Kottu Roti and Devil Dancing in Sydney: a novel

Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of the Diaspora, a Sri Lankan Migrant Perspective: an exegesis

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This is to certify that the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any other degree or purpose.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work, and that all assistance received in preparing this thesis and all sources have been acknowledged.

Sharmila Jayasinghe

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Abstract

This thesis comprises a creative component, the novel *Kottu Roti and Devil Dancing in Sydney*, and an exegesis examining contemporary Sri Lankan-Australian diaspora literature, including *A Change of Skies* by Yasmine Gooneratne, *Chai Time at Cinnamon Gardens* by Shankari Chandran and *Untethered* by Ayesha Inoon. Both explore how inherited cultural knowledge, shaped by historical Occidental thought, frames the West as the 'Other' and how this perspective is reinterpreted, challenged, and transformed through diasporic experience.

The novel, set in the fictional Sydney suburb of 'Little Sri Lanka', depicts a culturally hybrid and liminal space. Employing multiple narrative voices, and incorporating ritual, folklore, ancestral memory, and inventive uses of English, it explores how inherited worldviews are lived and tested. Through humour, magic-realist elements, and everyday absurdities, such as a love-struck man paralysed by Western trousers, marriage proposals that lead to spontaneous combustion, and disappearing houses, the novel shows the tensions between resistance to Western influence and the possibilities of hybridity.

The exegesis combines creative writing, autoethnography and literary analysis to trace the development of Occidentalist ideas from precolonial and colonial narratives to contemporary diasporic literature. Using the frameworks of Occidentalism (Buruma and Margalit) hybridity (Homi Bhabha) and diasporic identity (Stuart Hall), it shows how Sri Lankan diasporic literature simultaneously resists, adapts and transforms Western norms while preserving inherited cultural memory.

Together the creative and the critical components illuminate the ongoing production of hybrid identity in diaspora, highlighting the dynamic interplay of homeland, migration and cultural negotiation. The thesis positions diasporic fiction not only as a reflection of displacement but as an active site of cultural critique, survival, and reinvention.

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Introduction

Acceptance and Resistance: Homeland and the West

In 2016, during Sri Lanka's 68th Independence Day celebrations in Colombo, Sri Lankan-British soprano Kishani Jayasinghe performed an operatic rendition of 'Danno Budunge', a revered Sinhala song long associated with nationalist sentiment. Composed by John de Silva with a melody by Indian musician Viswanath Lawjee, for the 1903 Sinhala drama *Siri Sangabo*, which draws from the fifth-century Sinhala chronicle *Mahavamsa*, the song is steeped in cultural and spiritual significance.[1] Jayasinghe's operatic interpretation sparked intense debate, with many within Sri Lanka's artistic and cultural circles viewing the Western classical form as a violation of the song's sanctity. Vocalist and composer Dr Victor Ratnayake, a pioneer in adapting Sri Lankan music to new contexts, found this performance too radical, claiming 'Western music genres cannot be harmonised with our cultural heritage' (Wickramasinghe 2016), describing opera as a distortion. Vimala Amaradeva likewise condemned the performance for ignoring the audience's cultural sensibilities (ibid). While Sri Lankan music has long absorbed foreign influences, particularly South and North Indian traditions, with Carnatic and Hindustani raga-based compositions being incorporated into the school curriculum (Meddegoda 2020; Aravinthon 2021), critics argued that the operatic form overshadowed the song's spiritual simplicity and emotional depth. Despite this, Jayasinghe received strong support for challenging musical norms, ultimately inspiring her to reshape perceptions of music in Sri Lanka by establishing the Colombo Opera Company to further promote opera (Sandanayaka 2022).

This moment illuminates the core tensions that drive this study: the dynamic and ongoing negotiation between resistance to and adaptation of Western influence, a process that takes on distinct forms in a diasporic context. Jayasinghe, as a diasporic artist, embodies the hybridity that migrant communities navigate, a blend of globalised influences and cultural reinvention. The backlash she faced reflects the persistent resistance to Westernisation within

[1] Further details about the song are in '"Danno Budunge" – over a century old', *Daily FT* 2020, Available at: https://www.ft.lk/FT-Lite/Danno-Budunge-over-a-century-old/6-703311.

Sri Lanka, a resistance that is not static, but is continuously redefined through creative practices. The tension between cultural preservation and the reimagining of cultural forms shapes the central inquiry of this research. How do Sri Lankans, particularly in the diaspora, negotiate these intertwined impulses? And how are these negotiations expressed in their literary practices, through language, structure, character, and narrative voice?

The sections that follow introduce the personal, historical, and theoretical foundations of this study, outline its central research questions, define its methodological approach, and establish its scope within the broader fields of diaspora and postcolonial literature. As a Sri Lankan-Australian writer and researcher, I inhabit this space of contradiction. My worldview was shaped by inherited scepticism towards the West, rooted in colonial memory, nationalist ideology, and family narratives. Yet I live in Australia, raise bilingual children, and write in English, a language once seen as a colonial weapon but now part of my expressive identity. This study grows out of that lived contradiction and incorporates its textures and memories to offer one strand of embodied experience among innumerable diverse stories. It explores how diasporic literature becomes a space where identity is not simply preserved but reimagined, through resistance, hybridity, and negotiation.

Cultural Resistance and the Construction of the West

Resistance to Western influence in my family spans generations, shaped by historical and immediate circumstances: opposition to British occupation, nationalist movements after independence, global influences in development and the aftermath of the country's internal conflicts. My grandfather's resistance, rooted in colonial memory and cultural pride, represented a broader ideological stance within postcolonial Sri Lanka. He deliberately rejected Westernisation, wearing the national dress, a sarong and collarless shirt, refusing to speak English and living without modern amenities in a village attuned to the rhythms of the temple, paddy fields, and reservoir. Educated at a pirivena (Buddhist temple school), he was a respected community figure who proudly proclaimed, 'We have a history of over 2,500 years. We were civilised while the white man still ran around naked.'

This resistance was not simply eccentric or personal; it reflected a broader ideological and cultural stance embedded within postcolonial Sri Lanka. Shaped by the aftershocks of British rule and the nationalist revival after independence, this world view treated language as a key battleground. The 1833 Colebrook–Cameron reforms had enshrined English as the administrative and educational medium, reinforcing elite dominance and marginalising vernacular knowledge systems. In response, the post-independence state sought to reclaim

cultural sovereignty, most visibly by elevating Sinhala as the official language in 1956 (Coperehewa 2011). This cultural assertion extended beyond policy into daily life. Patriotic songs played a significant role in shaping national consciousness. These songs, which we were made to listen to at Grandfather's house, were aptly labelled 'Deshabhimani Gee' or patriotic melodies. They called upon the gods to 'quarter the whites' for past injustices. These songs didn't just focus on race and country; they also vilified indigenous individuals who had adopted Western cultural practices. The aim of these songs was to instil patriotism and nationalistic sentiments in our young minds, fostering a sense of cultural pride and resistance.

Grandfather's resistance to the West was framed by this larger ideological framework, a deep-seated belief in preserving what he saw as the true values of Sri Lanka, untouched by colonial influence. In his stories and outlook, the West was not just foreign—it was seen as spiritually empty, morally confused, and culturally intrusive. His life was a daily rejection of the influence of the West, symbolising a steadfast commitment to indigenous values, even if it meant living in ways that seemed archaic or disconnected from the modern world.

In his household, the West symbolised everything corrosive: civil war, consumerism, environmental degradation, and even the erosion of family structures. We half-jokingly called these disruptions '-sations': Colonisation, Westernisation, Industrialisation, and Modernisation. They were lived challenges to a way of life grounded in spirituality, communal rhythms, and ancestral knowledge.

Change of Place: Change of Attitudes

My grandfather's resistance was rooted in cultural pride and a refusal to accept Western dominance, yet the changing socio-political landscape in Sri Lanka and the pressures of modern life made this ideological stance complicated. I experienced this shift firsthand during my undergraduate years, particularly the increasing acceptance of English, previously viewed with suspicion for its colonial and elitist associations. Unlike many of my peers, I was raised fluent in English, encouraged by my father, who had obtained an English education in the 1950s. For many of my batchmates from rural schools, however, English proficiency was not a priority as the language was seen not only a medium of communication but also a marker of the social and class divide. Yet over the semester, many came to recognise that English had become essential for academic success, career advancement, and social mobility. For this reason, several classmates approached me with a tentative request: 'Oyage kaduwa hondai ne, puluwang da apita ugannana?' (Your 'sword' is sharp. Can you teach us?). In Sri

Lankan colloquialism, kaduwa or sword symbolises both the power of English and its potential to create social divisions.

Over the next few years, I informally taught spoken English to many batchmates, in the university's bustling food court. This highlights the complexity of a nation navigating between resistance to Western influences and the pragmatic need to adapt. While ideological resistance to the West persisted, English became a necessary skill, and the lines between rejection and acceptance blurred. The focus shifted from outright rejection to selectively embracing aspects of Western influence while maintaining cultural identity.

Though my grandfather, who lived much of his life under British occupation and witnessed the country's struggle for independence, rooted his resistance in colonial memory and cultural pride, my father's attitudes were shaped more by practical and immediate concerns. Having pursued an English education out of necessity, he moved to the city, the hub of commerce and administrative services, for career opportunities. He, however, still maintained nationalist convictions: as an administrative officer in Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike's government, he worked tirelessly to reduce dependence on the West. Leaving his homeland was never a part of his agenda, yet, when war broke out in the north[2] and rebellion spread in the south[3] coupled with prolonged university closures,[4] he encouraged my eldest brother to migrate to Australia for safety and opportunity. A suicide bombing near my workplace, while I was pregnant, marked a turning point, prompting my father to urge the entire family to seek refuge abroad. The West, once vilified, was thus recast as sanctuary.

When I settled in Australia, I immediately felt the intensity of navigating between cultures, the push and pull of acceptance and rejection, traditions and adaptations. Initially, I

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[2] The Sri Lankan Civil War (1983–2009) was a prolonged conflict between the Sinhalese majority government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a Tamil terrorist group that sought an independent Tamil state. See a historical overview about the conflict in Anandakugan, N 2020, *The Sri Lankan Civil War and Its History, Revisited in 2020*, Harvard International Review.

[3] The 1987–1989 JVP insurrection was an armed uprising led by the Marxist-Leninist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) against the Government of Sri Lanka. For more information read Staniland, P. 2016, 'Sources on the JVP rebellions', *Paul Staniland*, 1/9/2016, Available at: https://paulstaniland.com/2016/08/01/sources-on-the-jvp-rebellions/

[4] By 1989, the violence that had plagued the south spread to the universities. Militant student unions, aligned with the JVP and other political groups, created chaos on campuses as they fought each other. In the midst of this turmoil, students were tortured and killed. The vice-chancellor of the University of Colombo was shot in his office. Ultimately, the escalating violence forced all universities to close indefinitely.

tried to preserve our heritage fully: holding puberty celebrations, facilitating arranged marriages, teaching traditional dances, and observing Sinhala New Year rituals with astrological precision, while insisting that we speak only our language at home. Yet, in this new environment, free from the societal pressures I had grown up with, my children embraced a different reality. They wore jeans with saree blouses and celebrated Sri Lankan New Year and Anzac Day with the same enthusiasm. Their lunchboxes had kottu roti and Vegemite toast sharing a space, while they spoke a hybrid language which blended Sinhala and English effortlessly.

My children's identities reflect a fluidity I had not foreseen. When one of my daughters married a white Australian who called me 'Amma', I recognised that our identity had not been lost but reconfigured. Hybridity, not cultural purity, became the form through which tradition survived. The resistance I had inherited from my grandfather, combined with the pragmatic adjustments of my father, now manifested in a new phase, an ongoing remaking of identity shaped by both memory and adaptation.

Theoretical Framework: Occidentalism, Hybridity, and Diasporic Identity

This study places the personal and historical tensions discussed here within a critical framework that weaves together three key concepts: Occidentalism, hybridity, and diasporic identity, providing a nuanced exploration of how Sri Lankan-Australian writers navigate cultural identity in relation to Western modernity. A central argument that emerges from this analysis is that diasporic life is not solely defined by the West. While the colonial legacy, and the attendant Western gaze as articulated by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978), often shape how non-Western identities are constructed, this study emphasises that diasporic identity is a complex and dynamic negotiation. It is shaped by a broader range of influences, both internal and external, which coexist and interact in dynamic and complex ways. These frameworks provide both the theoretical grounding and analytical lens through which I explore the diasporic experience as one of tension, transformation, and creative reinvention.

Occidentalism: Resistance and the Inherited Gaze

I begin with Occidentalism, a concept that has been defined in various ways since its emergence as an academic field of study. In many scholarly discussions, Occidentalism is understood as 'anti-Westernism', a rejection of ideas, political processes, or material objects labelled as Western (Ning 1997; Bonnett 2004; Woltering 2011; Sims 2012). After the September 11 attacks in the USA, Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit (2005) explored

Occidentalism as a form of hatred toward the West, which depicts it as a soulless, machine-like society, an emblem of moral decay and materialism (Buruma & Margalit 2005: 9). In Alistair Bonnett's view, this image is not merely reactive; it emerges as a way for non-Western societies to assert their own cultural identity and resist perceived Western cultural domination (2009: 201-17).

Literary philosopher Kenneth Burke's theory of 'contextual definition' underscores this relational dynamic: 'to tell what a thing is, you place it in terms of something else' (1945: 24). Thus, the 'West' becomes intelligible only through contrast with an idealised 'East'. In other words, Occidentalism constructs the West as the binary opposite of the Orient (Sims, 2012; Chen 1995). This framework resonates deeply with my personal memories of the cultural landscape in which I grew up.

In the Sri Lankan context, Occidentalist sentiments have long shaped the cultural imagination. From nationalist rhetoric to family customs, and even artistic controversies like the backlash against Kishani Jayasinghe's operatic rendition, the West is often framed as alien, intrusive, and spiritually barren. This construction functions as a cultural defence, what Hassan Hanafi describes as a 'defence of national character, national culture, and national lifestyle' (Hanafi 2008: 257-67).

In my own family, this resistance to the West manifested through everyday practices and ideological stances that framed Western influence as a threat to Sinhala-Buddhist values. However, as I argue in Chapter 3, while some elements broadly associated with an Occidentalist worldview position it as resistance to the West, its binary structure – East versus West, us versus them, tradition versus modernity – presents a limited perspective on diasporic identity. To move beyond these binaries, this study turns to more dynamic and process-oriented frameworks that offer a richer, more nuanced understanding of cultural negotiation in the diaspora.

Hybridity: Negotiation and Cultural Production

The second key framework in this study, hybridity, is drawn from Homi Bhabha's theory of cultural interaction. This concept is particularly relevant in diasporic contexts, as it captures the complexities of identity formation across cultural boundaries. Bhabha defines hybridity not as a simple blending of traditions, but as a generative 'third space' where identity is shaped through disruption, translation, and re-signification (Bhabha, 1994: 5). In this space, the boundaries between coloniser and colonised, East and West, are unsettled and reimagined.

Rather than resolving cultural contradictions, hybridity highlights them, revealing how postcolonial identity is formed through ambivalence, mimicry, and difference. For diasporic individuals who navigate multiple cultural logics, this framework provides a powerful lens through which to understand their lived experiences. Bhabha's concept of hybridity, described as both 'camouflage' and 'heresy' (193), suggests a means of resisting dominant structures by occupying them differently.

In the diasporic context, hybridity speaks to the ongoing experience of shifting between belief systems, languages, and cultural expectations. 'It foregrounds complicated entanglement, emphasising togetherness-in-difference rather than separateness or the virtual apartheid' (Ang 2003: 2) that can emerge when cultures remain siloed. As Ien Ang argues, hybridity 'prevents the absorption of all difference into a hegemonic plane of sameness and homogeneity' (ibid), highlighting the richness of cultural interaction.

For me, as a Sri Lankan-Australian writer, hybridity is not merely theoretical – it is a daily reality, embedded in the way I write, parent and speak. This study embraces hybridity not only as a critical framework but as a mode of storytelling, analysing, and being.

Diasporic Identity: Being, Becoming, and Reimagining Belonging

While Bhabha offers a model for understanding cultural fusion and subversion, Stuart Hall adds to the discussion by locating identity within historical rupture and diasporic becoming. To further understand identity in motion, I draw on Hall's (1990) theory of diaspora identity, which emphasises identity as both 'being' and 'becoming' (260). Hall rejects essentialist notions of cultural purity and instead sees identity as a continuous production, shaped by displacement, rupture, and the play of history, culture, and power. Diaspora identity, for Hall, is not a return to origins but a remaking of self through transformation and difference.

Like Bhabha, Hall disrupts binary thinking. He insists that diasporic identities do not exist in opposition to either the homeland or the host land. Rather, they emerge through a process of negotiation across multiple cultural terrains. Hall's framing allows this study to explore how diasporic individuals and writers reimagine belonging, not by rejecting the West outright, as Occidentalism might suggest, but by transforming both their ancestral and adopted cultures into something new.

