

UNDER A SHADOW

A Memoir (1942-1946)

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Chapter 1

I remember it was in the year 1944, two years after the Japanese invaded Malaya, when my siblings and I were making figurines with the clay which we found under the house, that I first saw a cow suddenly descend into our compound as though it came from the sky.

Before I go on with this story, I need to explain where my town Batu Pahat actually stands on the map of present-day Malaysia. It is one of the many towns in the west coast of Malaysia. It is also an important town in the state of Johor. Many tiny streams flow into the main river of Batu Pahat.

Our bungalow house stood next to one such stream. It was opposite Beauty World, a popular amusement park in Batu Pahat. It stood on concrete pillars, about four feet high, above the ground, providing an under house. We children used the clay from the abandoned homes of mud crabs living in the stream, in front of our house, for moulding figurines.

When I saw the cow, I left my sisters and ran to the edge of the under house where I stood still with my grubby hands, watching a tall Sikh man, who wore a white turban on his head, a grey *jubbah* and a pair of black *shalwar*, led an immaculately white cow into our premises. The cow walked behind the man, looking quite jaunty and at ease with herself as if she owned the piece of land where she walked. I have never seen a white cow with such confidence before.

By then, my sisters were standing next to me, watching the cow walk in with the Sikh man. However, on catching sight of us, her nostrils flared up as if she could sense us children staring at her. So we stood away from her. Standing next to the faded

and well-washed white turban of her master, her coat shone in the warm morning sunlight like fresh milk. Her horns were curved perfectly like the halves of a new moon. She tossed her head as if she was indifferent to all the stares she got. But the black of her eyes were focused on me. I thought she looked like a wild bird ready to take flight.

My father, a police officer, standing at five feet eleven tall with broad shoulders, commanding a muscular frame in a pair of khakis and shirt, walked towards the cow with a turnip head in his hand. Raju, the cowhand with a slightly built frame, also walked towards her but with empty hands. However, Raju talked to the cow in his soft voice as he approached her. She studied them both with caution. Finally she let Raju examine her before he took the rope from the Sikh man.

It was after that we children started to move slowly towards her. We, in fact, inched towards her. We did not want to spook her so we gathered round our father first. He was in a jolly mood and he said in English to us, “Ha, look at those dark eyes of hers. She is spirited. She reminds me of someone. Come look at me, kids.”

All of us turned our eyes from the cow to him. After a couple of seconds with careful deliberation, he said, “We will call her Rosa.”

Then he went forward to the cow with his turnip, leaving us children standing alone behind. She was not interested for she turned away from my father’s turnip. I heard my mother shout in Malayalam, “Try something else!”

So my father pulled out some hay from his pocket and advanced towards her, saying softly, “Here, my girl, come and have a bite.”

The cow slowly turned her head. She nibbled the hay. My father smiled and gave her a couple of jovial slaps on her shoulders, saying softly, “Well done, Rosa,” as she ate the hay from my father’s hand cautiously. I could see he was pleased with her.

By then, Raju had become friends with the cow by talking to her in a gentle voice. She was sniffing Raju and was ready to follow him. We children stood a couple of feet away watching Raju led this new cow to the shed, leaving my father behind with the Sikh man. I thought she looked like a white steed by the firmness of her muscles when Raju led her away to the cowshed.

My father walked towards the gate with the Sikh man talking in Punjabi. I knew they were talking about the price of the cow because I heard the word “*pisa*” being mentioned. My father paid him the money he wanted without bargaining.

I hesitated. I watched my siblings walk to the kitchen. But I decided to follow the cowhand leading Rosa to the cowshed instead.

The cowshed was formerly used as the garage. It stood at the far corner of the compound. It was a well-built space with timber walls, cemented floor and a tiled roof, which used to house a sizeable car of a dignitary. It was large enough to hold three cows. Both Papati and Meenachi, who have been supplying the whole family with milk, were chewing the cud as they watched Rosa’s entry into the cowshed from the corner of their eyes. As she entered, they began to move their tails from side to side to keep the flies away. Papati’s coat looked slightly greyish and Meenachi’s was almost pinkish-white, next to Rosa’s milky-white coat as she took her place. After a while, Rosa’s tail began to swish in harmony with Papati’s and Meenachi’s.

