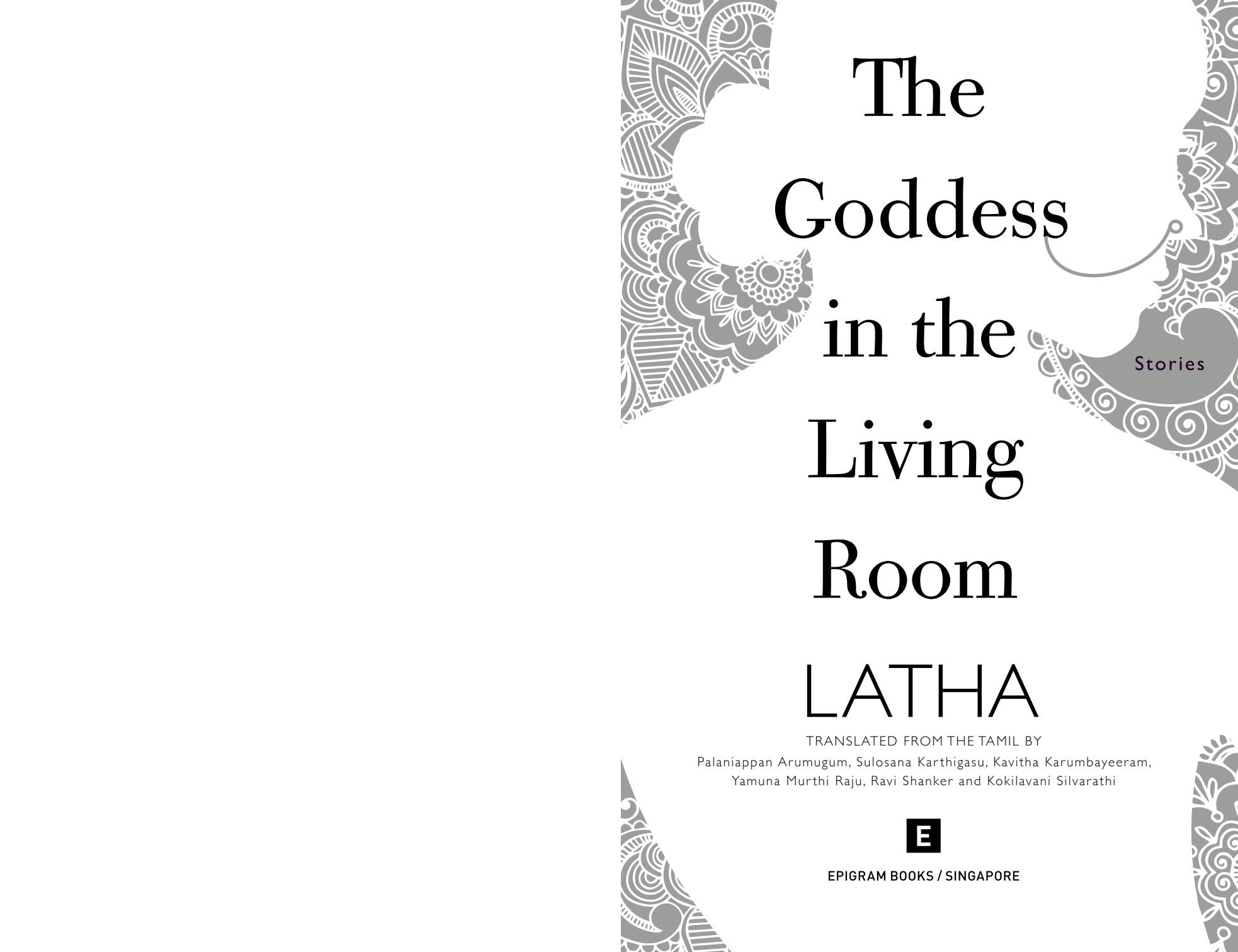
The  
Goddess  
in the  
Living  
Room

Stories

LATHA

Winner of the Singapore Literature Prize

## The Goddess in the Living Room



The  
Goddess  
in the  
Living  
Room

Stories

LATHA

TRANSLATED FROM THE TAMIL BY

Palaniappan Arumugum, Sulosana Karthigasu, Kavitha Karumbayeeram,  
Yamuna Murthi Raju, Ravi Shanker and Kokilavani Silvarathi