Research Questions

This study investigates how Sri Lankan-Australian writers and communities negotiate inherited cultural resistance to the West through diasporic identity formation, everyday life, and literary practice. Drawing on the frameworks of Occidentalism, hybridity, and diaspora identity, the study explores how these communities navigate cultural resistance in their lived experiences and artistic expressions. In examining this, the study considers how Occidentalist attitudes are transmitted, challenged, or reconfigured across generations within the Sri Lankan diaspora. It also looks at how Sri Lankan-Australian literary texts represent the tension between cultural preservation and hybrid transformation, both thematically and formally. Additionally, the study explores how diasporic writers use hybridity as a concept and narrative strategy to move beyond binary representations of East and West, and how the creative process, particularly through autoethnographic fiction, functions as a site of cultural translation, critique, and identity formation.

These questions anchor the study in a broader inquiry into postcolonial identity, narrative form, and the politics of cultural memory. In a global moment where migration, hybridity, and cultural tension continue to shape diasporic consciousness, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how literary expression becomes a powerful medium of negotiation, survival, and self-invention.

Scope of the Study

To understand the evolution of Occidentalist thought and its transformation in the Sri Lankan diaspora, this study traces cultural negotiations with the West across three historical phases:

1. Precolonial and Early Contact – responses to Western traders, missionaries, and early settlers prior to colonisation, with attention to oral traditions and cultural memory.
2. Colonial and Post-Independence – the rise of nationalist ideologies, resistance narratives, patriotic songs, and postcolonial literature that rejected Western influence while asserting indigenous identity.
3. Contemporary Diasporic Fiction – literary works by Sri Lankan-Australian writers navigating the complexities of belonging, hybridity, and memory within multicultural Australia.

These stages provide a diachronic view of how perceptions of the West shift from suspicion and rejection to selective adaptation and hybrid negotiation.

Methodology: A Hybrid Approach to Writing the Diaspora

This study adopts a hybrid methodology that brings together creative writing, autoethnography and literary analysis to explore how the Sri Lankan diaspora negotiates cultural identity in relation to the West. This approach reflects the complex, layered, and often contradictory experiences of diasporic life, experiences that cannot be fully captured through traditional academic frameworks alone.

Storytelling as Research

At the heart of this methodology lies the belief that fiction is not merely a form of artistic expression but also a legitimate mode of knowledge production (Smith 2009; Bochner and Riggs 2014; Webb 2015). Patricia Leavy (2016) highlights fiction's unique ability to 'get at the complexity of lived experience', offering a means to help others 'learn and feel' (37). This is especially important in social research, where fiction's power to 'promote empathy and self-reflection' and 'disrupt dominant ideologies or stereotypes' (38) allows it to serve as a transformative tool. My creative thesis, *Kottu Roti and Devil Dancing in Sydney*, operates both as a narrative artifact and a method of inquiry. Set in the fictional Sydney suburb of Little Sri Lanka, the novel reimagines diasporic life through a community shaped by ancestral memory, hybrid identities, and the continuous negotiation of cultural values. By weaving multilingual dialogue, ritual practices, and satire, the novel engages with themes of Occidentalism, hybridity, and identity transformation, turning fiction into more than just a medium for storytelling; it becomes a space for theorising, where ideas are embodied, contested, and lived through character, voice, and form.

Fiction offers an imaginative gateway to cultural and emotional truths that often elude direct articulation through academic language (Leavy 2016: 38). It creates a space to explore multiplicity through voice, satire, metaphor, and plot, unveiling contradictions, affective tensions, and cultural nuances in ways that formal exposition cannot. In my creative process, narrative allows me to express the complexities of diasporic experience, with characters and their interactions revealing the layered, often conflicting emotions and cultural practices that shape their identities. Through this dynamic process of inquiry and expression, fiction becomes an effective tool for making visible the intricate textures of lived experience, offering a nuanced and deeply personal exploration of identity and cultural negotiation.

Autoethnography: Making the Personal Known

Complementing this creative mode is autoethnography, an approach that systematically analyses, represents, and writes (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experiences (ethno) (Ellis et al. 2011; Holman Jones et al. 2022). My own migration, the memories passed down through generations, and the everyday negotiations of identity in a multicultural setting form a critical part of this inquiry. Drawing on lived experience allows me to examine inherited resistance to the West not only as an academic concern but as an embodied and evolving tension. Autoethnography enables a reflexive engagement with these dynamics, foregrounding subjectivity, memory, and intergenerational transformation that occurs across generations.

Where fiction allows immersion into imagined scenarios, autoethnography provides critical distance: a means to examine how memory, ideology, and identity are internalised, disrupted, or re-enacted. Autoethnography brings analytical clarity to lived contradictions; fiction gives them flesh.

Literary Analysis

I also conduct literary analysis of key works by Sri Lankan-Australian writers: Yasmin Gooneratne's *A Change of Skies* (1994), Shankari Chandran's *Chai Time at Cinnamon Gardens* (2022), and Ayesha Inoon's *Untethered* (2023). These novels, distinct in tone and form, offer a range of perspectives on diaspora, resistance, and hybridity. Through close reading, I analyse how these texts formally and thematically reflect cultural negotiation, linguistic adaptation, and the diasporic impulse to preserve and transform identity.

Together, these methods offer a triangulated approach: fiction allows imaginative world-building and emotional truth-telling; autoethnography grounds the research in lived experience and personal memory; and literary analysis provides critical distance and intertextual insight. This methodological hybridity mirrors the cultural hybridity explored in this thesis, making space for multiplicity, contradiction, and transformation.

Relevance and Researcher Positionality

There is a growing body of research on the global South Asian diaspora, particularly within the Australian context, and my study contributes to this expanding field. Positioned at the intersection of diaspora studies, postcolonial theory, and literary analysis, my research explores the evolution of Occidentalist worldviews within the Sri Lankan diaspora in Australia. This thesis focuses on how inherited cultural perceptions, shaped by colonial

memory, nationalist ideology, and anti-Western sentiment, transform as migrants resettle in Western nations. What sets my research apart is its emphasis on how these perceptions are expressed, challenged, and reimagined through literary form and creative practice, offering fresh insights into the dynamic interplay of culture, identity, and migration.

Australia provides a timely and compelling site for this inquiry. As a multicultural society, it has seen rapid growth in the South Asian migrant population, which constitutes over 6% of the national population,[5] with the Sri Lankan diaspora forming one of the most established and culturally active communities.[6] Australia, therefore, provides fertile ground for examining the layered dynamics of Occidentalism, hybridity, and identity formation in a multicultural, postcolonial setting.

The Sri Lankan-Australian diaspora offers a distinctive lens through which to study cultural resistance and negotiation. As a community shaped by the legacies of Portuguese, Dutch, and British colonialism, as well as a protracted post-independence civil conflict, Sri Lankan migrants arrive with deeply embedded memories and ideologies that continue to influence how they relate to Western modernity. This is especially evident in their artistic, linguistic, and ritual practices, which often reflect a simultaneous embrace of hybridity and defence of tradition.

This moment is particularly significant due to the growing visibility of Sri Lankan-Australian writers and artists, alongside ongoing discussions on decolonisation, representation, and cultural memory. It is crucial to examine how diasporic narratives are evolving, as these works are not just cultural artefacts but active sites of identity formation, political critique, and intergenerational dialogue.

As a Sri Lankan-Australian writer and researcher, I bring a complex positionality to this research, both insider and outsider. I was raised in a cultural milieu steeped in nationalist pride and resistance to Western influence. I grew up surrounded by stories of colonial resistance, cultural purity, and linguistic pride. Yet my adult life unfolds in a society where Western modernity shapes public life, language, and professional legitimacy. I now write in English, raise children who blend Sri Lankan and Australian customs, and engage with

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[5] Statistics taken from https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/2f762f95845417aeca25706c00834efa/666a320ed7736d32ca2570ec000bf8f9!OpenDocument

[6] The growing South Asian population in Australia consists mainly of migrants from India, Nepal, Malaysia and Sri Lanka: https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/australias-population-country-birth/latest-release

literary communities across both cultural worlds. This complex consciousness informs every aspect of my creative and scholarly practice.

Positioned as both subject and analyst, I approach this inquiry not through detached observation but through embedded, lived experience. Through autoethnography, creative writing, and literary analysis, I explore how diasporic individuals like me move beyond inherited binaries, between East and West, tradition and modernity, coloniser and colonised, toward more fluid, negotiated identities. Literature, in this process, does not merely reflect but creates new possibilities, presents fresh perspectives, and reimagines patterns of experience. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of how literature can serve not only as a reflection of diasporic experience but also as a tool of cultural survival, reinvention, and critique, particularly within the unique socio-political space of contemporary Australia.

This chapter has established the conceptual and methodological foundation for a study that interrogates how Sri Lankan diasporic writers negotiate inherited cultural resistance to the West. By tracing personal and familial experiences, from ancestral narratives of colonial resistance to the realities of hybrid life in Australia, I have situated this inquiry within a broader diasporic condition shaped by memory, migration, and identity transformation.

Employing the interwoven frameworks of Occidentalism, hybridity, and diasporic identity, this study challenges fixed binaries between East and West, tradition and modernity, resistance and assimilation. These dichotomies, though historically constructed, are continuously re-imagined within the diaspora, particularly through the literary works of Sri Lankan-Australian writers. In this dynamic, fiction becomes more than just representation; it serves as an evolving space where inherited cultural worldviews are tested, transformed, and, at times, transcended.

Focusing on Sri Lankan-Australian literature, this thesis explores how diasporic writers engage with ancestral memory and contemporary realities to construct narratives that actively shape the evolving nature of diasporic identity. These narratives not only reflect but also actively contribute to the negotiation of identity in the face of shifting geographies, ideologies, and life-worlds.

As this research unfolds, subsequent chapters will build upon this foundation: Chapter 2 elaborates the hybrid methodology that blends creative writing, autoethnography, and literary analysis; Chapter 3 delves into the conceptual frameworks of Occidentalism, hybridity and cultural identity; and the following chapters present close readings of selected pre- and postcolonial literature from the homeland, diaspora novels and the creative work

Kottu Roti and Devil Dancing in Sydney, to trace how cultural resistance and adaptation manifest in form, voice, and character. Ultimately, this study positions diasporic fiction not as an aftermath of displacement but as an active and vital response to it, a genre where the boundaries between critique, creativity, and cultural survival are continually redrawn.

Chapter 2 - Methods and Methodologies

In Chapter 1, I provided a brief introduction to the hybrid methodology underpinning this study, outlining the integration of creative writing, autoethnography, and literary analysis as means to explore the Sri Lankan diaspora's negotiation of cultural identity in relation to the West. In this chapter, I expand on these methodological foundations, detailing how each approach operates and how they interconnect to provide a nuanced framework for understanding diasporic experiences. I use literary analysis to examine key diasporic texts to understand how writers engage with colonial legacies, resistance, and hybrid identities, while storytelling as research is employed to bridge the personal with the academic, positioning fiction as both an expressive tool and a method of inquiry. Finally, autoethnography is employed to delve into personal and intergenerational memories, highlighting how these experiences shape and are shaped by broader cultural dynamics. The chapter also considers the diverse histories and perspectives within the Sri Lankan diaspora, acknowledging the unique experiences of different ethnic communities. This multi-vocal approach seeks means to capture the intricate and varied ways in which identity, memory, and resistance are expressed in the diaspora. Through these methodologies, this study not only examines how diasporic identities are represented but also offers a reflective space to understand the lived complexities of migration and belonging.

Literary Analysis

This study approaches literature not merely as a subject of analysis but as a method for understanding how the Sri Lankan diaspora, a community deeply shaped by colonial histories, perceives, negotiates, and represents the Western world. By treating fiction as both a reflective and generative mode of inquiry, this exegesis provides a contextual framework for the creative work, which is similarly informed by the lived experience of diaspora.

The significance of this approach lies in the growing global presence of Sri Lankan migrants and the remarkable literary contributions of Sri Lankan authors. Australia, one of the top destinations for Sri Lankan migration and home to a vibrant diasporic community, provides a particularly rich context for this investigation. The increasing visibility and success of Sri Lankan-Australian authors such as Yasmin Gooneratne, Michelle de Kretser, Shankari Chandran, Rajith Savanadasa, and Ayesha Inoon, whose works have received major

national and international recognition, including the NSW Premier's Literary Award, the Miles Franklin Award, and the ASA/HQ Commercial Fiction Prize, demonstrates the cultural and narrative impact of this community. Their stories not only enrich Australian literature but also offer layered insights into the complexities of diasporic identity, belonging, and transformation.

As outlined in Chapter 1, I analyse three key novels: *A Change of Skies* (1991) by Yasmin Gooneratne, *Chai Time at Cinnamon Gardens* (2022) by Shankari Chandran, and *Untethered* (2023) by Ayesha Inoon. These works are chosen for their distinct tone and form, as they collectively trace important aspects of the emotional and cultural geographies of the Sri Lankan diasporic experience in Australia. They follow characters navigating shifting identities, intergenerational tensions, and the layered negotiations of home and host land. Analysing these texts provides both a literary lens and a methodological pathway for exploring how diasporic consciousness is formed and represented.

To deepen this understanding of diasporic narratives as both form and method, it is necessary to consider the literary and historical contexts from which they emerge. As Stuart Hall reminds us, cultural identity is not fixed but always in process, 'a matter of "becoming" as well as of "being"' (Hall, 1990: 225). This sense of 'becoming', as discussed in Chapter 3, is often shaped by inherited traditions, customs, and beliefs from the homeland. It is within this evolving framework that my study also engages with pre- and postcolonial Sri Lankan literature, texts that articulate indigenous knowledge systems, resist colonial ideologies, and grapple with the dissonances left in colonialism's wake.

By tracing these literary continuities and disjunctions, I argue that contemporary diasporic literature should not be read solely as a response to migration, but rather as a complex field of negotiation shaped by colonial legacies, ancestral memory, and the cultural frictions of diasporic life in the West. Fiction, in this sense, becomes both a method and a metaphor, a way to write, understand, and reimagine the diaspora.

Storytelling as Research

Crucially, this study is grounded in the belief that storytelling itself is a powerful and legitimate mode of theorising. As Stacy Holman Jones (2016) argues, storytelling offers a compelling means of making sense of everyday cultural experiences. Her view aligns with Edward Said's insights in *Culture and Imperialism* (1994), where he emphasises the transformative role of narrative in both enacting colonial domination and facilitating postcolonial resistance. Said illustrates how stories were instrumental in shaping imperial

ideologies by allowing colonisers to portray foreign lands as ‘strange’ and thereby justifying their conquest, while also serving as a medium through which the colonised could reclaim their histories, voices, and identities (Said 1994: xiii). Through fiction, Said writes, we confront central questions of power and belonging: ‘who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going, who won it back, and who now plans its future’ (ibid).

This understanding of fiction as a site of power, resistance, and reclamation is reinforced by contemporary scholars. Jori Pascal Kalkman (2024) argues that fiction uniquely illuminates the emotional, psychological, and social complexities emerging in shifting cultural landscapes, and offers a space to examine how personal and collective identities are constructed, challenged, and renegotiated across borders and in hybrid contexts. While Said and Kalkman emphasise fiction’s power in resisting colonial ideologies and illuminating emotional truths, Patricia Leavy (2016; 2020) advances this further, proposing fiction as a legitimate method of academic inquiry. Drawing on her experience as both scholar and novelist, Leavy contends that fiction allows researchers to express inner truths, reveal the complexity of lived experiences, and create immersive worlds that invite empathy and reflection. In her novel *Low-Fat Love* (2011), informed by a decade of interviews with young women, Leavy combines a playful, chick-lit style with a critical commentary on gender, relationships, and cultural identity, illustrating how fiction can: (1) portray the complexity of lived experience at both micro and macro levels; (2) promote empathy and self-reflection; and (3) disrupt dominant ideologies or stereotypes, raising critical consciousness and awareness (Leavy 2016: 38).

Together, these scholars affirm that storytelling, particularly through fiction, is not merely illustrative but constitutive, shaping how we understand the world, navigate belonging, and challenge dominant narratives. Fiction thus becomes a dynamic mode of inquiry, offering both the critical distance of analysis and the emotional intimacy of lived experience. This dual function underpins the methodological approach in this study.

In my research, fiction occupies a central role, operating simultaneously as process and product, reflecting the dual nature of autoethnography as described by Ellis et al. (2011) discussed later in this chapter. As a process, it draws upon personal memories and collective experiences to explore broader cultural dynamics, translating them into narratives that resonate with community members and wider audiences. As a product, fiction employs narrative techniques, such as characterisation, structure, voice, and point of view, to construct

meaning and engage with ongoing conversations about identity, belonging, and transformation.

While the novel, a form introduced to us during colonial encounters with the West, is here re-appropriated as a space for inquiry and knowledge-making, drawing on folk stories and jataka tales, magic realism (further discussed in Chapter 6), is employed to illuminate the colonial novel's strategies of both resisting and accommodating Western representation. In *Kottu Roti and Devil Dancing in Sydney*, fiction is not simply illustrative but generative: it creates a narrative through which the intricacies of diasporic life can be examined, embodied, and shared.