Tamby, a new cowhand who arrived a week ago, came carrying a white enameled pail with a couple of dents, full of corn and crushed tapioca swill. He poured the swill out into two shallow aluminum pans for each of the cows. He then left some swill for Rosa in the pail. He took a *changkol* from its resting place against the wall and scrapped the new patches of cow dung into a metallic dustpan. These patches looked like green patties on the floor. According to my grandmother, cow dung is an extremely useful item in the house. In India, it is made into patties and left to dry on the mud walls of the cottages, to be reused for making firewood. But my father only used them as fertilisers.

Tamby then carried the dustpan to the dunghill which stood like a heap of discarded canvases, just behind the cowshed. He dumped the newly collected cow dung onto the weathered dunghill.

I looked at the trees growing next to dunghill, looking as if they were enjoying the manure. There were papaya trees with a lush cluster of young growing papayas. A jackfruit tree was sprouting new little buds ready to be covered over with sackings. The roots of these trees were enjoying the nutrition from the dunghill and the trees looked as if they were enjoying the manure.

Then I heard my mother's voice yelling, "Wash your grubby hands and get here!"

I turned towards the kitchen. Standing along the narrow corridor, linking the kitchen to the main house, were my siblings, Tony, Andy, Hazie and Lizzie. As usual, they had lined up for a dose of red palm oil which was given to us faithfully every morning.

So I ran to the standpipe standing in the courtyard, washed my grubby hands and took my place in the line-up. I opened my mouth, closed my eyes and swallowed the teaspoonful of red palm oil. As I opened my eyes, my mother popped a cube of *gula melaka* into my mouth.

Gula melaka is made from dark crude sugar, which is extracted from the sap of a certain palm tree. A cube of this sugar was given as a treat to take the taste of the red palm oil from my mouth. As I sucked the cube of *gula melaka* slowly, I watched Lizzie, my younger sister.

Lizzie opened her mouth but my father's attention was taken up by the question thrown at him by my mother in Malayalam. "Why did you pay the Sikh man the money he asked for the cow?"

"Times are hard. Nobody knows how long this occupation will last. The rice sold at the black market is beyond the means of an ordinary man. He needed the money to feed his children. So there was no need to bargain."

“So you gave him more than what he asked for.”

“No I gave him exactly what he asked for. I did not bargain. It was a good buy. Look at it as an investment. What is most important is that she has not calved yet.”

He then turned to Lizzie standing in her position with her mouth opened for a while. Unfortunately, before she could swallow the red palm oil, she retched. She tried to retain the red palm oil in her mouth. This only increased the strain of retching. In the end she vomited the red palm oil.

My mother was by Lizzie’s side, helping her to ease her throwing up by rubbing her back. This made Lizzie cry.

Chomel, our baby monkey who was watching Lizzie struggle, grimaced as he swung from pillar to pillar. I got distracted by his antics wondering what he was about to do.

When my father first brought Chomel to our house, he was only a few days old. He was so tiny and helpless. My mother had to feed him with milk from a bottle. Apparently, while patrolling in the outlying areas of the jungle, a policeman shot the mother mistaking it for a bandit. Later to his horror, he discovered a baby cradling inside the dead mother’s body. He decided to take the baby home. But his wife, who was pregnant and had three tiny tots in the house, refused to feed another mouth. She told her husband that they could not afford it. So the policeman had arrived at my father’s office, the same day, with the baby monkey. My father was not given much choice in the matter. He was given a tiny monkey. So my father brought the baby monkey to our house. He called all of us and explained the situation.

He said, “Here is an orphan who needs your help. Will you help your mother to feed this helpless orphan?”

In the last three months, the baby monkey had grown into an impish scamp. It was growing every day and his slender arms were getting stronger. I could see his animated body through his downy hair. He is now on the beam, swinging on his hind legs, stretching his arms out towards me and making grimaces.