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# Alyssa

THE SAND BELOW was now clearly visible. Peering deeply into the still waters, Alyssa took stock of the different shells, pebbles and black stones of varying sizes peeping out of the weeds, foliage and algae covering them.

Her grandfather sat beside her, legs drawn up at the knees, motionless. As still as the waters in the lake. His left arm was propped on his knee and the fishing rod in his hand was equally motionless, but his right hand, holding a cigarette, was moving rhythmically, from his lips back to the right knee, as he took regular puffs from the cigarette.

Occasionally, the fishing line in the water drifted, ever so slightly. But the worm, dangling from the hook at the end of the line, remained immobile.

Alyssa looked at her grandfather's reflection in the pond. She preferred this to looking at him directly. She seemed to take pleasure in gazing at the motionless worm and then suddenly swinging her gaze to her grandfather's silhouette reflected on the water's surface.

Her grandfather coughed suddenly, breaking the water's stillness, sending small bubbles scattering in ever increasing

symmetric circles. He let the fishing line droop deeper into the water and in one graceful motion yanked it out quickly, turned and thrust the fishing rod towards Alyssa. A big fish dangled at the end, thrashing desperately, as it struggled to free itself from the hook.

“Your grandmother will love this.”

Alyssa looked up, directly into his face. She observed his widened eyes, alert, focussed. She noticed the ease with which he caught the struggling fish, how he deftly dislodged it from the hook and then tossed it into the pail sitting beside him.

Instinctively, Alyssa knew that she would have to handle the next catch. Her grandfather did not believe in giving explicit instructions. His philosophy was “You observe and follow”. She had learnt this in the one month she had been staying with him.

He now passed the fishing rod to Alyssa. She grasped the nylon line, pulled it taut and fixed the hook, a bit clumsily. The slight cut on her hand, sustained when she had tugged forcefully on the line, did not bother her. Opening the lid of the small jar beside her grandfather, she fished out a worm, hooked it on the line and passed the rod to him.

With one sweep of his hand, he threw the line, snagging a large crayfish within minutes. Reeling the line in, he handed it to Alyssa to remove the prized catch. She did not disappoint him.

By the time they packed up, the November skies were darkening. Grandfather’s fishing trips at lakes or by the coast would always end before night fell, as there were no streetlights in Pulau Ubin. He fished at night only when he went deep-sea fishing.

Her grandfather picked up the pail (now overflowing with the day’s catch), the water bottles and fishing rod, and loaded them into his pick-up van. Swiftly gathering up the remaining plastic bags, Alyssa followed closely, trying to match her small steps to his big strides.

The streets would be pitch-dark by now. They would have to travel by the light thrown from the headlights of her grandfather’s battered pick-up. Legally deemed as not road-worthy in Singapore, it had been consigned to the scrapyard. Grandfather had bought it and given it a new lease on life—Pulau Ubin had no such legal requirements.

Her grandfather had the engine running even before Alyssa could shut the door. By the time they reached home, a mere twenty minutes away, TV transmissions for the day had begun. There was no television in their house—Grandfather was dead set against it—yet they could distinctly hear their neighbour’s TV.

The houses here were large and well spaced out, unlike on the mainland. But not everyone on the island had electricity, let alone a TV set; the government’s electricity programme had not reached Ubin as yet. Some of the islanders, however,

had installed their own electricity generators, especially since the television programmes had been launched.