By dramatising scholarly concerns and giving voice to the affective dimensions of migration, the novel becomes a primary research method in itself. It offers a textured, reflective space to understand how diasporic identities are shaped, reshaped, and performed in response to both the enduring legacies of colonialism and the demands of contemporary life. In this way, fiction functions not only as a narrative device but also as a critical methodology, one that enables me to enter into conversation with the cultural, emotional, and historical realities of the Sri Lankan diaspora.

However, creative exploration, anchored in fiction, is not separate from lived experience – it emerges from it. My family and cultural ties to the Sri Lankan community, combined with my personal connection to Australia, offer an embodied understanding of the shifting identities and tensions explored in diasporic literature. These connections not only offer access to insider knowledge but also ground the research in authenticity. My creative thesis, which engages with themes of Occidentalism, hybridity and diaspora identity (explored further in Chapter 3), emerges from this deeply personal terrain. Through it, I aim to illuminate how the Sri Lankan diaspora negotiates belonging, weaving together cultural inheritance with contemporary realities.

To further explore these layered experiences and to examine the cultural knowledge I carry, I turn to another methodology, one that foregrounds subjectivity, memory, and self-reflexivity.

Autoethnography: Making the Personal Known

While fiction allows for the creative exploration of diasporic life, it is through autoethnography that I confront the emotional, historical, and cultural terrain I inhabit. This approach enables a critical return to the self, using personal experience as both the lens and

the site of inquiry, providing insight into how cultural identity is shaped through migration and generational memory.

Centuries ago, our forefathers extended hospitality to Western visitors who were lost at sea.[7] Yet, these same visitors and their counterparts subsequently became invaders, seizing our lands, occupying our homes, and imposing changes on our culture, religion and languages for over four hundred years. The stories of this betrayal are not just historical; they are personal. I recall my grandfather recounting how our people had resisted, deeply disheartened by the mistreatment they endured. Among the many stories he shared was one where an ancestor's male infant was killed, seen as a threat to the future Empire.

Such atrocities left lasting scars. Even after the invaders eventually returned to their own countries, the resentment remained, passed down through generations, manifesting subtly, as quiet acts of rejection towards anything deemed Western. Years later, ironically, many of us, including myself, left the homeland our ancestors defended, seeking safety, stability, or the promise of a 'better' life in the West. I still recall the dissonance of those first steps into a Western city: the sharp awareness that I was now building a life in a place once symbolised as the seat of oppression. This unsettled long-held narratives, and raised questions: How do we, the descendants of those who resisted colonial domination and harboured scepticism toward Western values, inhabit, and identify with, these Western spaces? What does it mean to belong in a land once regarded as the 'Other'?

To explore these questions, I turn to autoethnography, a methodology that situates personal experience at the centre of research, allowing for critical reflection on migration, cultural negotiation, and identity. It bridges personal and collective memory, connecting my experiences with the broader sentiments and shifting subjectivities of the Sri Lankan diaspora.

Autoethnography systematically analyses (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno) (Bochner & Ellis 2016; Holman Jones et al. 2022; Ellis et al. 2011). Through reflective analysis of thoughts, emotions and bodily sensations, it reveals the social and cultural contexts shaping identity. By transforming these reflections into narrative, autoethnography, a sophisticated qualitative approach, becomes both a method

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[7] In 1505 stormy weather forced Dom Lourenco de Almeida, son of a Portuguese viceroy in India, and his fleet to dock in Galle harbour in Sri Lanka. This marked the beginning of invasions by the West and colonisation. Further reading: MS Roberts, 1989, 'A tale of resistance: The story of the arrival of the Portuguese in Sri Lanka', *Ethnos*, vol. 54, Routledge, no. 1-2, pp. 69–2.

of inquiry and an act of reclamation, linking storytelling with scholarly analysis (Denzin & Lincon 2000, Adams et al. 2015: 254–76).

Ellis et al. (2011) define autoethnography as both a 'process' and a 'product'. As a process, it draws on personal experience to illuminate cultural patterns, making them accessible and resonant for both insiders and outsiders. As a product, it produces narratives or creative artifacts using techniques such as character development, plot, and varied narrative voice to convey embodied knowledge. Holman Jones et al. (2022) emphasise that 'autoethnographers treat personal experience as valid "data", offering insights inaccessible to detached observers. In doing so, we learn deeply about lived, day-to-day moments related to a research topic or issue, such as the complexity, messiness, and serendipity of social life; the personal, often-hidden nuances of challenging, thrilling, traumatic, joyful, and taboo encounters; patterns of experience that shift and change with time; the ways a past occurrence informs present and future acts; and the emotional, sensory, and material effects of experience that escape observation or even conscious awareness.'

As a diasporic writer, I find myself particularly drawn to this methodology. Traditional research methods have been critiqued for their colonial undertones, often reflecting power dynamics that privilege certain voices while marginalising others.[8] For individuals like me, whose perspectives are frequently sidelined by authoritative scholarly discourses, autoethnography offers a powerful alternative lens, one that validates personal experience as a legitimate site of knowledge production.

In this research, I integrate my personal history to examine how the West has shaped my own identity. It is my hope that this self-exploration, situated within the broader context of a community's shared experience and framed by theoretical research, will offer meaningful insights into how resistance and acceptance toward the West are negotiated and expressed

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[8] Tony E Adams, Stacy Linn, and Carolyn Ellis in *Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2015) discuss those who advocate and insist on canonical forms of doing and writing research as advocating a White, masculine, heterosexual, middle/upper-class, Christian, able-bodied perspective. L Smith, 2021, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Zed Books, London, discusses 'Research' as one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary, associating it with the control of knowledge, the theft of resources, and the perpetuation of colonial power. Edward Said, in his seminal work *Orientalism* (Penguin Group, 1995) stated that the Orient was almost a European invention and had been since antiquity – projecting it as a place of romance, exotic beings, and landscapes. Stacy Holman Jones, 'Living Bodies of Thought,' *Qualitative Inquiry* 22, no. 4 (2016), pp. 228–37, discusses canonical forms of research further as advocating a heterosexual perspective.

across generations of diaspora from colonised nations. My creative work becomes a space where these complex dynamics come to life, blending personal narrative with cultural critique. In this way, autoethnography frames *Kottu Roti and Devil Dancing in Sydney* not merely as an act of self-expression, but as a method for interrogating the cultural entanglements of migration, memory, and identity through a personal yet politically conscious lens.

Different Histories, Different Perspectives

While my lived experiences are central to this investigation, I recognise the limits of studying a community as ethnically diverse as mine through the lens of my own singular Sinhalese identity. My interpretations are inevitably shaped by the particular historical, cultural, and political contexts of my background, yet Sri Lanka's colonial past was experienced differently across ethnic groups – Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim, Burgher, and others, generating distinct relationships to power, resistance, and the West. These variations have informed differing attitudes and narratives surrounding colonialism and its legacies.

To acknowledge and address this complexity, I engage with fictional narratives that represent a range of ethnic perspectives. Through this broader literary engagement, I aim to move beyond a singular ethnonational lens and instead explore the mosaic of voices that make up the Sri Lankan diasporic experience. This multi-vocal approach allows for a more nuanced and inclusive reading of how identity, memory, and belonging are articulated across different cultural inheritances. ensuring that the creative and critical work honours the diversity it seeks to understand.

As a Sinhalese, I am aware that my community's historical resentment towards Western powers differs from that of other communities, each shaped by their own experiences of colonialism. Growing up, I was acutely aware of this through my grandparents' stories of oppression under British colonial rule. One tale, passed to my grandmother by her mother, recounted the capture of our last king and queen by British soldiers in 1815. Grandmother would tear up describing Queen Rangammal Devi's suffering, including the moment a soldier tore off her heavy gold earring, leaving her wounded. This was just one of many stories she shared, always ending with the same message: we must never forget who we are and where we come from, and never allow the West to define our identity.

While colonisation's impact is a shared experience in Sri Lanka, I recognise that these kinds of narratives handed down vary across the island's diverse ethnic tapestry. Each

community carries distinct experiences and perceptions of colonial rule. A particular incident from my childhood vividly illustrates this. One Christmas, a group of British Christian pastors visited my maternal grandfather's house, bringing a yule log cake as a gift. When my grandmother went to serve it, she found only crumbs. After questioning, she discovered that Raja, the young Tamil gardener, had eaten the entire 260-gram cake. Unapologetic, he explained that his ancestors had been wronged by the British, brought from South India as indentured labourers under false promises. His great-grandmother had trekked hundreds of miles to the tea plantations, only to face harsh conditions and backbreaking work. According to Raja, devouring the yule log cake was taking a mere fraction of the compensation owed to his people. His ancestors, the Tea Estate Tamils, also known as 'Tamils of Indian origin', had encountered colonial subjugation in a distinct form. Often labelled as 'slaves' or derogatorily referred to as 'coolies'[9] in colonial records, they were brought in to provide the backbone of the colonial tea economy, facing not just backbreaking labour but also social ostracisation, poverty, and political marginalisation long after independence.[10]

In contrast, my ancestors, native to the island, encountered colonial domination in ways that often centred on political disempowerment, cultural suppression, and nationalist resistance. Thus, while we share a legacy of colonisation, the expressions of trauma, resentment, and remembrance differ, shaped by different forms of violence, loss, and survival. This diversity complicates any singular narrative of colonial trauma, highlighting that generational memory is a mosaic rather than a monolith, shaped by ethnicity, class, geography, and familial inheritance. As a Sinhalese researcher and writer, I am aware of the limits of my own perspective. My autoethnographic lens, though valuable in unpacking personal and communal memory, must also be expanded by engaging with stories beyond my own ethnicity. Only through such a pluralistic approach can this research reflect the textured realities of the Sri Lankan diaspora and the many ways in which postcolonial identities continue to be formed, fractured, and reimagined in the shadow of empire.

This commitment to multiplicity is rooted in my own childhood experiences. I was four when we moved from the outer suburbs of Colombo to my father's official quarters near

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[9] To understand 'coolies', see Daniel, EV 2008, 'The Coolie', *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 23, no. 2, pp. 254–278.

[10] For further reading about the 'Tea Estate Tamils' see M Srinivasan, 2021, 'Sri Lanka's Malaiyaha Tamils living in inhumane, degrading conditions: U.N. expert', *The Hindu*, 4 December.

the city. This gated community became a vibrant microcosm of Sri Lanka's multicultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious identity. There, I experienced the country's diversity firsthand: my best friend was a Muslim girl who chose to wear the hijab at puberty and her mother, Aunty Fathima, delighted us with biryani during Eid. I also bonded with a Tamil boy whose mother served me pongal during Hindu festivals. Christian and Burgher neighbours offered Christmas cake and Breudher, while Sinhala and Tamil New Year was marked with firecrackers and friendly competitions. During Vesak, we collectively decorated lanterns. We addressed parents as Amma, Thaththa, Appachchi, Appa, Umma, or Mummy and Daddy, reflecting our linguistic and cultural plurality. Yet, beneath this harmony ran a nuanced undercurrent of resistance towards anything 'Western' or 'modern', varying in intensity between families.

The children of the estate spoke their mother tongues, reserving English for school. Patriotic songs played on radios, and many of our fathers, government officials, proudly wore the 'national', a traditional cotton shirt, instead of suit and tie. Girls rarely wore trousers; ankle-length dresses and tightly plaited hair were the norm. While my Tamil friends and I studied Kandyan and Bharatanatyam dance, our Burgher friends, of Portuguese-Dutch ancestry,[11] studied ballet. Their cassettes played English pop songs, while ours played Sinhala and Tamil tunes. Inter-racial, inter-religious friendships were common, but conservative upbringing meant elders still oversaw matchmaking. Westerners were welcomed as guests but never considered marriage material, and we were warned against mixing our 'pure blood' with that of 'white people'.

These lived experiences illuminate how each sub-community – Sinhalese, estate Tamil, Jaffna Tamil, Muslim,[12] or Burgher – negotiated the relationship with colonial legacies and responded to Western influence. This diversity of attitudes, values, and inherited resistance informs my creative thesis, which reimagines such a microcosm in the context of a shared diasporic neighbourhood: *Little Sri Lanka*, a fictional gated community in Sydney. Through this space, I explore how layered memories and cultural negotiations are re-enacted and reconfigured in the diaspora, revealing the complexities of identity, belonging, and resistance far from the homeland.

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[11] More on the Burgher community is in Careem 2017.

[12] More on the Tamil community is in Soherwordi 2010 (29–49) and Manogaran & Pfaffenberger 2020. For more on the Muslim community, see Fernando 1969 (245–55).

Chapter 3 - Conceptual Framework

Stereotyping the 'Other'

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978/1995) defines a mode of understanding rooted in the 'Orient's place in European Western experience' (1), characterising it as 'a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the Orient and (most of the time) the Occident' (2). Said demonstrates how this approach was widely adopted by poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and colonial administrators, producing a vast body of texts and theories about the East, its peoples, customs, and imagined destiny. In doing so, Orientalism not only constructs the East as fundamentally 'Other' but also legitimises Western imperial expansion under the guise of a civilising mission, framing the West as morally upright and progressive, or 'rational, virtuous, mature, "normal"' (40) while portraying the East as exotic, backward, and in need of guidance (65-72).

While Said cautions against constructing a complementary discourse in the East (328), historical evidence shows that Eastern societies have long imagined and critiqued the West, studied it, and compiled knowledge about it from the very first encounter between the two spheres (Said 1978/1995: 1-5; Bonnett 2009: 204). Syrian scholar Aziz Al-Azmeh (1992) challenges Said's emphasis on Western domination, demonstrating that the act of constructing and critiquing the 'Other' has not been exclusive to the West. Drawing on medieval Arabic travel literature, Al-Azmeh demonstrates how early Eastern writers constructed images of the West as culturally inferior and barbaric (Al Azmeh, 1992: 3-18). In *Barbarians in Arab Eyes* (1992) he cites a Cordoban traveller writing around 965 CE who described the Galicians as filthy and uncultured people 'who wash only once or twice a year, and even then only in cold water' (18). Al-Azmeh notes that this portrayal recurs in the works of later writers such as Al-Himyari and Qazwini, indicating a sustained Eastern narrative that cast Europeans as backward and uncivilised. This demonstrates that 'Othering' is a reciprocal process, not a unidirectional imposition of power.

This act of stereotyping Western culture by non-Western societies is referred to as 'Occidentalism'. The term emerged as a conceptual counterpart to Orientalism, first explored in James G. Carrier's *Occidentalism: Images of the West* (1995), which examines how non-Western cultures construct representations of the West. Carrier argues that these portrayals are shaped by historical encounters with Western imperialism and frequently function as

mechanisms of resistance or cultural preservation. Similarly, *Formations of Modernity* (1992), edited by Stuart Hall and Bram Gieben, brings together diverse voices to explore how non-Western societies perceive the West, highlighting the influence of colonial histories, globalisation, and media on these representations.

Occidentalism has existed since the idea of the West or Western peoples was first formed (Takeuchi 2010: 24; Jouhki 2006: 49; Bonnett, 2009:204), with numerous non-Western counter-narratives emerging in response to Western contact (Woltering 2011: 5; Sims 2012: 207). Yet the academic study of Occidentalism is comparatively recent, and its definition varies (Jouhki 2006: 60; Sims 2012: 207). Sometimes it refers to Westernisation, in which non-Western societies adopt Western cultural elements, often equating the West with modernity and progress (Jouhki & Pennanen 2016). This can result in the portrayal of non-Western societies as traditional and backward. More commonly, however, Occidentalism is viewed as a form of resistance against Western cultural dominance, as non-Western societies strive to assert their own cultural identity and challenge prevailing Western narratives (Buruma & Margalit 2005: 104; Bonnett, 2009: 204).

Both forms of Occidentalism were evident in Sri Lanka during my upbringing. One model celebrated the West as a symbol of advancement and emulation, while the other emphasised cultural pride and resistance, positioning local traditions as ethically and spiritually superior to Western norms. The latter resonates strongly with my experiences, reflected in literature, songs, and everyday discourse that carried traces of cultural vigilance.

Such Occidentalism is what comes into play when we consider cultural controversies, such as the uproar surrounding Jayasinghe's rendition of 'Danno Budunge'. The backlash to her Western-style arrangement of a sacred song was not merely a reaction to musical change but symbolised a broader rejection of Western influence. Dr Ratnayake's statement that Western music genres 'cannot be harmonised with our cultural heritage' reflects, it might be argued, an Occidentalist perspective, where the East sees itself as culturally superior to the West. This moment signals a shift in the power dynamics outlined in Said's *Orientalism*, moving from a Western-imposed binary to a self-asserted cultural hierarchy in which the East lays claim to moral and aesthetic authority.

My grandfather's remark that 'we' were civilised while 'they' were still 'running around naked' captures the binary lens through which many in my community viewed the world, positioning the East as morally upright and the West as culturally inferior.

This notion of reverse 'Othering' is further explored by Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit in their book *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies* (2005). Buruma,

an expert in East Asian affairs, and Margalit, an Israeli philosopher, argue that, like Orientalism, Occidentalism serves as a political and cultural tool, constructing a 'dehumanizing picture' of the 'Other', in this case the West, as imagined by 'its enemies' (5). This perspective depicts the West as a realm of vice, materialism, and moral decay, in contrast to a supposedly purer, more virtuous East (9).