When I walked towards my grandmother who was sitting on the stairways leading to the main house, Chomel scuffled down from the beam and scurried towards her. He found a weevil on her white *mundu*. He held it out to show it to me before popping it into his mouth.

Unlike my mother, my grandmother is always dressed in the traditional Syrian costume of the people in Kerala. This costume consists of about six yards of plain white muslin wound round her body, with one end pleated manually into a fan the night before. A white blouse with long fitting sleeves and a V-shaped neckline is worn on the top. My mother, on the other hand, wore a saree and a blouse. She said she wanted to be part of the local scene.

People looked at my grandmother strangely because of her white clothes. When I asked her why she only wore white, she told me that it was customary among widows in her community to stop wearing colours when their husbands have passed away.

When I looked surprised, she said, “People in my community never wear solid colours any way. The border was the only place where they had colour on their sarees. It is about a half to two inches thick on a white fabric. The colours were red, black, green, blue or gold. The gold was for the wedding saree which they stopped wearing as soon as the first child was born.”

I began to picture a country where women were dressed mostly in white fabric with lines of colour running through them. Would I want to live in such a community? Why were the rules weighed against women? It seems even simple joys of life were denied to women. Why did women put up with these rules? Wasn't it possible to rebel against such a ruling? I looked at my grandmother and wondered about the kind of life she led in Kerala. Was she happy living in such a community? What would women do when they were unhappy? Was she happy to leave her kind in India and come to Malaya? Is she happy to be in Malaya now? Such questions roamed my mind as I sat with her looking for weevils. I dare not ask too many questions about

her life in Kerala. So the picture of her life in Kerala remained vague and fuzzy in my mind.

When I inquired about her earrings, she told me that her people in Kerala deliberately elongated their earlobes by making their little girls wear heavy gold earrings studded with precious stones called *kunukku*, in Malayalam, which helped to stretch her earlobes. First they used earrings studded with a single stone. As time went on, they used heavier earrings, studded with more stones, to increase their weights. She said that it was a very painful process. My grandmother's brothers, one a lawyer and the other a Monseigneur, had forbidden her from inflicting the same pain on my mother. I tried to imagine the agony and trauma of having one's earlobes elongated. It must have been terrible to go through such pain.

Now my grandmother leaves the earlobes to hang loose without the heavy stone-studded earrings. Instead she only wears two large heavy gold circular earrings, called *maeka motherum* in Malayalam, on the top of her ears. Indifferent to beauty, she lets her earlobes hang empty, like two rubber bands, to her shoulders. Many people found this rather peculiar though nobody questioned her. I understood why she refused to adorn her ears, though she never talked about it. I thought she looked unique in her white clothes. The circular gold earrings stood in contrast to her stark white clothes. This gave character to her face.

I sat next to my grandmother and helped her to search the weevils in the rice without asking her unnecessary questions. My focus was on the little black weevils which crept everywhere in the rice. They were numerous. They moved round in the loosely woven cane tray, heedless of our scrutiny. I picked them out of the tray and dropped them into a little ceramic bowl with blue edging. After a while my mother came to help us. She said in Malayalam, "I hope the rice will last. The *pikul* of rice in 1943 seemed a great deal when it first came. We thought it would outlast the years of occupation. "

"What if it doesn't?"

After saying it, my grandmother carried on with the search of the weevils. I could see my mother looking at her in surprise. It was the kind of response which provoked the listener. I watched my grandmother's face as she did.

"You know the Japanese Officer, the guy who brought the gunnysack of rice; he had come to our house earlier in 1942."

"You must have made a mistake. Anyway they all look alike."

"Yes, some do but this one had a distinctive feature."

"What?"

"He had a mole on his chin."

"So?"

"The officer who accompanied the soldiers to our house with the gunnysack of rice had a mole on his chin, too."

"What are you trying to say?"

Then my grandmother looked towards my direction. I pretended to be busy looking for weevils.

"The first guy wanted to ease himself."

"So?"

"We were terrified of the Japanese soldiers as we listened to the incidents of rape in those early days. So I did not want him to enter the house. I met him on the driveway instead."