But it did not mean that those without their own generators could not watch. All they had to do was gather at the community centre, where the government had installed a large generator and a TV for common viewing. The centre soon became a popular gathering place for the community as the islanders gathered in the evening to watch the shows, snacking on the koropok and other munchies bought from the mamak stall nearby.

Grandfather had used kerosene lamps for a long, long time. The luxuries in the house—fridge, air conditioner and fan—were recent acquisitions. Grandfather had bought these soon after his third son fixed a generator for the house, but for some reason he still refused to get a TV. Neither did they go to the community centre, or visit their neighbour's home to watch.

But Alyssa missed television badly. In mainland Singapore, she had a personal set, a present from her mother, and had spent every minute of her after-school hours watching all the programmes till transmission ended. Even the programmes in Malay, English and Chinese. It did not bother her that the programmes were only in black and white, or that channels were few and transmission hours limited. For Alyssa, it was a fascinating world.

The afternoon's fishing had left Alyssa hot and sticky and the smell of fish clung to her clothes and hands. She needed

a bath very badly. Grabbing her towel, she walked out to the bathroom. Made of wooden planks, it was as large as her mother's three-room HDB flat in Singapore. Built by her grandfather, the house also had four spacious bedrooms, a big kitchen and a sizeable living room. It was a house full of memories—Alyssa's mother and her twelve brothers had lived, played and grown up there. But now, the nest was empty. Only her grandparents remained. The others had married and set up their own homes. Three were studying overseas.

Grandma, walking in with a pail of hot water, cut short Alyssa's musings. She proceeded to mix the warm water with cold water in the large ceramic urn that served as the bathtub, and left, closing the door quietly behind her, leaving Alyssa alone.

Used to hot showers, and her mother's ablutions, Alyssa had initially found it difficult to adjust to the "scoop and pour" bath, to wash and soap, bathe and dress herself. But now she was used to it.

Scooping a bucket of water from the tub, she poured it over her body and soaped herself briskly. She scrubbed hard, over and over several times—she felt like the fish scales and their smell were still clinging to her body. Finally she was satisfied. Wrapping herself in her large towel, she returned to her room to dress.

By the time she had freshened and put away her box of clothes, her grandma had dinner ready: thosai and chutney for

Alyssa, rice and fish curry for Grandpa. Alyssa wondered where her grandmother had found the time to clean the fish and prepare dinner so quickly. Her mother hardly cooked, and on the days she did, it took almost half a day to cook a meal.

Grandfather had already cleaned the fishing tackle and other equipment, and had his bath. He was now out on the porch, feeding biscuits to Karuppan and Sengkan; the two wild dogs were nearly Alyssa's height.

Soon he joined them at the dinner table. Grandpa served himself rice and poured a generous helping of the fish curry over it. Grandma served the thosai for herself and Alyssa, and they began to eat.

Grandpa always ate rice with fish curry for lunch and dinner. Biscuits sufficed for breakfast. He loved his fish. Alyssa had heard that fishermen hated to eat fish, but this was definitely not the case with her grandpa. Maybe it was her grandmother's knack for turning out delicious fish curries.

But Alyssa hated fish. So Grandmother would whip up different dishes for her.

Alyssa's mother, Sellarani, was her grandparents' only daughter. They used to dote on her. But now, she knew that they all quarrelled incessantly whenever they met. Grandpa had even stopped speaking to her. The previous month when her mother had brought Alyssa to her grandparents' home, only Grandma had spoken to her. Alyssa often wondered what had caused the rift.

"Can you look after Alyssa for a few weeks? My new job is demanding and I am late home most days. Muthu also does overtime work very often and I don't like to leave Alyssa alone at home. School holidays have also just begun, and for the next couple of months she will be bored out of her mind. It's only for a few days..."

Grandpa walked away without a word. Grandma simply nodded her head.

Since that day, Sellarani had visited her daughter only once. She arrived suddenly, travelling by bumboat from mainland Singapore, bringing a bag full of storybooks for Alyssa.