This assertion of Eastern superiority is not a modern anomaly but part of a longer history of counter-discourses that portray the West in negative terms. Such representations have circulated widely in postcolonial societies, sustained through political rhetoric, artistic expression, and literary texts. Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), the influential spiritual leader who played a pivotal role in shaping Indian nationalism, described the West as 'unclean, bodily and spiritually' (Murty 2003: 8). Similarly, as Alastair Bonnett (2009) explains, the Indian poet and essayist Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) characterised the 'Occidental Other'[13] as lacking spiritual depth, portraying Western civilisation as something that 'has sprung up from the soil of Europe and is overrunning the whole world, like some prolific weed … based upon exclusiveness … It is carnivorous and cannibalistic in its tendencies' (Tagore 1917: 59).

This perception is echoed in Sri Lankan cultural expressions. The derogatory Sinhala phrase, 'redda asse mahattaya', or 'gentleman under the cloth', mocked men who imitated Western 'gentlemen' by wearing Western-style trousers under traditional attire, revealing a deep-seated suspicion toward cultural mimicry. Similar anxieties were evident in the controversy surrounding Jayasinghe's operatic rendition. Together, these examples reveal a persistent tension in the postcolonial Sri Lankan society, where the West is not only viewed with scepticism but is often portrayed as lacking spiritual and cultural substance. This inversion of Orientalist narratives exemplifies an Occidentalist lens, one that positions the East as morally and culturally superior to the West.

[13] Yang Liu and Fred Dervin uses the phrase 'Occidental other' to describe Westerners in 'Racial Marker, Transnational Capital, and the Occidental Other: White Americans' Experiences of Whiteness on the Chinese Mainland,' *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 48, no. 5 (May 14, 2020): 1–18, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183x.2020.1763785.

Occidentalism as Anti-Western: Historical Patterns and Postcolonial Resonances

Buruma and Margalit (2005) situate these patterns within a broader theoretical framework, arguing that Occidentalism extends beyond specific national histories to form a comprehensive critique of the Western mindset and the ideological frameworks associated with modernity, secularism, and materialism. They identify four overlapping animosities as recurring strands of Occidentalism, noting that these patterns can be observed 'in all periods and places where this phenomenon has occurred' (11), indicating the global and enduring nature of this counter-discourse.

One of these key strands is the Occidentalist's anxiety about the city. At the heart of this critique lies the dichotomy between the village and the city. The village represents an idealised past marked by communal purity and spiritual integrity. It stands in stark opposition to the city which is 'conceived as a giant marketplace' where 'everything and everyone is for sale' (18). Buruma and Margalit further illustrate Occidentalist disdain for the city through the example of the influential Egyptian thinker Sayyad Qutb, who, upon visiting New York in 1948, 'felt miserable in the city, which appeared to him as "a huge workshop," "noisy" and "clamouring." Even the pigeons, he remarked, seemed unhappy amidst the urban chaos. Qutb longed for conversations that were not about money, movie stars, or car models' (32). This example highlights how the Occidentalist view contrasts sharply with the romanticised village, or, by extension, the East, as virtuous and simple. This idealisation underscores the Occidentalist yearning for a return to a more 'authentic' way of life, untouched by Western influence (13-42).

This strand resonates with my own postcolonial lived experience. My grandfather, educated in a pirivena and rooted in his village, viewed the city with suspicion. For him and for other elders, Western represented a threat to traditions, customs and joint family structures, fostering isolation. 'Nobody bothers about others; they chase money alone,' Grandfather often complained about the city dwellers. He embodied the Occidentalist yearning for an 'authentic' life, untouched by Western influence.

These attitudes are interlinked with another strand of Occidentalism Buruma and Margalit discuss: an antipathy toward the bourgeoisie or urban dwellers of the 'sinful city' (16). The authors discuss Occidentalists' views of the bourgeoisie as 'philistine' and 'unheroic', preoccupied with material comfort, personal freedom, and the mundane dignity of ordinary lives, qualities deemed shallow and uninspiring compared to the heroic or

transcendent ideals upheld in more traditional societies (72). According to them, this disdain is especially pronounced in the rhetoric of those that are described as ‘warriors’ of holy wars. For such figures, the West’s consumerist values stand in contrast to their own deeply held beliefs. This divergence is starkly expressed in the words of a Taliban fighter: ‘[Americans] love Pepsi-Cola but we love death’ (49), highlighting a radical rejection of materialism in favour of what is perceived as sacred sacrifice. Similarly, young kamikaze attackers are seen as those who ‘embrace death as a sacred sacrifice’ (52) upholding honour and devotion in ways that Occidentalists claim the West can no longer comprehend.

Expanding on this critique through religious and moral frameworks, Buruma and Margalit explore perspectives rooted in Islamism, Manichaeism, extreme Hinduism, pre-war Japanese Shintoism, and strands of Judaism. Drawing on Max Weber’s concept of the ‘disenchantment of the world’, which is defined as the progressive removal of magic from social life and the liberation of the mind in pursuit of material betterment (Greisman 1976; Marotta 2023), they argue that Eastern narratives often depict Western men and women as morally corrupt, obstacles to the creation of a pure and virtuous society. In these critiques, Western women are described as ‘temple prostitutes’, while Western men are cast as ‘pimps’ (Buruma & Margalit 2005: 132). Such language underscores the recurring Occidentalist view of the West as not only materially obsessed but also spiritually bankrupt and morally degraded. This critique is mirrored in Sri Lankan attitudes toward cultural mimicry. I am not unfamiliar with being called ‘Kalu Suddhi’ or ‘mimic woman’ for wearing trousers, speaking English, or using cutlery at the dinner table. And in the society I grew up in, marriages with Westerners were rare and frowned upon. Such reactions reveal the subtle presence of Occidentalist moral judgement: adopting Western ways could be seen as a sign of moral and spiritual compromise.

Another distinct strand of Occidentalism, as outlined by Buruma and Margalit, is the deep-seated opposition to what is perceived as the ‘mind of the West’. This critique targets the foundations of Western intellectualism, particularly its reliance on science, reason, and secularism, as emblematic of a soulless, mechanistic worldview. From the Occidentalist perspective, the Western mind is described as ‘a mind without a soul, efficient, like a calculator, but hopeless at doing what is humanly important’ (76). Rationality, in this view, is not a virtue but a vice: cold, disenchanted, and devoid of spiritual depth (ibid). The West, therefore, may achieve ‘great economic success’ and develop ‘advanced technology’, yet remains fundamentally incapable of comprehending ‘the higher things in life’, because it

‘lacks spirituality and understanding of human suffering’ (Buruma & Margalit 2005: 75). This strand resonates in my family’s attitudes toward Western-style medicine. My grandfather, the village healer, often criticised doctors trained exclusively in Western medical systems for ‘curing parts of the body but missing the person as a whole’. He contrasted this with traditional Ayurvedic practice, which considers mind, body, and spirit inseparable.

Another prominent strand of Occidentalism, as identified by Buruma and Margalit, is its opposition to feminism. This strand is particularly evident in the rhetoric of devout Muslims and ultra-Orthodox Jews, who express contempt for what they see as the degraded status of Western women. Buruma and Margalit note that these groups perceive ‘exposed women of the West’ (132) and their ‘Westernized counterparts everywhere’ as ‘temple prostitutes in the service of Western materialism’ (ibid). In this framework, feminism is cast not as a force for liberation, but as a symbol of the West’s moral and spiritual decay, dismantling traditional family structures and subverting cultural values that are often held sacred in non-Western societies.

These structures, based on defined gender roles, reverence for motherhood, and patriarchal authority, are idealised in Occidentalist rhetoric as the foundation of moral and cohesive society. Figures like Morteza Motahhari, a leading ideologue of the Iranian Islamic Revolution, is seen as exemplifying this perspective, critiquing feminism as a disruptive force that undermines the family unit, devalues motherhood, and challenges traditional gender roles (133). Buruma and Margalit argue that these critiques of feminism go beyond issues of gender; they represent a broader rejection of Western modernity, where opposition to feminist ideals reinforces a romanticised vision of tradition as a means of resisting Western cultural dominance (129–134).

This tension between modernity and tradition resonates within my own experience. Although I grew up in the city with access to education and professional opportunities, the values embedded in my family reinforce traditional gender roles, the reverence of motherhood, and modesty in women’s dress. These inherited expectations shaped my decisions and influenced my sense of self, even as I navigate spaces of education, work, and urban life that often-encouraged independence and self-determination. My experience illustrates how Occidentalist anxieties around feminism persist not only in ideological rhetoric but also within familial and cultural practices, shaping the lived reality of women negotiating multiple cultural frameworks.

Through these strands, the anxiety about the city, disdain for the bourgeoise, opposition to the Western mind and resistance to feminism, Occidentalism emerges as a

moral critique of the West. Buruma and Margalit use Japan's Meiji period (1850–1912) and subsequent years to illustrate these Occidentalist dynamics. Despite the deliberate adoption of Western science, law, military strategies, and philosophy, rapid Westernisation in Japan during the Meiji period provoked social and cultural upheaval later. Intellectuals and nationalists reacted with nostalgia for Japan's pre-Western past, framing East as morally and culturally superior (Chapter 1). This reaction ultimately led Japan to reaffirm and pursue its traditional customs and values with renewed vigour.

Similarly, postcolonial Sri Lanka, while shaped by colonial imposition of Western practices, retains a deep-seated resistance to Westernisation. I observed this resistance firsthand while living there. Within my own family, as discussed in this chapter and the introductory chapter, it manifested in subtle yet persistent ways: my grandfather's disdain for city life and English education, my father's refusal to adopt Western clothing and preference for local initiatives, and even minor domestic choices, such as disapproving of cutlery at the dining table, discouraging the use of English at home, or frowning upon women wearing Western-style trousers are examples of the prevailing anti-Western sentiments.

In this context, Sri Lankans have also participated in constructing the West as 'Other', portraying it as overly materialistic, morally compromised and spiritually barren. This reversed gaze exemplifies Buruma and Margalit's concept of Occidentalism, highlighting how anti-Western sentiments intertwine with identity formation and cultural preservation.

However, while Occidentalism illuminates historical resistance and the persistence of cultural pride, it risks oversimplifying postcolonial lived realities, the everyday, embodied experiences and practices shaped by colonial histories. These realities are intertwined, complex, and often contradictory, shaping the rhythms of daily life, inherited values, emotional responses, and generational attitudes toward the West. Simple either-or frameworks miss how Sri Lankans negotiate colonial legacies and local traditions, blending adaptation, resistance, and reinterpretation in their everyday practices.

To capture these complexities, this study turns to the concept of hybridity, emphasising negotiation, intersection, and the fluid production of identity. Hybridity provides a more nuanced understanding of how Sri Lankan subjects navigate a world still profoundly shaped by colonialism, acknowledging both anti-Western sentiment and adaptive strategies individuals employ to reconcile multiple cultural influences. By combining Occidentalism with hybridity, the analysis foregrounds the tension between historical resistance and

contemporary lived experience, offering a richer lens through which postcolonial identity, memory, and cultural negotiation can be understood.

Hybridity: Negotiation and Cultural Production

While growing up between the city and the village in Sri Lanka, I was constantly navigating two cultural worlds; on the one hand, the traditions and customs passed down through generations, and on the other, those introduced by Western colonisers. Although this negotiation was present in my early life, it became far more pronounced after I migrated to the West. In my youth, the negotiation was largely shaped by a recognisable Occidentalist worldview, where resistance to Western influence was the dominant stance.

However, living in the West today, I find myself engaged in a far more complex and nuanced form of cultural negotiation. In my life in Sri Lanka, tradition and inherited customs shaped the fabric of everyday life, governing family dynamics, social roles, and even unspoken codes of behaviour. In contrast, the Western way of life I lead now is more explicit, institutionalised, and ever-present. From the education system, where my children learn about Shakespeare, European history, and Western philosophy with little reference to Sri Lankan knowledge systems, to media representations that centre Western norms, the influence is constant. Gender equality and individual sexual autonomy are embedded in legal and social frameworks, while expressions of individuality, personal ambition, independence, and the mantra of 'you do you' are encouraged in career choices, living arrangements, and everyday interactions.

This immersion in Western culture has made the process of negotiating between identities more visible and more layered. It demands a deeper self-awareness and a constant balancing act between adapting to a new environment and preserving the cultural inheritance of my past. The process has not always been seamless; it has required moments of introspection, conflict, and continuous adjustment.

I see this dynamic playing out in my children's lives as well. Raised in the West, they grow up immersed in its values and daily rhythms, yet they must also engage with the traditions, expectations, and cultural legacies of their ancestral homeland. Their experience reflects the same tension, between belonging and otherness, between preservation and transformation, that has defined much of my own diasporic journey.

This ongoing negotiation of identity situates individuals within what Homi Bhabha describes as a moment of transit, 'where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion' (Bhabha

1994: 1). For postcolonial subjects, including those in Sri Lanka and its diaspora, this in-betweenness reflects the tension between inherited cultural norms and the pressure of Western modernity. Bhabha captures the disorientation of this liminal existence through the French term *au-delà*, evoking being 'here and there, on all sides, fort/da, hither and thither, back and forth' (2).

In practical terms, this describes the lived experience of negotiating multiple cultural frameworks: the simultaneous adherence to ancestral traditions and engagement with global, often, Westernised practices. It resonates with the patterns of resistance I observed within my own family, who moved from the village to Colombo, the commercial hub of Sri Lanka, where Western influences are navigated, adapted, or contested. This produced a hybrid, dynamic sense of self that is neither wholly Eastern nor wholly Western, but constantly negotiated across time, space, and social context.

This is equally true to my diasporic experience, where we inhabit a space that is neither fully of the homeland nor entirely of the host land. This in-between space mirrors the cultural terrain I traverse daily, where identity is not fixed but an evolving mosaic of experiences, memories, and influences. Bhabha names this phenomenon 'hybridity' (5), a concept that captures the fusion of cultural forms through ongoing processes of translation, negotiation, and transformation. While common usage may define hybridity as mere mixture or overlap, Bhabha's interpretation is more provocative. For him, hybridity is not a passive blend but a powerful, disruptive force. He describes it as 'camouflage' (193), a strategic adaptation that allows new forms of identity to emerge. He calls it 'heresy', a radical act of defying dominant cultural narratives. Hybridity, Bhabha argues, is 'how newness enters the world' (227), through 'a process of translating and transvaluing cultural differences' (252).

By placing hybridity within the broader frameworks of postcolonial and diasporic studies, Bhabha offers a vital theoretical foundation for understanding the fluid and often contested nature of cultural identity. In my study, hybridity serves as a key analytical lens, not only because of its intellectual depth but also because of its personal relevance. Bhabha himself embodies the very conditions he theorises; a man of Parsi descent, born in Mumbai and later living in Britain and the United States, he writes from within a diasporic experience. His work captures the lived reality of many in the diaspora, including myself, where cultural belonging is not fixed or singular, but always multiple, layered, and continuously negotiated. It speaks to the ways in which I, and others in the diaspora, navigate competing cultural logics, challenge imposed binaries such as East and West, tradition and modernity, insider and outsider, and craft identities that resist closure. Rather than a space of confusion or

compromise, hybridity emerges as a dynamic site of creativity, resilience, and possibility. It is in this ever-evolving space of 'in-betweenness' that I locate my voice, my writing, and my sense of self.

Diasporic Identity: Being, Becoming, and Reimagining Belonging

While Bhabha offers a framework for understanding cultural fusion and subversion, Stuart Hall locates identity within the context of historical rupture and the ongoing process of diasporic becoming. To further understand identity in motion, I draw on Hall's (1990) theory of diasporic identity, which emphasises identity as both 'being' and 'becoming' (260). Hall rejects essentialist notions of cultural purity, and instead views identity as a continuous production, shaped by displacement, rupture, and the play of history, culture, and power. For Hall, diasporic identity is not a return to an unchanging origin, but rather a remaking of self through transformation and difference (269).

Hall's views complement Bhabha's concept of hybridity by further emphasising the fluidity and multiplicity of identity in diasporic contexts. Hall asserts that diaspora identity is 'not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture' (225). While acknowledging that 'cultural identities come from somewhere and have histories' (260), he argues that they are not static, and 'they undergo constant transformation' (ibid). Identity in Hall's view is a production, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation, a notion that resonates deeply with my creative and analytical engagement with diasporic fiction.

Hall's exploration of diasporic identity challenges traditional, binary understanding of cultural belonging such as 'past/present' or 'them/us' (262). As a member of the Caribbean diaspora, Hall frames diasporic cultural identity as a collective 'one true self' (258) shared among people with a shared history and ancestry. According to Hall, cultural identities reflect shared historical experiences and cultural codes, providing stable, though dynamic, frames of reference that persist beneath the shifting divisions of history (ibid). This identity is never fixed and is shaped by ongoing cultural negotiation. For Hall, diaspora identity is as much about 'becoming' as it is about 'being' (260). It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is a continuously evolving process, grounded in history yet not confined to it. This dynamic nature of diasporic identity disavows the idea of fixed, monolithic identity, and instead offers a more fluid ongoing process of becoming.