"Where was I?"

"You were in bed with malaria."

"I see."

"He indicated his need. He was quite polite and discreet."

"Okay."

"I pointed towards the coconut tree at the end of our compound, close to the road."

"But what makes you think that they were the same guy?"

"It is just a feeling."

My grandmother was silent. I was thinking of the upheaval in 1942. So was my mother. I thought of the horror that came down on the people of Malaya. My mother's face showed the pain she went through. I looked at both of them but they were so absorbed in their own thoughts to worry about me.

I remembered the arrival of the gunnysack of rice. I distinctly recalled the Japanese Officer with his sword on his side. But I couldn't remember a mole on his chin. I was sitting on one of branches of the chiku tree with my sister Hazie playing *masak-masak* with ripe chikus when two Japanese soldiers with strong arms and legs carried a heavy sack of jute, about eight feet long and two and a half feet wide, to the house. My father spoke to the officer-in-charge in Japanese for a while. The soldiers were allowed to take the gunnysack into the house.

My father said, "*Arigato*," as he bowed to the soldiers. They bowed to him in turn. Later when I asked my father about it, he told me that it was their custom. They greeted each other by bowing. There were many stories told of how the locals were punished if they unwittingly did not bow to the sentry. It was possible my grandmother got the detail wrong.

"Go on. Go and play," said my mother in Malayalam.

I slowly got up and walked away without fussing. As I walked away, I remembered how scared we were of the Japanese soldiers during the invasion. There were stories afloat of the atrocities committed by the soldiers during the fall of Singapore in 1942.

Images of travelling in a car to Amber Estate flashed through my mind. When we arrived at the estate, we were met by about seven families who had just arrived. They were Malayalee Christian families from Kerala. Each family had about eight to ten children. They arrived in taxis like we did.

After we sat down and had a drink, we were told to pool our food resources. Each family dumped a gunnysack of uncooked rice on the floor. I recalled seeing a mountain of rice heaped in the middle of the living room in that huge house which belonged to the estate manager. There was a heap of canned tins, sugar and salt. One man from each family was selected to form a group in charge of this horde of food. It was squirreled away in no time to the attic for safekeeping.

I recalled how the evacuees of Amber Estate were disturbed by the revving of two motorbikes one day. We were startled by

the noise. At the sound of the motorbikes, an alarm system in the bungalow went off. We were all told earlier to hide when the alarm goes off. So I crept under the bed with my sisters.

After a couple of minutes, not being able to bear the suspense, I crept out of my hiding place and peeped out of the window. My head could barely reach the window sill. So I stood on my toes and looked out. I saw two Japanese soldiers on a motorbike shouting in a language I did not understand. Two dogs started to bark without stopping. The soldiers shot them, one after the other, in quick succession. I saw the blood ooze out of the dogs, staining the white cemented ground red. There was silence for a couple of minutes as I stared in horror.

Then I heard the chickens screech in the background. I saw a number of men from our group, who guarded the food in the attic enter the chicken pen. I saw them chasing the chickens. They strangled the chickens after they had caught them. Then the strangled chickens were handed to the two Japanese soldiers who were still seated on the bikes revving the machines. With the chickens hanging on their bikes, the Japanese soldiers zoomed off into the darkness of the rubber trees, fluttering a white flag with a ball of red in the centre.

I stood rooted to the spot recalling what had happened. This flashback disturbed me. Food became the focus in my mind. Is food the most important thing in life? Would people kill for food? Were the men in our group frightened by the Japanese soldiers? Or were they more concerned about the horde in the attic which they promised to guard? Confused, I stood still wondering what I should do. I felt small and useless. What could I have done to increase the food supply? As a girl, I was considered useless. There seemed to be many hands grabbing at the food from all the sides, each hand wanting more. Life depends on food. The animals want it too. So do human beings. Would mother know what to do if we run out of rice? Maybe I should ask father? He should know what to do if we run out of rice.

I began to walk slowly towards the under house. Can there be people if there is no food in the world? Then I heard Hazie's voice calling me to see the figurine that she had created. So I dashed to the under house.