"Your father bought these for you."

She fussed over Alyssa, cleaned her room, made the bed. Fluffing up the pillows, and then teaching Alyssa how to do it for herself. She folded her daughter's clothes and put them neatly away in the boxes. She even wanted to bathe Alyssa, like the old days in Singapore.

"I can manage on my own," Alyssa had retorted and shut the bathroom door.

But Sellarani was still there when Alyssa emerged from the bathroom, hair dripping water. Taking the towel from her daughter's hands, she dried her hair, before following her daughter to her room. There was no hair dryer. She switched on the fan to do the job, and proceeded to dust her daughter's back liberally with talcum powder.

"Looks like you have trouble reaching your back—see,



it is not all that clean. You must remember to scrub it well when you bathe. Ask Grandma to help if you can't do it on your own."

Sellarani proceeded to dress her daughter in the new pants and blouse she had brought. Drawing Alyssa onto her lap, she combed her daughter's hair, plaiting it neatly. She sensed Alyssa was unhappy with the lack of facilities in her grandparents' home.

"You know, this arrangement is only till the holidays are over. Yes, it is not as convenient as our flat in Singapore. But this house is large and you can play freely here. But don't go out alone. Remain close to Grandma..."

Alyssa still remained silent.

"I did think of bringing your TV set here, but I had too many things to carry. Just two more weeks before I take you back to our home."

Alyssa's silence continued. Perhaps she sensed that her mother was prattling away with no purpose.

Soon it was time for her mother to return to the mainland. As usual, Grandma had packed food for her daughter: fish, prawns and vegetables. She now passed the overflowing bags to Sellarani. Alyssa noticed that her grandpa was nowhere to be seen. Obviously, he was not going to see his daughter off.

Sellarani followed Grandma out to the yard, Alyssa close by her side. Placing the overflowing bags in the back seat, she got into the pickup after helping Alyssa up. Grandma

took the driver's seat and within a few minutes they were at the jetty, and then Sellarani was aboard the bumboat for the return journey.

Alyssa clutched her grandma's hand tightly as she watched the boat carrying her mother pull away from the jetty. They stood waving till the boat disappeared from sight, before starting for home.

The drive home was more eventful. Grandma made several stops along the way, to chat with friends. Conversation was all about their produce. Grandma spoke proudly about the ripening papayas and pineapples in her fruit garden, the durians that had fallen overnight and which she had gathered, the dried salted fish that she had made from Grandpa's catch. Alyssa listened, quietly observing their excited chatter.

While her grandma loved to speak, her grandfather was a man of few words. He rarely spoke to anyone, even to the neighbours who often popped over to buy vegetables, or grandma's special ground chilli and sauces. Grandma would merrily chat away with them while she weighed and packed the produce. Surprisingly, Grandpa never stopped her chatter.

He had left for the quarry by the time they reached home. Granite quarrying was the main commercial activity on the ten square-kilometre island. Pulau Ubin had gotten its name due to the abundance of granite on the island. Alyssa's grandparents were among the many who had arrived to

work in the quarries in the early 60s and made Pulau Ubin their home.

Aik Quarry, where Grandpa worked, was one of the largest. It supplied most of the granite needed on the mainland. Grandpa had been working at this quarry for many years. Her two uncles, Grandpa's eldest two sons, also used to work there. One of them had died in an accident while breaking granite, but this did not stop Grandpa from continuing to work at the quarry. Through the years, his hard work and experience had been recognised and he was now the quarry supervisor. He went fishing only when he had no work at the quarry.

Most of the smaller quarries on the island had closed in the past several years and Aik Quarry's closure was also imminent. But Grandpa had no intention of leaving Ubin even when the quarry ceased operations.