In this context, postcolonial theory, particularly Homi Bhabha's notion of mimicry (Bhabha 1984: 125–33), offers a crucial insight into how identity transformation occurs.

Bhabha explains that members of a colonised society often imitate the language, dress, politics, or cultural attitude of their colonisers, not out of mere submission, but as an opportunistic strategy. By adopting the behaviour of the coloniser, the colonised subject gains access to the same power structures that the coloniser embodies (122–123).

This process, however, does not lead to a complete dissolution of traditional identity. Instead, it opens up what Bhabha terms a 'third space' (54–55, 88–89), a liminal zone where the identities of both the coloniser and the colonised are in flux. In this space, old boundaries collapse, and new forms of cultural expression and creativity emerge. For the postcolonial subject, this 'in-between' space represents a unique condition, one that does not wholly belong to either culture. It is neither the coloniser's identity nor the precolonial subject's identity but a hybrid, liminal space that exists on the border between two cultures. In this space, cultural negotiation takes place, allowing for a transformation of identity that is neither fully rooted in the past nor entirely of the present. This in-between space enables a continuous redefinition of both the self and belonging, offering the possibility of new cultural expressions that resist fixed categorisation.

A Personal Expression of Hybridity and Cultural Identity

As a Sri Lankan-Australian, hybridity defines my lived experience. It dissolves once-clear boundaries between East and West, self and other, homeland and host land. After more than two decades away from Sri Lanka, I no longer view cultural identity through an 'us versus them' lens. I now inhabit a liminal space, embracing aspects of Western life I once resisted, while questioning traditions I once held dear.

The rigid binary that once shaped my understanding of East and West, so central to Occidentalist thought, has faded. Living in the diaspora has taught me that identity is not about choosing sides or preserving cultural purity but about moving through in-between spaces with openness and adaptability. In this space, there is no fixed allegiance, no singular definition of self. Hybridity becomes a way of being; layered, reflective, and always in motion. This recognition of identity as fluid and transformative connects deeply with Hall's view that diaspora identities are in continuous production, never static, always evolving within historical and cultural context.

This hybridity deeply informs my writing. It was only after migrating to the West that I found my voice as an English-language fiction writer. Living within the diaspora allowed me to see my hyphenated identity not as a burden, but as a wellspring of creative possibility. I reclaimed English, a language once associated with colonial power, as my own. Writing in it

became an act of resistance and reconciliation. My fiction straddles worlds: it draws on folk wisdom, rituals, and memories of the homeland, while engaging with the contemporary realities of life in the West. Writing becomes a space of negotiation and transformation, where multiple worlds can coexist. It allows me to tell stories that are expansive, plural, and human, unbound by fixed identities.

This shift, from viewing culture through a singular lens to what Bhabha calls 'double vision*'*(Bhabha 1994: 126) parallels the journeys of other Sri Lankan diaspora writers. Authors like Yasmin Gooneratne, Shankari Chandran, and Ayesha Inoon have powerfully explored the ambiguities of hybrid existence. Their work resists confinement to a single cultural or linguistic framework, instead reflecting the richness and tension of multiple affiliations.

Bhabha's concept of hybridity sheds light on how these writers inhabit the 'third space' (87), where 'the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity' (55) but are 'always produced in the act of enunciation' (186). My creative thesis unfolds within this generative space, between utterance and identity, memory and reinvention.

Through *Kottu Roti and Devil Dancing in Sydney*, I explore the shifting subjectivities of the Sri Lankan diaspora, tracing their journey from binary worldviews rooted in Occidentalist resistance toward a more nuanced, reflexive consciousness of hybridity. These stories reveal dual impulses: resisting and embracing, longing and belonging. My characters do not represent neat or static cultural identities; they inhabit Bhabha's liminal zone. I experiment with form as well, drawing from, but not confined to, either Western literary conventions or those of the homeland. This creative experimentation informs the theoretical approach of this study. By foregrounding hybridity, I explore how diasporic individuals and texts challenge binary categories such as coloniser/colonised, East/West, and tradition/modernity and instead craft identities that are interstitial, dialogic, and transformative.

In this chapter, I have explored the theoretical frameworks that illuminate the formation and negotiation of diasporic identity, with particular focus on hybridity, cultural negotiation, and the ongoing process of 'being' and 'becoming'. Drawing on Bhabha and Hall, I have shown that Sri Lankan diaspora identities emerge in the liminal space between homeland and host land, tradition and modernity, past and present. Central to this discussion is Occidentalism, which helps us understand the inherited currents of resistance to the West that shaped both pre-migration consciousness and post-migration experiences. This chapter demonstrates that cultural hybridity and negotiation are not solely products of migration; they

are rooted in a homeland consciousness already engaged with Western influence, contested and adopted over generations. Situating diasporic identity within this continuum, between inherited resistance, ongoing negotiation, and creative adaptation, provides a framework for returning to the narratives and landscapes of the homeland, where these dynamics first take shape and continue to inform diasporic literature.

Chapter 4 - The Birth of ‘Othering’: Occidentalism in the Homeland Context

Rhythms of Everyday Life

Growing up in Sri Lanka, the highlight of our school holidays was visiting Grandfather’s house in the village. For us children, the most magical time was the evening, lying on wooden slats, gazing up at the vast, star-filled sky. The fields around us came alive with the rhythmic chants of farmers stationed on raised platforms, singing folk poems that predated colonial contact.

One such chant in Sinhala goes:

අහසේ තරු සේම ගොවිතැන් කරන්නේ

පොළොවේ වැලි සේම බෙගොත් ඉසින්නේ

මගේ හේනමයි ඌරට පෙනෙන්නේ

විස්නු සමන් දෙවියො නඩු බලන්නේ

This translates in English as, ‘Farm is like stars in the sky, like sand on the earth, My farm is what the pig targets, Gods Vishnu and Saman please look into my grievances’.

This chant, simple in its composition, highlights the deep connection between the land, the people, and the gods, a thematic continuity that spans centuries. These melodies served multiple purposes: recounting village life, celebrating communal achievements, and occasionally poking fun at human quirks and societal norms (Erandima et al. 2023).

Training as a classical dancer deepened my intimacy with these folk rhythms. I remember dancing to the beat of a song that narrated the story of a boatman calling out to his brother.

In Sinhala it went:

ඔන්න මලේ ඔය නාමල නෙලා වරෙන්

අන්න බිදෙයි පය බුරුලේන් තබා වරෙන්

කැළණී ගඟේ ඔරු යනවා බලා වරෙන්

සාදුකාර දී ඔරුවක නැගී වරෙන්

Which translates to English: ‘Oh, young brother, pluck that lotus and come, the branch might break so tread carefully and come, watch the boats floating in Kaleni river and come, say a prayer, get on a boat and come’.

Folk poems, preserved orally across generations, are central to cultural identity. They reveal the shared consciousness of diverse social strata (Erandima et al. 2023; Batuwatta 2019), and serve as living archives of cultural memory, documenting history, struggles, joys, and values (Vashist & Tuhina 2025; Goel 2024; Baroda 2013). Orally transmitted Sri Lankan folk poetry, like that discussed here, preserves memory while offering social critique and commentary.

From Silence to Presence: The West in Folk Songs

Despite the island's vibrant engagement with the wider world, reflected in sources such as the *Mahavamsa*, Ibn Battuta's 14th-century travel accounts, Fa-Hien's 400 CE observations, and various archaeological findings (McLaughlin 2014; McIntosh 2022), folk poems preserved in inland and agricultural communities rarely mention foreign visitors.

This absence may reflect the nature of these arrivals: many were transient, leaving little lasting impact, while those who stayed often assimilated, adopting Buddhism and integrating into society. Such naturalisation likely reduced the perception of outsiders as disruptive and making them less likely to be recorded in folk poetry.

Obeysekera (2002) identifies traditional exorcism rituals such as bali and thovil performed by lay practitioners as metaphorical enactments of this process.[14] These rituals dramatise the transformation of foreign elements into domesticated and spiritually aligned entities. Outsiders who underwent such transformation were eventually absorbed into the cultural order, qualifying for rajakariya, the civic responsibilities owed to the king by those deemed as insiders (20).

Having witnessed thovil rituals in my grandfather's village, I can appreciate Obeysekera's interpretation. These rituals, now mostly drama performances, typically begin with invocations honouring the island's protective deities, starting with the Buddha and proceeding to guardian gods, establishing their supreme authority. The entry of the athuraya, a figure representing the foreigner or an afflicted being, introduces conflict. This character often mocks or resists the Buddhist guardians, staging a symbolic challenge. Yet, through

[14] Obeysekera explains that while the people of the island lacked a modern understanding of physical geography, they were nonetheless aware that their land was surrounded by the ocean. As a result, myths and legends often depicted 'foreigners' as deities and demons as arriving from across the seas. In ritual practice, healing ceremonies were performed to 'naturalise' these foreign beings – whether they were alien deities, magicians, merchants, or groups of travellers entering Sri Lanka.

intricate dance and chant, the athuraya is ultimately subdued and compelled to acknowledge the supremacy of the Buddha and the island's deities. This performative surrender symbolises integration, where the threatening force or alien is neutralised and incorporated into the harmonious whole.

Historically, this ritual metaphor helps explain how earlier visitors, such as traders or pilgrims, were received not as invaders but as guests capable of incorporation into the existing socio-religious framework.

However, this inclusive approach began to fracture with the arrival of the Portuguese in the late 15th century. Unlike their predecessors, the Portuguese wielded unprecedented power rooted not in kinship, belief, or barter, but in violence, conquest, and technological superiority. The introduction of firearms and cannons disrupted the symbolic world of ritual and reciprocity, replacing it with fear, destruction, and resistance.

This rupture is dramatically illustrated in the *Rajavaliya* (1923), a 17th-century Sinhala chronicle recording the first sightings of Portuguese ships off the coast of Colombo. Unlike earlier folk poems, which predate colonial contact and do not reference the West, this later form incorporates explicit encounters with foreign powers.

> … a race of people fair of skin and comely withal. They don jackets of iron and hats of iron: they rest not a minute in one place: they walk here and there; they eat hunks of white stone and drink blood; they give two or three pieces of gold and silver for one fish or one lime; the report of their cannon is louder than thunder when it bursts upon the rock Yugandhara. Their cannon balls fly many a gawwa and shatter fortresses of granite.[15]

This portrayal signals a marked shift, showing the emergence of an Occidentalist perspective. The Portuguese are depicted as iron-clad, insatiable, and destructive, a characterisation echoed in other literary sources from the same period. For example, the *Alakesvara Yuddhaya*, a composition from the Sitawaka period around 1592, documenting folk narratives, describes the Portuguese in Sinhala as: 'Kudugal sapakamin, le bona [minisun]' (Roberts 1989: 74), translating to 'people who devour kudugal and drink blood'. Roberts interprets this as a layered cultural allegory, rich in symbolic meaning: the Sinhala term kudugal, while literally 'stone', may metaphorically suggest meat or a sacred deposit,[16]

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[15] The English translation of the description taken from Guṇasekara 1995.

[16] Roberts notes that in 15th century works such as the *Purana Mamavaliya* and the *Ruvanmala*, 'kulugal' was a synonym for 'mas' or meat.

imbuing the act of eating with sacrilegious overtones. Similarly, sapakama (or sapakamin), meaning 'to gobble' or 'to devour' (73) evokes predatory and taboo entities like hyenas, wolves, monitor lizards, and most notably the le mapila (74), a mythical blood-sucking serpent known in local folklore for its insatiable greed and destructive tendencies. Within Sinhala cosmology, demons (yakku) and restless spirits (perethayo) are often characterised by their uncontrollable craving for flesh and blood. By invoking such imagery, these texts recast the Portuguese as monstrous, supernatural figures whose behaviours starkly oppose Buddhist ideals of moderation, self-discipline, and cosmic balance.

Roberts further argues that the reference to Portuguese cannons threatening Yugandhara, the cosmic mountain central to Buddhist cosmology, intensifies this portrayal. By disrupting this sacred site, the colonisers are depicted not only as political aggressors but also as agents of spiritual and cosmic chaos. These metaphors extend beyond vilification, revealing the profound anxiety and resistance embedded in local cultural response to Western incursion. The Portuguese are cast as violators of both sacred space and ethical codes, their presence shaking the moral foundations of the island's worldview (69-82).

War Poetry and 'Othering': Reasserting Cultural Identity

In this climate of disdain and defiance, Hatan Kavi (war poetry) emerged as a potent literary form in Sinhala folk traditions. As a distinct subset of folk poetry, these war songs celebrated the heroism of native kings and warriors resisting colonial powers. They served both as oral historical records and as rallying cries, reinforcing communal identity and cultural resilience in the face of foreign domination.[17]

Notable examples of war poems include the 'Maha Hatana' (The Great War), recounting King Rajasinghe II's victory over the Portuguese during the 17th century; 'Parangi Hatana' (War Against the Portuguese), describing the decisive battle of Gannoruwa in 1638; and 'Ingrisi Hatana' (War Against the English), narrating King Sri Wickrama Rajasinghe's resistance to British forces in 1803. These poems celebrate military victories while asserting the sovereignty and superiority of the nation, its rulers, and its people, simultaneously 'Othering' the Western invaders and portraying them in an intensely negative light.

Derogatory metaphors are central to this poetic strategy. Colonisers are likened to animals such as Asian water monitors, dogs, rat snakes, and wolves, symbols of violence, cunning, and impurity. These imageries reflect the perceived brutality, moral corruption, and

[17] See Pirani 2018 for further reading on Sri Lankan war poems.

inferiority of the invaders, contrasting them with the noble, righteous native king. Terms like thuppahi (mixed race lot) further dehumanise the colonisers, reinforcing the binary between the indigenous population and the colonial 'Other'. These symbolic devices are more than poetic embellishments; they function as strategic tools to promote nationalism, justify resistance, and articulate a collective identity rooted in sovereignty, spirituality, and cultural pride. These compositions reflected the political tensions of their time while actively participating in the resistance against foreign rule.

Initially, this resentment was directed specifically at the Portuguese, Dutch, and British colonial regimes, whose oppressive practices deeply scarred the island's social and political fabric. Over time, however, this animosity evolved into a broader critique of the cultural aftermath of colonialism, often termed 'Westoxification'.[18] This term critiques the pervasive influence of Western ideologies, values, and systems, particularly those linked to modernity, capitalism, and individualism, introduced through colonial domination. The resentment shifted from colonial rulers to the lingering ideological transformations that continued to shape local culture, threatening indigenous ways of life and spiritual balance.

This shift is exemplified in a popular Sinhalese poem still familiar to children in Sri Lanka today. Satirising the arrival of modern technology, the poem reflects the cultural discomfort with Western innovations and the perceived disruption they bring. It is written in Sinhala as:

අඟුරෝ කකා,

වතුර බිබී,

කොළඹ දුවන,

යකඩ යකා.

Translated into English, it reads: 'Eating (fiery) coal and drinking water, the iron demon runs to Colombo.'

The steam engine, introduced by the British, is called an 'iron demon', a metaphor that mocks Western technology while expressing the community's unease with the alienation brought on by colonial modernity. The 'iron demon' symbolises intrusive change, echoing

[18] In the 1960s, Jalal Al-e Ahmad, an influential leftist intellectual in Iran, coined the term *gharbzadegi* (often translated as 'Westoxification') to describe the detrimental effects of Western influence on Iranian society. This concept is further discussed by Buruma and Margalit in *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), p. 54.

metaphors in hatan kavi, the *Rajavaliya*, and even in rituals like thovil and bali, where foreigners are similarly portrayed as demonic or disorderly. This sustained metaphorical framing reinforces a collective narrative in which Western colonial presence is marked by disruption, danger, and a departure from spiritual and cultural equilibrium.

These evolving sentiments of resistance extend beyond folklore or traditional rituals, manifesting in both cultural and political dimensions throughout the late colonial period (Ihalagama 2019). Sinhala literary circles, particularly in the early twentieth century, became a key site for nationalistic expression, intertwining calls for national liberation with the revival of Buddhism and indigenous values. Prominent poet Ananda Rajakaruna (1885–1957) critiqued Western lifestyles and material excess, using satirical and accessible verses to channel enduring cultural discontent while promoting spiritual and cultural renewal. One of his poems, cited by Garrett Field (2016: 368-85), questions the locals' obsession with external appearance over inner purity:

We waste all the water of the ocean to clean our bodies.

We use a whole mountain of things to beautify our bodies.

Can we ever rid ourselves of defilements by beautifying our bodies?

Through these lines, Rajakaruna reinforces the broader nationalist project: rejecting superficial modernity and reaffirming indigenous spiritual values as the true path to liberation.

The Resistance to Westernisation: Linguistic and Cultural Renewal

This resistance extended beyond critiques of materialism and Western lifestyles, to encompass the growing antagonism toward the English language, particularly in the post-independence era. A striking example was Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike's 1956 declaration of Sinhala as the national language, reflecting the broader postcolonial impulse to reclaim indigenous identity and reject colonial legacies. For many Sri Lankans, English symbolised not merely a language, but a tool of domination, an instrument of elitism that privileged a few, while marginalising the Sinhala-speaking majority.

Rajakaruna's poetry echoed this resistance to linguistic imperialism, aligning with cultural movements promoting linguistic purity and pride in the Sinhala language. As Field notes, Rajakaruna even criticised fellow Sinhalese who casually blended Sinhala with English, viewing such linguistic hybridity as a betrayal of national identity (Field 2016: 368-85).

One such poems states in Sinhala;

සිංහල බස නොදන් යම් යම් ළමයි

ඉංග්‍රිසියෙන් දොඩති මහ ජගතුන් මෙන්

ඔවුන්ගෙ විලාසෙ විහිලුවක් පෙනෙන ඒ පොඩිත්තන්තට වුයේ

බරපතල වරදේ ජාතියත් ඉන් නසි. (Abeysinghe 2002)

This translates into English as:

Some children who do not know the Sinhala language.

Talk in English like it's a big thing.

These children commit a grave offence.

And destroy our nationality.

Such ideological tensions surrounding language and cultural identity became central themes in Sri Lankan literary fiction, especially during the struggle for independence and its immediate aftermath. Simon De Silva's *Meena* (1905/1987), widely regarded as the first Sinhala novel (Gamage 2016; Jayasinghe, 2005), exemplifies this. Viewed through an Occidentalist lens, *Meena* reflects the complex cultural negotiation between the 'West' and the 'East', illustrating how early literary works mediated anxieties about colonial influence and the reassertion of indigenous identity.

The novel's protagonist, Meena, is caught between two love interests representing contrasting cultural ideologies. Danny, symbolising the 'West', is driven by materialism, greed, and physical pleasures. In contrast, Pavulus embodies the pure East, characterised by simplicity, wisdom, and spiritual connection to nature. Meena's ultimate choice of Pavulus, despite her earlier engagement to Danny, suggests a longing for cultural and spiritual purity, reflecting the broader cultural struggle Buruma and Margalit describe, where the West is seen as morally corrupt, while the East is idealised as spiritually rooted and morally superior (2005: 23).

This pattern of cultural resistance extends to other nationalist writers like Piyadasa Sirisena, who used fiction as a powerful tool to counter colonial ideologies. His narratives critique both public and private forms of cultural Westernisation, which he famously termed mishra vivah or 'mixed marriage' (Uditha 2021), a metaphor for undesirable cultural hybridity, historically frowned upon in the island (Yalman 1967; Goody 1990). Sirisena's works reflect an unease about the erosion of indigenous identity under Western influence. In *Jayatisa saha Roslynd* (1906/2021), Sirisena contrasts the spiritual rootedness of village life

with the moral and cultural dislocation of the city. His protagonists navigate these tensions, as Christian evangelism and colonial modernity are framed as disruptive forces eroding the island's cultural and spiritual fabric. Jayatissa, the protagonist, having distanced himself from his heritage, experiences profound regret during a contemplative visit to the ancient capitals of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, exclaiming, 'Alas, what happened to us!' (Sirisena, 1906/2021: 167), capturing a collective nostalgia for a pre-colonial past deemed spiritually and culturally superior.

The dichotomy between village authenticity and urban alienation resurfaces in post-independence Sinhala literature, particularly in Madawela S. Ratnayake's *Akkara Paha* (1959/1995). Published shortly after independence, the novel continues the nationalist narrative by focusing on Sena, a young man whose English education in the city leaves him disoriented and estranged from both his rural upbringing and the urban elite. Disillusioned by the city's impersonal and materialistic lifestyle, Sena returns to his village, marries his childhood sweetheart, and takes up farming. His symbolic return to traditional life stands as a celebration of indigenous values and the moral superiority of rural life. Ratnayake contrasts Sena's path with urbanised farmers who, seduced by quick profits, abandon paddy farming to grow grass, portraying this choice as both spiritually hollow and economically short-sighted, reinforcing the nationalist ideal of the village as a site of cultural purity and moral resilience, in opposition to the perceived corruption of modern urban life.

A similar critique of Westernisation, expressed through irony and satire, emerges in Lucian De Zilwa's *The Dice of the Gods* (1918), widely regarded as the first English language novel by a Sri Lankan (Goonetilleke 1997). Set in colonial Colombo, it offers a vivid portrait of a society in transition, focusing on the Burgher community as emblematic of the Westernised middle class. Through William, a Ceylonese man returning from a European education, De Zilwa explores the dissonance between colonial aspirations and local realities. William views the Empire as a 'business proposition' (De Zilwa 1918: 291) and navigates a city overwhelmed by 'the ding-dong of carriage bells', 'rickshaws', and the smell of 'drains, curry, joss-sticks, exhaust gases, and burning margosa oil' (13), highlight both the allure and chaos of colonial modernity.

Through satire, De Zilwa critiques the Burgher community's perceived detachment from the island's nationalist awakening. William's brother, Jack, is described as having 'many irons in the fire' (28), reflecting an opportunistic, profit-driven mentality, while Burgher women are caricatured as frivolous, 'flirting with young clerks' (27). These depictions echo an Occidentalist critique of Western individualism, materialism, and moral laxity, contrasting

sharply with the rooted, virtuous, and traditional rural life valorised in Sinhala nationalist literature.

Religious scepticism is also featured prominently, with William portrayed as an atheist (19), underscoring the spiritual void often associated with Western modernity in Occidentalist discourse. This deficiency is further accentuated through Dhammananda, a nationalist figure who condemns the Burghers for their lack of patriotism and utilitarian view of the colony, stating, 'You would just as soon live in the Straits or in America so long as it paid you to do so' (291–292). Such critiques reflect a broader literary impulse during the colonial and early post-independence periods to expose the cultural and moral shortcomings of Westernised elites.

Martin Wickramasinghe's Critique of Cultural Purity

Many early Sri Lankan novels, particularly those written before and shortly after independence, served as platforms for nationalist ideologies (Gamage 2006). Martin Wickramasinghe (1890–1976), widely considered the most prolific Sinhala writer of the twentieth century (Tilakaratne 2019; Jayasinghe 2005; Lokuge 2013), however, marked a departure from this convention. Unlike writers like Sirisena, Ratnayake and Simon de Silva, who celebrated traditional and indigenous values, Wickramasinghe explored the complexities of a national identity, rejecting both rigid idealisation of the past and unchecked embrace of Western modernity (Somirathna 2016).

In his renowned trilogy, *Gamperaliya* (*The Change in the Village*, 1944), *Yuganthaya* (*The End of the Era*, 1949), and *Kaliyugaya* (*The Epoch of Kali*, 1957), he presents a nuanced examination of Sri Lankan society, exploring tensions between preserving cultural purity and adapting to modernity. Class differences and the tensions they produce form a central concern in his work (Jayasinghe 2005).

Gamperaliya (1944), the first of the trilogy, exemplifies this focus, following a feudal family navigating the social, economic, and cultural upheavals brought by colonial influence in their rural village. It portrays the gradual disintegration of traditional structures while simultaneously capturing efforts to retain elements of village life, setting them in contrast with the complexities of urban modernity. Through this tension, Wickramasinghe offers a nuanced reflection of a nation balancing the preservation of cultural 'purity' and the inevitable adaptation to modern forms of life.

This societal shift is embodied in Piyal, a young man of modest origins, who challenges entrenched social norms by embracing Western ideals. As an English-educated

schoolmaster from a lower social stratum, he climbs the social ladder in the post-independence era, adopting Western notions of success and merit. Through Piyal, Wickramasinghe critiques both the lingering colonial legacies and the rigidity of traditional hierarchies.

Occidentalist consciousness is further illustrated through characters like Muhandiram and Matara Hamine, an elderly high-caste couple, who initially reject Piyal's proposal to marry their daughter, Nanda, favouring Jinadasa, a suitor of similar caste though of dwindling wealth. Their resistance reflects unease with social mobility and changing norms. Ironically, the narrative shows their eventual concession: Nanda's parents accept the inevitability of change. What begins as a rejection of modernisation concludes as acknowledgement of its transformative power, unfolding almost as a cautionary tale about the cost of resisting progress.

Wickramasinghe's treatment of history transcends nationalist idealisation of tradition, critically interrogating its capacity to shape a sustainable future (Tilakaratne 2019). *Gamperaliya* maintains a balanced, candid tone, acknowledging the impact of colonialism, while drawing attention to the limitations of nationalist ideologies that resist necessary transformation. His characters inhabit a complex cultural terrain, selectively embracing and resisting aspects of both Western modernity and indigenous tradition.

This nuanced engagement with cultural hybridity anticipates themes later explored by diasporic writers.[19] By neither fully romanticising the past nor idealising the West, Wickramasinghe lays the groundwork for hybrid narratives that challenge reductive binaries. His legacy resonates in contemporary Sri Lankan-Australian literature where stories grapple

[19] The civil war in Sri Lanka, spanning from 1983 to 2009, stands as one of the most violent and traumatic periods in the island's history, profoundly transforming its cultural, social, and economic fabric. It should be noted that this prolonged conflict also marked a significant thematic shift in Sri Lankan literature. Whereas earlier literary works often focused on colonial resistance, rural authenticity, or the tensions of modernity, the war catalysed a move towards narratives centred on ethnic conflict and political instability. During and after the war, literature – across genres including poetry, fiction, drama, and cinema – began to grapple directly with the realities of violence, displacement, and trauma. Writers working in English, Sinhala, and Tamil responded to the war by seeking to understand its origins, bear witness to the human cost of terrorism and repression perpetrated by all sides, and foster dialogue and reconciliation. In particular, Sri Lankan Anglophone fiction that emerged in response to the ethnic conflict reflects both the deep scars left by terrorism and violence, and an urgent effort to comprehend the sociopolitical conditions that allowed such a conflict to take root. For further reading, see Bamunusinghe & Senaratne 2023, and Jayasuriya 2012, 2016.

with similar tensions across cultural, generational, and geographical divides. In the diaspora, these inherited complexities take on new life, reshaped by migration, memory, and the realities of living between worlds.

Chapter 5 - Negotiating Identity: 'Othering' in Contemporary Diasporic

When I first arrived in Australia, I was determined to pass on Sri Lankan cultural values to my children and enrolled my daughters in traditional dance classes. An elderly aunty of our community praised my efforts but cautioned that giving the children too much freedom, particularly in choosing future spouses, could lead them to marry suddas, or 'white people', potentially threatening the purity of our family lineage.

This warning reflected the deep-seated cultural resistance ingrained in our identity, rooted in Occidentalist ideas that portray the West as morally and spiritually inferior. Having grown up in a conservative household, I understood the emphasis placed on lineage and cultural purity, historically framed as a defence against Western intrusion, particularly regarding marriage. 'Mishra vivaha', mixed marriages, with Westerners were viewed with scepticism, seen as diluting cultural identity and disrupting tradition.

These cultural attitudes are not unique to my family; they are embedded in Sri Lankan literature as well. Martin Wickramasinghe's trilogy, *Gamperaliya* (Uprooted) (1981 [1944]), *Kaliyugaya* (Age of Kali) (2016 [1957]), and *Yuganthaya* (End of an Era) (1949), illustrates the negotiation between tradition and modernity, and the tensions experienced by Sinhala subjects under colonial modernity, urbanisation, and merchant capitalism. In *Gamperaliya*, for example, (discussed in chapter 4), Piyal, a man from a rural lower-middle-class background, migrates to the city, reinvents himself as a successful English-speaking businessman, and returns to the village, challenging the declining rural feudal aristocracy. The subsequent novels, *Kaliyugaya* and *Yuganthaya*, continue to explore Sinhala society as it becomes increasingly unmoored from traditional village life, attempting to 'negotiate a sense of postcolonial identity which can reconcile modernity and tradition' (Rambukwella, 2018). This trilogy exemplifies how traditional social hierarchies, moral codes, and community values govern life in the homeland, frameworks that diasporic families carry with them and must adapt when negotiating life in new cultural contexts.

Settled in Australia, I now realise these expectations were increasingly impractical, especially for the next generation. The realities of diasporic life made rigid ideas of cultural purity untenable. As Homi Bhabha explains, diasporic space 'provides the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood ... that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself' (Bhabha, 1994: 1). This was vividly illustrated when my daughter chose a white partner, likely descended

from those historically connected to the homeland's colonial past. Their relationship initiated new signs of identity, blending both families' traditions and values. Their wedding became a site of collaboration and contestation, combining a traditional Sri Lankan ceremony with Western customs. This moment captures hybridity, the in-between space where identities are neither fixed nor pure, evolving through contact, exchange, and transformation, reimaging the boundaries between East and West, tradition and modernity.

In this space of negotiation, the binaries of 'us' versus 'them' or Sri Lankan versus Western, or here versus there, blur, giving rise to new forms of identity. This is especially apparent among second-generation migrants, for whom cultural blending is an everyday reality. The concept of mishra vivaha now extends beyond individuals to encompass religious practices, rituals, and languages. For example, both Sinhala and Tamil New Year are celebrated with pride in April, while Christmas is equally embraced in December. My children, for instance, fully engage in local traditions like playing Two-Up on Anzac Day, participating in the ritualistic and communal aspects of Australian culture, without losing their Sri Lankan roots.

Language also reflects this hybridity. At home, my children fluidly move between English and Sinhala, creating a unique linguistic rhythm that belongs to neither language entirely yet feels at home in both. This exemplifies Stuart Hall's (1990) assertion that diasporic identity 'belongs to the future as much as to the past' (225). Identity in this sense is a process of continuous transformation, shaped by historical ruptures and cultural interactions. It emerges through negotiation, defined not solely by the past or present but by the intersection of both.

However, not all migrants navigate this journey in the same way. Scholars such as Cavalcanti (n.d.), Chattopadhaya (2022), Levitt (2009), Brettell et al. (2009) and Ahsan (2024) assert that diasporic adaptation is shaped by factors including race, ethnicity, religion, caste, class, and personal migration histories. Second-generation migrants often face fewer pressures to privilege one cultural identity over another, instead engaging in a continual negotiation between ancestral roots and contemporary realities, reflecting Hall's understanding of diasporic identity as a process of being and becoming.

Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity offers a valuable lens for these layered and shifting identities, highlighting how cross-cultural exchanges give rise to new, blended forms of selfhood. This dynamic plays out within my own family: my identity, anchored in Sri Lankan upbringing, contrasts with my husband's, shaped by his early years in Scotland and a pragmatic Western sensibility – he prefers black pudding over roti for breakfast and

gently mocks my habit of lighting incense to ward off evil. Our children, shaped by an Australian schooling and social norms, engage with tradition and belonging on their own terms, often blending cultural practices with a distinctly local flavour. For example, they may prepare a traditional rooster lamp for special occasions, but decorate it with eucalyptus and native flowers, merging Sri Lankan rituals with Australian elements.

Across our broader diasporic circles, such as my Tamil friend whose family fled to Canada during the 1983 Black July pogroms, the variations in migration histories lead to equally diverse articulations of identity, each shaped by the specific intersections of displacement, memory, and the host culture.

These varied experiences highlight the complex, entangled nature of diasporic identities. As Ien Ang (2003) observes, hybridity emphasises 'complicated entanglement rather than identity', fostering 'togetherness-in-difference rather than separateness and virtual apartheid'. This notion encapsulates the diasporic condition as a fusion of conflicting yet interconnected identities, reflecting the emotional and cultural negotiation of belonging to multiple worlds, neither fully Western nor entirely Sri Lankan. Such hybridity, marked by the coexistence of tradition and modernity, shapes lived experiences and underpins diasporic literature.

Diasporic texts weave narratives of resistance, critique, and nostalgia for the homeland while exploring fluid identities forged in multicultural contexts. They highlight the struggles and creativity inherent in navigating cultural intersections, making hybridity both a lived reality and a central literary theme. In diasporic narratives, the West is no longer seen solely as an imperial or cultural threat but as a space for growth, freedom, and self-discovery. This hybridity reflects a departure from the oppositional stance of Occidentalism towards a more integrative and reconciliatory perspective, echoing themes explored in Wickramasinghe's depiction of tradition, morality, and social negotiation in the homeland.

People and Spaces: Hybridity in Chai Time at Cinnamon Gardens

Shankari Chandran's *Chai Time at Cinnamon Gardens* (2022) offers a nuanced exploration of hybridity, embodying the complex and shifting identities of diasporic Sri Lankan-Australians. Set in a fictional aged-care facility in Western Sydney, the novel interweaves Tamil and non-Tamil residents, staff, and local Australian neighbours, highlighting how the legacies of colonialism, migration, and communal violence intersect with the characters' attempts to build new lives in Australia.

The residents and staff at Cinnamon Gardens represent a spectrum of diasporic experiences shaped by both homeland and host-country contexts. There is Cedric, a sharp-witted elder trying to escape the shadow of familial abuse; Maya, a feisty author, and her husband Zakir, an archaeologist; Ruben, a multilingual academic, all survivors of Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict who hail from Jaffna. Anji, Maya's warm and resilient daughter, a geriatric psychiatrist, completes the group. Chandran foregrounds both the emotional and sociocultural negotiations of these characters, demonstrating how hybridity is experienced, enacted and continually renegotiated. Ruben's attack by a gang of white boys on his way to work and the racist graffiti sprayed on the sides of the nursing home illustrate the ongoing negotiation of racialised power dynamics, while first-generation characters like Maya and Zaki, in particular, carry intergenerational trauma into their everyday interactions within the nursing home and broader community, confirming Hall's (1990) assertion that diasporic identity is always 'a matter of becoming as well as being.'