Grandma left for her vegetable farm immediately after reaching home. The farm sat on the large tracts of leased land surrounding the house. Grandma's additional income, derived from the sale of the farm's produce—from the variety of fruits to greens and vegetables—helped to supplement Grandpa's income and had greatly helped them to manage the large family. But the monthly lease price of the land had steadily increased. Fortunately, the house and garden surrounding it belonged to her grandparents.

Sellarani did not return for Alyssa at the end of December.

Not wanting Alyssa to miss her schooling starting in January, Grandpa thought it best to enrol her in Ubin's Bin Kian Chinese Primary School. She joined the Primary Three class in 1978. They could have admitted her to the Malay school on the island, but in Grandma's view, very few students studied there and hence standards were not as high. Still, Alyssa wondered if there were other reasons.

The student enrolment in the Chinese school had also been falling as many families had returned to Singapore with the closure of many quarries. Now, the school population numbered less than one hundred. Alyssa was the only Indian in her class of seventeen, but thanks to the diversity of programmes she had watched, she spoke some Hokkien, and was therefore able to get along with her classmates.

There were many differences between her classmates in her school in Singapore and now in Ubin. Here, students in the Primary Six class rode motorcycles to school. They were not breaking any rules as driving licenses were not needed in Ubin.

Her grandfather drove her to school on the first day. From the second day, she cycled to school—it took her half an hour. On some days after school, she would go fishing with her grandfather. On other occasions, she would wander into the forest.

She didn't need to worry about food when in the forest as there were abundant fruit trees—rambutan, durian, coconut.

And guava, her favourite. She loved to watch the antics of the many dogs, cats, monkeys, occasional deer and peacocks that made the forest their home, while munching away on the guavas.

Unlike the other kids, she went alone. She had not made friends yet. On many occasions, she came across groups of her schoolmates climbing the coconut and rambutan trees, plucking the fruits and enjoying them. Sometimes they would also pluck the young coconuts, cut them open and share with Alyssa. Yet she did not make any effort to join the group.

Once, she spent the entire weekend in the forest. She slept on the solid, broad branches of the large trees that were plentiful. To prevent herself from falling, she tied herself to the branch.

Her grandparents never questioned her about her movements, even when she stayed out overnight without informing them. She assumed that her mother and uncles had behaved similarly when they were children, and her grandparents were used to it. She noticed that the children in Ubin were allowed to do as they pleased.

Much as she enjoyed the forest, Alyssa loved fishing with her grandpa better. He knew so many different ways to bring in a good catch. Sometimes he would drive bamboo poles in the water, and hitch a net to it. Or he would go to the kelong nearby and fish from there. If he felt like it, he would take

the sampan out, and if he was able to gather a few friends, he ventured out on the motorboat. Whatever the mode of fishing, he always managed to get a good catch.

Alyssa longed to learn the intricacies of fishing from her grandpa. The time spent with him provided the right opportunity.

For the past several days, Grandpa had been focused on mending a large fishing net, patiently stitching whatever holes he found. He fixed the ropes that had frayed. Alyssa sat quietly, observing attentively.

One day when she returned home, she overheard her grandmother talking to him: "Alyssa is exactly like you. She doesn't speak much, or ask questions ceaselessly, but she is very observant and absorbs everything."

Intent on listening to her grandmother's conversation, Alyssa failed to notice the fishing tackle and hooks on the floor. Her scream echoed through the house, startling her grandparents. Grandma had never realised that Alyssa could scream that deafeningly.

Blood was dripping profusely from Alyssa's foot when her grandparents reached her. If he was shocked, Grandpa showed no sign. He turned back into the house and returned swiftly, holding the basket he used to keep fish fresh. Scooping Alyssa off the ground, he motioned to his wife to place Alyssa's injured foot in the basket. Grasping the bleeding foot, Grandma quickly set Alyssa's foot into the

vessel, completely burying it in the ice chips. As her foot began to become numb, the pain eased and Alyssa's sobs turned into soft whimpers.