Language and cultural references operate as key markers of hybridity in Chandran's work. English is layered with Tamil expressions, reflecting the dual worlds that characters inhabit and the tensions between home and host country. The hybridity of the diasporic experience, is explored not only through language but also through the characters' relationships and experiences. This hybridity is expressed in the interactions between migrant and non-migrant characters, sometimes marked by tension but at other times marked by mutual understanding and care. Cedric's escape from familial abuse and Maya's, Zakir's, and Ruben's departures from Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict exemplifies the emotional complexities of diasporic experience (Bhabha 1994; Hall 1990). Furthermore, Nathan and Anji's marriage symbolise the productive integration of Eastern and Western values, highlighting how hybridity can be generative rather than oppositional.

Chandran resists essentialist portrayals by presenting a broad spectrum of diasporic experiences. Some characters may flirt with familiar stereotypes, such as Gareth, a white Australian local councillor whose worldview is coloured by settler entitlement and political self-righteousness, but they are rendered with nuance. Gareth's marriage to Nikki, a woman working at the nursing home, and his friendship with Anji, tether him to the migrant community. Yet, when Gareth lodges a complaint to the Human Rights Commission over the removal of a Captain Cook statue, his discomfort with shifting cultural narratives is laid bare. Through Gareth, Chandran explores how colonial ideologies persist in modern political discourse, sometimes masked by liberal rhetoric, and how power, privilege, and resistance operate in multicultural societies. Gareth is not a caricatured villain; rather, he is a figure of

conflict, vulnerability, and contradiction, whose desire for control and discomfort with others' agency evoke colonial residues in contemporary form.

By contrast, characters such as Maya, Anji, Zakir, Ruben, and Nathan embody shared moral and emotional sensibilities that cross cultural lines. Ruben, Maya, and Anji emerge as selfless individuals dedicated to care and community. Nathan, despite his Australian heritage and appearance, embraces an ethic of self-sacrifice more commonly associated with Eastern heroism. He is humorously labelled as a 'unicorn' (Chandran 2022: 93), a rare blend of empathy, strength, and loyalty. Referred to affectionately as 'everyone's favourite backup husband' and a 'real hero' (90), Nathan becomes emblematic of the novel's vision of hybridity, a space where cultural intersections foster growth, understanding, and transformation.

Spaces withing the novel further enact hybridity. Zakir's walk-in wardrobe serves as both a storage area and a prayer room; Maya's linen cupboard houses a Hindu shrine. These intimate transformations symbolise the coexistence of traditions within the diaspora. Religious syncretism is further underscored by the presence of a 'brown Jesus' alongside Hindu deities, (61). Such domestic configurations materialise the blending of belief systems, reinforcing the idea that diasporic identity is enacted through everyday spaces and rituals (Hall 1990, Appadurai 1996).

Food similarly functions as a medium of cultural negotiation. While the aged-care facility primarily serves Westernised meals, the inclusion of Sri Lankan staples such as 'idiyappam', 'sothi', and 'sambal' (15) enriches the menu and restores a sense of cultural completeness, making the characters assert a culinary connection to heritage within a Western context. This balance between loss and reclamation highlights the importance of preserving heritage within diasporic life, where tradition is not abandoned but rather reimagined in new contexts.

By intertwining narratives of resistance, hybridity, and memory, Chandran's novel illustrates how diasporic literature captures the layered complexities of identities. Hybridity is presented not as a static blending of cultures but as an ongoing process of negotiation, adaptation, and self-invention, echoing Stuart Hall's notion of diasporic identity as a continual process of *'being and becoming'* (Hall 1990: 225). Similarly, the novel enacts Homi Bhabha's concept of the *third space*, where cultural intersections generate new meanings and possibilities beyond fixed East–West binaries (Bhabha 1994). Through this lens, *Chai Time at Cinnamon Gardens* offers a nuanced vision of integration, reconciliation,

and the continual evolution of identity in the diaspora, highlighting how memory, cultural inheritance, and contemporary realities intersect in shaping diasporic life.

Reimagining Tradition and Language: Hybridity in A Change of Skies

This theme of reimagining tradition in unfamiliar surroundings is explored in Yasmin Gooneratne's 1991 novel *A Change of Skies*, which adopts a hybrid literary approach to reflect the lived experiences of Sri Lankan migrants. The novel traces the migration of Bharat Mangala Devasinha, a young specialist in Asian Linguistics, and his wife Navaranjini from Sri Lanka to Australia in the 1970s, as Bharat assumes a lecturing position at Southern Cross University. The couple initially experiences culture shock in Australia, navigating the unfamiliar norms, expectations, and social structures of their new environment. Through active engagement with Australian society, they manage to adapt and thrive, demonstrating the negotiation and accommodation required to inhabit an alien space while maintaining their cultural identity. This contrasts with the more urgent, trauma-driven migrations depicted in later works such as Chandran's *Chai Time at Cinnamon Gardens*. This contrast underscores the varied motivations and circumstances that shape diasporic journeys, highlighting the diversity of migratory experiences, motivations, and the complex negotiation of diasporic subjectivities (Hall 1990). For instance, Bharat struggles to reconcile his professional ambitions with familial expectations, while Navaranjini navigates her role as mother, wife, and cultural custodian in a society that values assimilation over heritage. These narrative threads exemplify how migration is rarely a single, linear process but a constellation of competing demands, negotiations, and adaptations.

Gooneratne's narrative is distinguished by her hybridised use of language, which functions as both a model of cultural preservation and tool of critique. Writing in English, the language of both colonial legacy and transnational mobility, she infuses the text with Sinhala phrases and culturally specific wordplay. This linguistic layering enacts the dual consciousness of her characters, revealing the tension between homeland belonging and host-country adaptation. This resonates with Bhabha's (1994) concept of the 'third space', where the interaction between coloniser and colonised cultures leads to the creation of new, hybrid forms of identity. The hybrid linguistic landscape in Gooneratne's work becomes a space where the boundaries between cultures are contested and redefined.

A striking example of Gooneratne's use of satire to explore identity and assimilation appears in the protagonist's decision to change his name upon migrating to Australia, from Bharath Mangala-Davasinha to Barry Mundy. To an English-speaking audience, the name

may seem unremarkable, but its Sinhala resonances are steeped in humour and critique: 'Barry' resembles 'bari', meaning 'inefficient' or 'incapable', while 'Mundy' evokes 'mundi', meaning 'dregs' or 'sediments'. To an Australian reader, the name also evokes the fish barramundi, adding a playful layer of cultural misrecognition. This seemingly innocuous transformation becomes a vehicle for Gooneratne to critique the cultural dilution and erasure of identity that often accompany migration. Through this playful renaming, she uses humour to expose the deeper tensions of belonging and self-perception in diasporic life. The change from Bharat to Barry highlights the struggles of hybrid identity in a postcolonial context, a concept central to the theoretical framework, where assimilation is not simply an adjustment but a cultural negotiation fraught with loss and transformation.

Gooneratne's satire extends to her depiction of diasporic community leadership, particularly in the figure of Mr Mekaboru Kiyanahati Balapan Koyako, a Sinhala made up name which loosely translates as 'look at the way this man is lying'. The irony is amplified by his wife's affectionate nickname for him: 'boru', meaning 'lies'. These exaggerated names go beyond comedy, offering pointed commentary on the performativity, contradictions, and pretensions that often shape diasporic leadership and identity politics. This use of humorous characterisation exemplifies Bhabha's understanding of hybrid identity as a performative and contested space, where individuals negotiate multiple cultural affiliations. In performing their identities, these characters subtly challenge the rigid expectations of Occidentalism and its portrayal of the West as a moral and cultural 'Other'.

Gooneratne's migrant characters are also deeply engaged in a 'religious and moral mission' (Gooneratne 1991: 90) in Australia, striving to protect and preserve their culture and values, as evidenced by their actions. They actively participate in cultural and religious practices, including the lighting of oil lamps and hanging paper lanterns on trees during Vesak. Additionally, they construct a temple and enshrine a picture of Lord Buddha (73), signalling their commitment to infusing Asian spirituality into their new home. Their intention to invite monks from Matara further underscores their dedication to preserving their religious traditions (ibid). These practices demonstrate that hybridity in the diaspora is not merely about adapting to a host culture but involves an active negotiation between cultural preservation and transformation, where spiritual and moral values are carried forward while engaging with new social contexts.

Together, these humorous and ritualised practices create a framework through which Gooneratne examines cultural hybridity as her characters navigate the blurred lines between Sri Lankan and Australian identities. Bharat, now Barry, adopts a 'half-vegetarian' lifestyle

(119), symbolising a partial departure from traditional customs. Meanwhile, Navaranjini, renamed Jean, pursues full assimilation, aspiring to become a 'true blue Aussie' (124), complete with Australian slang and a willingness to engage in the 'time honoured Australian custom of name swapping' (122). This hybridisation of food, language, religious practices, and daily activities reflects the hybrid cultural spaces created through migration, resonating with the notion that diaspora identities are not fixed but continuously evolving in response to new contexts.

Crucially, these satirical elements do more than critique individual characters, they underscore the inherent absurdity of striving for total assimilation. Gooneratne subtly reinforces the idea that a purely assimilated identity is not only unrealistic but also misses the richness of cultural complexity. Instead, her narrative suggests that hybrid identity is not just inevitable but deeply revealing, illuminating the tensions, negotiations, and ironies that define diasporic existence. Through humour and linguistic play, Gooneratne invites readers to embrace hybridity as a space of authenticity rather than loss, echoing the study's central premise that hybridity provides a mode of cultural expression and self-reinvention in the diaspora.

Changing Identity, Changing Practice: Hybridity in Untethered

The complex negotiation of tradition and modernity reflects a broader trend in diasporic fiction, which moves beyond the binary opposition of East and West inherent in Occidentalist narratives. Rather than romanticising the homeland or wholly embracing the West, such stories reveal how characters critique both Western norms and the restrictive or outdated customs of their origins. Diasporic fiction often moves beyond the binary opposition of East and West inherent in Occidentalist narratives, with characters frequently negotiating between inherited cultural practices and new social contexts. For instance, Ayesha Inoon's *Untethered* (2023) portrays Zia, who initially adheres to conservative Sri Lankan Muslim values but gradually embraces elements of Western freedom while retaining aspects of her faith. This hybrid identity replaces an adversarial view of the West with a process of personal negotiation and adaptation, exemplifying the hybrid subject as theorised by Hall (1990).

Zia, a 20-year-old woman from Colombo, is raised in a conservative Sri Lankan Muslim household where cultural and religious norms strongly guide her choices. Her parents arrange her marriage to Rashid, a man she barely knows, believing this ensures her future and social stability. Deep down, Zia wishes to pursue higher education, yet she consents to the marriage out of respect for familial expectations and communal obligation. This tension

between personal aspiration and cultural duty illustrates the early formation of hybridity in her identity, highlighting how inherited norms shape the diasporic subject even before migration.

After marriage, escalating civil unrest and political instability in Colombo compel Zia, Rashid, and their daughter Farah to immigrate to Canberra. Leaving behind family, friends, and a familiar community is traumatic. The challenges of resettlement, unfamiliar laws, social customs, language barriers, and financial constraints, compound the difficulty of her transition into married life and motherhood. This initial upheaval underscores the structural and emotional pressures that inform hybrid identities in diaspora, showing how adaptation is both external (laws, language) and internal (cultural negotiation, self-redefinition).

The novel follows Zia as she navigates the freedoms of Western society while retaining her faith and cultural practices. Her evolving identity neither wholly rejects the past nor uncritically embraces the West; instead, it illustrates a personal reimagining of belonging, demonstrating the hybrid subject as theorised by Hall (1990). Through Zia's experiences, Inoon portrays Bhabha's (1994) 'third space,' a recurring lens in this analysis, where diasporic subjects inhabit in-between cultural zones, negotiating identity, autonomy, and cultural memory simultaneously. This dual engagement is vividly illustrated when Zia, despite the pressures of assimilation, insists on maintaining traditional prayers, Ramadan rituals, and hijab-wearing practices while participating in Australian social life, school activities for Farah, and casual gatherings with neighbours.

Part 2 of the novel, *'Settling In'*, presents the more practical challenges of life in Australia. Rashid has been in Canberra for months before Zia and Farah arrive. Despite their rigorous vetting as 'skilled, qualified, healthy' (Inoon 2023:146) immigrants and assurances that they would not be 'a burden to the Australian taxpayer' (ibid), Rashid is unable to find work suited to his qualifications and instead takes shifts as a cleaner both day and night. Zia, at home with Farah in their small, rented townhouse, experiences loneliness, homesickness, and anxiety over Rashid's struggles. His moody and distant demeanour 'permeates the very rooms they were in until she could hardly breathe,' (160) and Zia must navigate these difficulties without the familial support she relied on in Sri Lanka, finding solace only within herself. This passage vividly illustrates how the diasporic subject negotiates not only cultural identity but also the practical realities of survival in a new land, highlighting the interplay between aspiration, adaptation, and emotional resilience.

Initially committed to daily prayers, the matchmaking process, and the culturally idealised roles of wife and mother, Zia embodies the traditional ideals expected of her. However, marriage to Rashid, a man who has already lived in the West and is described as 'more relaxed in his beliefs' (109), introduces her to a lifestyle that values spontaneity, informality, and autonomy. From loud music and casual dining to a freer sense of movement, Zia begins to encounter an alternative mode of living. Rashid's comfort in liminal spaces, such as airport lounges (104), where he enjoys observing the emotional comings and goings of travellers, reflects his affinity for the in-between. The airport, in this context, becomes a potent metaphor for hybridity itself, a transient space where identity is fluid, belonging is provisional, and the boundaries between homeland and host country blur. The airport metaphor connects seamlessly with Bhabha's 'third space', where individuals cross cultural boundaries and redefine their sense of self.

Zia's own faith and cultural practices are not simply maintained; they evolve as she navigates life in Australia. Her engagement with religion, prayers at the Yarralumla Mosque (146), preparing iftar meals during Ramadan, and wearing the hijab for Tarawih prayers (213–214) shapes her interactions, decisions, and sense of self. These practices are not static markers of identity but are reinterpreted and adapted in response to her diasporic experiences, reflecting a continuous process of 'becoming'. Through this interplay, Zia's identity is actively produced in each moment: her 'being' is grounded in inherited, cultural and spiritual traditions, while her 'becoming' emerges as she integrates autonomy, individuality and new social contests. This dynamic enactment of faith and culture reflects Stuart Hall's (1990) concept of diasporic identity as a continuous process of 'being' and 'becoming', an ongoing negotiation between history, memory and present realities.

Through Zia's experience, *Untethered* explores the delicate interplay between her original culture and the new cultural environment she inhabits. Her journey is representative of the broader diasporic experience, illustrating the challenges and opportunities of navigating multiple identities. This hybridity, far from signifying confusion or compromise, emerges as an inevitable and generative condition of diasporic life. Zia's story shows that hybridity offers a space for both cultural preservation and transformation, where identities are continuously negotiated through engagement with the host culture while retaining significant aspects of their heritage.

Rather than adhering to rigid binaries or oppositions, Sri Lankan diasporic fiction increasingly centres characters who navigate dual cultural affiliations with intentionality and nuance. These narratives reflect the hybrid identity discussed in the theoretical framework,

where individuals are not simply caught between two cultures but actively engage with them, reshaping their identities in the process. This shift is evident across the works of Chandran, Gooneratne, and Inoon, [20] where protagonists are not simply torn between two worlds but engaged in negotiating and reconciling the tensions between them. In *Chai Time at Cinnamon Gardens* (2022), for instance, Chandran's intergenerational cast, particularly Anji and the residents of the aged care home, grapple with their Tamil Sri Lankan heritage while forging lives in multicultural Western Sydney. Like the Muslim woman Zia in *Untethered* and the Sinhalese man Barry in *A Change of Skies*, they resist passive assimilation and instead reconstruct identity through memory and cultural ritual.

This approach enriches understanding of the diasporic experience, framing identity not as a fixed inheritance but as a dynamic process shaped by lived realities. By balancing tradition with modernity, heritage with adaptation, and faith with freedom, these narratives challenge essentialist views of culture and redefine belonging as an evolving, inclusive, and deeply personal journey within the globalised world. Hybridity, as seen in the works of Inoon, Gooneratne, and Chandran, is not merely a response to migration but a powerful, generative process that challenges fixed cultural categories and allows for a richer understanding of identity within the diaspora. Through these narratives, diasporic writers invite readers to engage with the complexities of hybrid identities and reimagine what it means to belong in the ever-evolving landscape of global migration.

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[20] Although it would have been possible to arrange the texts in this chronologically to reflect the migration patterns of Sri Lankans, my focus is on different ethnic groups and their perspectives of the West which is influenced by the different experiences under colonial rule. (as explained under the subheading *'Different Histories, Different Perspectives'* (p.18) in Chapter 2).