Grandma rushed back into the house, then returned with a stool and a large torchlight. Seating Alyssa on the stool, she shone the torch into the basket, moved the ice aside and checked if the bleeding had stopped. Meanwhile, Grandpa emerged from the house with several pieces of cloth and a small knife.

Sitting beside Alyssa on the floor, he gently lifted the injured foot from the basket. Placing it on his lap, he probed gently with the knife, trying his very best to extricate the fishing hook without hurting her too much. The hook had lodged quite deeply, and despite his gentleness, it tore her flesh when he finally extricated it, causing blood to spurt all over.

Pressing down on the wound hard to staunch the bleeding, he swiftly bandaged the foot, using another of the large pieces of cloth as a tourniquet above her calf. He lifted her in his arms, carried her to her bedroom and lowered her gently onto the bed. He placed several pillows on top of each other and lifted the foot to rest on top of them.

"Sleep now. We will take a look at it again in the morning." He left the room and went to sleep.

Meanwhile, her grandmother had made Alyssa a hot cup of Milo. Exhaustion, the sight of blood and the shock had

all taken a toll, and within minutes of drinking the Milo, she was fast asleep. She awoke suddenly sometime later, pain throbbing through the foot. She did not cry out and merely lay in bed quietly, waiting for daybreak. Her grandma would normally be awake by 5am.

She now walked in, gently stroked Alyssa's head and whispered: "Is it very painful?"

Alyssa nodded silently.

Soon her grandfather joined them and carried her to the bathroom. He placed her injured foot on a stool and left. Alyssa struggled to complete her morning ablutions. But she refused to allow her grandma into the bathroom to help her.

When she was ready, her grandfather drove her to the jetty, and they boarded the first boat out to the mainland. In a few minutes, they arrived, and her grandpa immediately took her to the nearest clinic at Changi Village. The doctor asked no questions. He cleaned the wound and proceeded to stitch it up. Fifteen stitches were needed.

When it came to paying the thirty-five dollar medical fees, Grandpa realised that he had only thirty dollars with him. Promising to pay the balance at the next visit, he took Alyssa by the hand and left the clinic.

He only had a dollar and a few loose coins left to pay for the return trip. Putting aside twenty cents for the boat ride, they feasted on a packet of Hero chocolate cake and a can of Kickapoo Joy Juice before boarding the bumboat home.

Within a week, Alyssa was back to normal, the wound fully healed.

Her mother had not returned to see her since her last visit, or even written to make sure her daughter was okay. It hurt and pained Alyssa, and there were many nights when she cried herself to sleep. But she never let her grandparents see her misery; neither did she ask them for anything.

Several weeks passed. One day as she sat in the front yard, she noticed that her grandfather was preparing to go deep-sea fishing. The telltale signs were all there—the quiet excitement, the spring in his step, the chain-smoking, the indoor preparations.

Alyssa had never been on a night trip to the sea. She was overjoyed when she found out that this time, Grandpa would take her.

The villagers normally went in a group if they planned to go deep-sea fishing. Sometimes they took their boats out to the kelong they had built in the middle of the sea, stayed there several nights and fished. On other occasions, they would return the same day.

Grandpa loved to go deep-sea fishing with his friends in one of the big boats. That morning, Alyssa helped her grandfather and his friend, Lee Kong, to clean and mend the large boat. Her wish was about to be fulfilled.

They worked on it almost the whole day. In the evening, Alyssa watched Grandfather and Lee Kong load the boat

with fishing net, tackle, pail, water bottles and refreshments.

Dinner was over, and they were ready. Grandma had packed some potato chips and toasted bread and other tidbits for them. Grandpa grabbed two packets of cigarettes, while Grandma handed a thick jacket to Alyssa.

“This is your younger uncle’s and is waterproof. Cover your head if necessary with the hood.”

Alyssa had planned to take her blue jacket. But looking at her uncle’s jacket in her hands, she knew that it would be more suitable. Grandpa was keen to leave immediately and they were off the minute she scrambled up to the seat. They picked up Lee Kong along the way, and in no time, reached the seaside parking lot. Grandpa switched off the engine and they climbed out. A chill wind was blowing and Alyssa immediately put on the jacket. Grandpa and Lee Kong walked ahead, puffing deeply on their cigarettes.

The water glistened in the moonlight. As Alyssa followed them, she enjoyed the feel of the sand on her feet, as she trudged along. The stray dogs, abundant on the island, were sprinting up and down the shore, as if on patrol. In the dark, they looked slightly menacing, but she was not afraid. She had learnt how not to provoke them from her days spent in the forest.

But the bandicoots that suddenly scurried across her path from nowhere, and the occasional crabs that peeped out from the sand, frightened her slightly.

Lee Kong and her grandfather, meanwhile, were intent on freeing the boat from the jetty and dragging it out to the sea. Unsure when she should board the boat, she stood, clutching a plastic bag, waiting for a signal from her grandfather. When the boat was afloat, Lee Kong and her grandfather boarded it in a single leap. If she dithered any longer she knew that she would not be on this trip. The boat was already drifting away and now she was about two feet from it.

It was now or never. Mimicking her grandfather's actions, she leaped, and landed on the boat, unscathed. If her grandpa was impressed, he showed no sign as he ambled to the engine room. Within seconds, the engine roared to life and the boat skipped through the water, piercing it and sending a mist of spray in all directions.

The boat was partitioned in the front by glass, and by a plastic mat at the rear. There was room only for two in the narrow cramped "room" created by the partitions. Alyssa joined her grandfather at the front, enjoying the cool breeze and the sight of the rippling waves ahead of the boat. Soon they reached mid-sea, and Grandpa cut the engine. Lee Kong threw out the floats tied to the boat on either side and the boat remained still, bobbing gracefully on the water.

Picking up the net, Lee Kong shook it vigorously to remove any tangles and threw it as far out as it could reach. One end of this large net was secured firmly to the hooks on the boat's side. The sea breeze caught the fine mesh net,

lifting and spreading it out, before letting it fall gracefully to the sea, where it merged with the waves.

Alyssa now moved to the back of the boat. Darkness enveloped the surroundings. Her eyes had grown accustomed to the dark, and she could make out the surface of the sea. The air was redolent with the smell unique to the sea—a blend of seaweed, plankton, fish and salt. Alyssa loved this smell. Grasping the sides, she closed her eyes, and took deep breaths, lost in the pleasure of being out at sea.

A sudden sting on her cheek startled her. Shocked, she turned around and saw a flying catfish, flopping frantically on the boat's floor. Before she could recover, she was assailed by the sight of hundreds of catfish flying towards her, like a volley of stones fired from a cannon. Some slammed into her, and others landed inside the boat, gasping for breath. Frightened, she tried to take cover, and tripped. Before she knew it, she found herself in the water, being dragged down by some heavy force.

Her reflexes kicked in. Holding her breath, she kicked her feet and in one swift thrust, emerged to the surface. Breathless, she tried to scream for help, but her breath only came out. Just when she thought that the sea was going to claim her, she felt someone tugging her by her hair.

Grandfather's voice came from afar: "Alyssa, Alyssa!"

The voices of Tamil women in Singapore are given a powerful outlet by Latha in this collection of stories. Among them: a grandmother forced to move because of an en bloc sale; a daughter caring for her terminally ill mother; and the enigmatic Alyssa, who is left with her grandparents on Pulau Ubin as a child, and must deal with devastating loss as an adult. *The Goddess in the Living Room* chronicles these women's domestic struggles and exposes the unyielding patriarchy in the Indian community.



Latha has published in Tamil two collections of poetry, a short story collection and in various multilingual anthologies. She is Sunday editor of *Tamil Murasu*, a Singapore newspaper.

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