While it is possible to explore historical patterns of migration through South Asian diasporic literature, it should be noted that each South Asian nation and its ethnic groups have distinct colonial experiences and, consequently, different perspectives on the West. My hope is that the framework developed in this study—focusing on one community and its literature through the theoretical lenses of Occidentalism, hybridity, and diasporic identity—can serve as a model for future research examining other South Asian communities through their literary works.

Chapter 6 - Conclusion

East Meets West in Kottu Roti and Devil Dancing in Sydney

The diasporic experience transcends the rigid binaries inherent in Occidentalist thought, offering a more nuanced vision where East and West intertwine, reflecting the complexities of cultural negotiation in a globalised world. This hybridity manifests in diaspora literature as well as other facets of society. Diasporic writers engage with what Ashis Nandy terms 'intimate enemies' (Nandy 2015: 15), negotiating the tensions between adopting and subverting Western conventions while embracing their unique literary heritage. This balance between preserving cultural roots and addressing the realities of diasporic existence is essential for ensuring authenticity in storytelling, achieved through cultural motifs, linguistic nuances, and narrative techniques that articulate the diasporic space.

My journey into hybrid literary expression began in childhood, when my father introduced the world of Kurutu Gee,[21] a unique form of Sri Lankan graffiti poetry, verses, inscribed by visitors to the ancient rock fortress of Sigiriya between the 6th and 14th centuries. Even at a young age, I was captivated by the simplicity and rhythmic beauty of these poems. Inspired by Kurutu Gee, I attempted to write my own poetry, blending English with native tongues. However, my teachers dismissed this linguistic fusion, echoing the nationalist sentiments of the poet Rajakaruna in 1921, who likened linguistic hybridity of mixing English language with Sinhala to a chaotic mixture of pickled vegetables and fruits or 'achcharu'. [22]

Growing up in an independent Sri Lanka, my early perceptions of the coloniser's language were shaped by nationalist discourse. When 'Singlish', a hybrid of Sinhala and

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[21] It is estimated that more than 1500 visitors have written poems and their names in their own hand in Sinhala, Tamil and Sanskrit on the rock. These poems give an insight into the chronological development of these languages. The legacy of these poems was brought to prominence by Sri Lankan historians such as Senarath Paranavithana and Benil Priyanka, who deciphered over a thousand of these verses, revealing their linguistic diversity and unique use of dialects. See 'Sigiriya Mirror Wall and Graffiti', lecture by Prof. Nimal De Silva at www.nationaltrust.lk

[22] Rajakaruna's sentiments as noted in Field (2016: 368–85): 'To mix the mother tongue with English was like carelessly tossing together ingredients to make *accharu*, a mixture of pickled fruit and vegetables introduced into Sinhala cuisine through the Sri Lankan Malay community.'

English, began to gain popularity in the 1990s, especially among television announcers and media personalities of my generation, I viewed it with suspicion. Raised with the belief that the nation and its language were sacred, I resisted this linguistic blending and insisted on speaking only one language at a time. However, after migrating to Australia, my perspective began to shift. I encountered diverse diasporic communities where language use was more fluid, where it was common to insert Sinhala words into English conversations or vice versa. Expressions like 'it made a "salang" sound' or 'he fell "dadas"', or the blending of English nouns with Sinhala suffixes, such as pool 'eka' or car 'eka', became everyday examples of this hybrid vernacular. This linguistic flexibility mirrored Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe's argument that English, though once imposed, could be reappropriated and reshaped to reflect local realities (Luria et al. 2006: 183–188).

Like Achebe, many postcolonial writers, including South Asian writers and those of South Asian descent, Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy,[23] Yasmine Gooneratne, and Shankari Chandran, have disrupted the authority of standard English by integrating culturally rooted linguistic elements that reflect the rhythms and realities of their communities. Inspired by this tradition, my creative thesis *Kottu Roti and Devil Dancing in Sydney* adopts English as its primary narrative medium, yet deliberately blends Sinhala and Tamil to capture thoughts, emotions, and everyday exchanges that English alone cannot convey. This multilingual layering is not simply decorative; it is a conscious strategy to reflect the hybridity inherent in diasporic identity and to challenge the presumed universality of English as a literary language.

For example, my characters the 'Gossip Aunties' speak a fluid, hybrid English interspersed with Sinhala expressions like 'ane', 'ai-o', 'mey', and '*noh*'. While these terms may be unfamiliar to monolingual English readers, they evoke distinct emotional textures and communal dynamics that are central to the diasporic experience. Such insertions are neither glossed nor italicised, as their purpose is to centre the diasporic subject rather than explain them to an external gaze. The same principle applies to familial terms like putha (son), mahan

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[23] In *Midnight's Children* (2008), Rushdie blends English with Indian languages. Dwivedi (2008) highlights Rushdie's linguistic experimentation, noting his use of intentional misspellings of compound words like 'suchandsuch' and 'downdowndown,' and the creation of new English forms such as 'dupatta-less' and 'memory-less'. Likewise, Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) employs linguistic hybridity, as seen in parakeets squawking, 'Mussalman ke ek hi sthan! Qabristan ya Pakistan!' (62) and voices exclaiming, 'Ai, Hai! Saali Randi Hijra!' (ibid.).

(son in Tamil), amma (mother), ammachchi (grandmother), umma (mother in Muslim Tamil), appachchi (father in up-country Sinhala), and thaththa (father in down-south Sinhala), which highlight the regional and cultural nuances within the Sri Lankan diaspora. Exclamations such as ai-yah (Tamil), ai-o (Sinhala), and Oh my God (used by English speakers within the community) serve as cultural sound markers, expressing frustration, surprise, or urgency, while also reinforcing the community's rich multilingualism.

This linguistic hybridity extends beyond individual words and into the imagery and metaphors that shape the narrative voice. Diasporic writers often reject conventional Western figurative language in favour of metaphors deeply rooted in their own cultural lexicons. For instance, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* (2009) likens a character's laughter to 'jewelled ankle bells' (13), conjuring the world of classical Indian dance, while Saman Shad in *The Matchmaker* (2023) draws upon the earth itself to describe a woman's complexion, 'dark as the soil of the earth of the land she left behind' (102), grounding identity in place and memory. Yasmine Gooneratne, writing from a position of cultural hybridity, compares a bed of flowers to the intricate border of a Kashmiri sari (1994: 85), fusing natural imagery with textile art and cultural memory.

Following in this tradition, *Kottu Roti and Devil Dancing in Sydney* incorporates metaphors and similes that reflect my Sri Lankan heritage and the diasporic realities of my characters. I liken Yashodara's parents' relationship to 'curd and honey', a familiar Sinhala metaphor symbolising harmony and balance. Dhara, Malaka's love interest, is described as 'a lotus in a muddy pond', evoking the resilience and purity of beauty amidst adversity. In a more humorous vein, a character's persistent cough is likened to 'a rusty old Kubota engine', drawing on rural Sri Lankan agricultural imagery. These figurative expressions, drawn from local speech and everyday experiences, aim to deepen the emotional resonance of the story while resisting homogenised representations of diasporic lives.

Ultimately, these linguistic choices are made not just to establish authenticity, but also to assert a space for cultural specificity within English-language literature. By weaving Sinhala and Tamil expressions, familial terms, and metaphors into the narrative fabric, *Kottu Roti and Devil Dancing in Sydney* mirrors the way diasporic communities speak, feel, and remember. It challenges the dominance of monolingual storytelling, offering instead a polyphonic narrative that celebrates the richness of linguistic and cultural hybridity in diasporic life.

In addition to linguistic hybridity, my creative thesis engages with the literary mode of magical realism, a form that originated in Latin American literature (Kumar 2024;

Figlerowicz & Mertehikian 2023; Siskind 2012), and is often associated with writers like Gabriel García Márquez and Isabel Allende. This genre, characterised by its 'portrayal of a recognizably real world environment in which the magical occurrences are a normal part of reality' (Bortolussi 2011: 350), emerged as a powerful tool for postcolonial writers to challenge dominant Western rationalist traditions and to centre indigenous cosmologies and worldviews. While magical realism is commonly associated with Latin American contexts, its thematic essence, where the mystical exists within the realm of the real, resonates deeply with South Asian and Sri Lankan storytelling traditions.

As observed by Bhattacharya (2020) and Kantor (2020), magical realism in South Asia frequently draws on older narrative forms that combined the everyday with the extraordinary long before the term 'magical realism' was coined. Bhattacharya notes that while Indian novels were influenced by European ideals of individualism, rationality, and historical consciousness, 'those did not turn the colonial novel into a case of derivative realism'; rather, 'older narrative forms combining the everyday and the extraordinary as in the puranas, the epics and the fables have deeply influenced modern literary writing' (Bhattacharya 2020). In predominantly agricultural societies in South Asia, cultural products frequently drew upon mythological and supernatural elements (Bhattacharya 2020, Mukherjee 1985) shaping South Asian novelists' use of mythological timelines and drawing on allegory, symbolism, and fables and producing a form of realism that is inherently complex and layered.

Bhattacharya (2020) further notes that this literary mode has frequently served as a 'medium of critique against Eurocentric empiricist discourses and totalitarian regimes, energised by historical crises.' Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), for instance, uses magic to represent the 'unreal, larger-than-life nature of times' (2020), offering both a political critique and a literary reflection of postcolonial ambivalence, while Bangladeshi author Shahidul Jahir blends fable-like narration with contemporary reality, demonstrating how magical realism can integrate extraordinary events into everyday life.

Growing up in a culturally rich household, I was surrounded by stories that effortlessly merged the magical with the everyday. My parents would often recount mythical tales, including the origin story of the Sinhala people, which describes the birth of the first ancestor from the union of a lion and a woman. These stories were not treated as mere fantasy but accepted as part of the cultural fabric, much like the supernatural occurrences in magical

realist literature. In Sri Lanka, this mode of storytelling is embedded in the Jataka tales,[24] folk beliefs, and oral traditions that have been passed down through generations, where spirits, gods, and demons regularly intervene in human affairs without disrupting the sense of realism.

This cultural background profoundly shapes the texture of my creative thesis and incorporates supernatural elements that reflect the mythic and folkloric dimensions of my upbringing: devils possessing humans, realms overlapping, malevolent spirits invading domestic spaces, and vividly rendered exorcism rituals. These are not metaphorical devices but integral to the lived experiences of many Sri Lankans, particularly in rural settings, where the spiritual and the physical worlds are closely intertwined. By embedding these magical elements into a diasporic narrative, I both honour my cultural heritage and challenge the idea that certain narrative techniques belong solely to particular literary traditions or geographies.

This interplay of cultural tradition and narrative innovation also extends to the structure of my work. The inclusion of the 'Gossip Aunties' as a recurring narrative device draws inspiration from the Sri Lankan theatrical world that surrounded me during childhood. My mother, a former stage actress, exposed me to the rich performance traditions of Sri Lanka, particularly folk drama forms such as 'nadagam' and 'kolam'. Central to both of these is the role of the 'Pothe Gura' in nadagam or the 'Sabapathi' in kolam: characters who serve as narrators and mediators, guiding the audience through the performance, introducing scenes, commenting on the action, and offering cultural or moral context through rhythmic verse or comic interludes.

In *Kottu Roti and Devil Dancing in Sydney*, I reimagine this traditional role through the 'Gossip Aunties', who function as contemporary equivalents of the Pothe Gura or Sabapathi. These aunties, with their sharp tongues and perceptive eyes, provide commentary, continuity, and cultural framing throughout the narrative. They inhabit the liminal space between the characters and the reader, offering humorous, poignant, or biting insights that help bridge generational, cultural, and geographic divides. Much like their theatrical predecessors, they guide the audience between narrative episodes, contextualising moments of tension, particularly those arising from East–West cultural collisions within the diasporic experience. Through them, I incorporate a performative oral storytelling sensibility into the

[24] Arsakulasuriya & Madushika 2021; Cowell 2010 for further reading on Jataka tales.

written form, creating a hybrid narrative structure that draws from both traditional Sri Lankan dramaturgy and postcolonial literary forms.

Together, the use of magical realism and the integration of culturally specific narrative structures allow my creative thesis to inhabit a space where the diasporic experience is not merely translated into English, but re-voiced and re-imagined through the rhythms, textures, and belief systems of Sri Lankan storytelling.

In the creative thesis, I also employ a broad cast of characters to reflect the complexity and multiplicity of the diasporic experience. This approach is directly influenced by traditional Sri Lankan performance, particularly 'kolam', a form of masked folk drama. In kolam, the prelude to the main act unfolds through a series of short, stock scenes that humorously portray various layers of Sri Lankan society, police officers, villagers, a washerman and his wanton wife, low-ranking courtiers, soldiers, and even animal or demon figures.[25] These comical vignettes are not merely decorative but serve to situate the audience in a shared social world, filled with satire, exaggeration, and coded critique.

Drawing from this tradition, the early chapters of my creative thesis introduce a vibrant cast of young characters from the estate, each burdened with their own afflictions and contradictions. Through satire and irony, I explore their anxieties, aspirations, and negotiations with identity, echoing the comedic yet revealing tone of kolam. In this way, hybridity is not only expressed through theme and character but also at a formal level, as I weave the narrative features of Sri Lankan drama into the structure of a contemporary Australian novel. This blending of oral and theatrical tradition with literary form underscores the adaptability and resilience of diasporic storytelling.

The novel also resists simplifying cultural identity into binary oppositions, East versus West, tradition versus modernity, ours versus theirs. Instead, it reveals how these seemingly opposing forces co-exist and interweave within diasporic life.

The performance of the shanthikarmaya, an exorcism ritual, in Sydney, orchestrated through the collaboration of Douglas, a Western doctor, and Gayatri, an Eastern medicine woman, serves as a metaphor for this synthesis. This ritual, deeply embedded in Sri Lankan healing traditions, is not simply transplanted but is transformed by its new context, reflecting the ways in which cultural practices evolve in diaspora into a hybrid form. By incorporating such ritualistic elements, the work challenges the notion that diasporic identities must either

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[25] Further reading: 'The Kolam, a Folk Drama – Asian Traditional Theatre & Dance' (Mey 2019)

fully assimilate or remain static. The shanthikarmaya embodies this fluidity, showing how memory and adaptation continuously shape cultural expression. It highlights that cultural preservation in the diaspora is not about rigid adherence to tradition but rather about reinvention – adapting customs to new environments while retaining their symbolic essence.

As a Sri Lankan-Australian writer, I find that my engagement with the West is neither one of wholesale rejection nor uncritical acceptance. Instead, I employ literary techniques that mirror the complexities of this relationship. Furthermore, the hybrid structure of my work, where folklore, magical realism, romance and contemporary diasporic struggles converge, allows for a nuanced exploration of how individuals within the diaspora perceive the West. This perception is neither static nor monolithic; it shifts across generations, is influenced by personal experiences, and is shaped by historical consciousness. For instance, an elder in the community may recall colonial-era injustices and approach the West with scepticism, while a younger diasporic individual, raised with Western education and media, may struggle with feelings of alienation and belonging. Through my characters, I study how these varying perspectives coexist within the same diasporic space, creating a dynamic and often contradictory relationship with the West.

Ultimately, *Kottu Roti and Devil Dancing in Sydney* presents a literary interrogation of Occidentalism and diasporic hybridity – one that does not seek definitive answers but rather invites reflection on the evolving nature of our diasporic identities. Through the blending of traditional storytelling techniques with contemporary themes, my work challenges rigid classifications of genre, culture, and belonging. The diasporic condition, as I explore in my thesis, is not a static state of loss or nostalgia but a space of creative possibility, where the past is not merely remembered but reimagined, and where cultural heritage is not simply preserved but transformed in meaningful ways. In navigating this in-between space, I, like many in my community, engage in a continual process of negotiation, resisting, adapting, and ultimately redefining what it means to belong. Through this literary journey, I seek not only to articulate my own diasporic experience but also to contribute to a broader discourse on how cultural memory, tradition, and hybridity shape the narratives of those who dwell between worlds.

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The Novel - Kottu Roti and Devil Dancing in Sydney

by Sharmila Jayasinghe

Prologue

Stepping through the colossal gates of Little Sri Lanka, LSL as the younger crowd called it, a newcomer would feel as though they were crossing into another realm. The gates stood like the lion guardians of Sigiriya, towering, regal, a concrete homage to an ancient marvel. Massive paws gripped the earth on either side of the entrance. The archway, a gaping mouth, gave the illusion the beast had paused in its roar, its throat wide open, daring the brave to step inside. As one passed through, the world beyond shifted, no longer Australia, but a distant land, alive with a rhythm of its own.

Then, like an unrelenting force, the sensory assault struck. The air came first. Thick, spiced, laden with cumin, coriander, and the sharp bite of dried chillies, seeping into the nostrils, weaving itself into the very fabric of one's clothes, clinging to skin like a memory. Just as the weight of it threatened to overwhelm, another scent, warmer, softer, rose: a golden, sizzling fragrance of vadais, crisp at the edges, tender within, their warmth wrapping around the newcomer like the comforting embrace of a grandmother's arms.

The charm of this place peaked in spring and in summer, transforming the estate into a vibrant tropical haven. With the days stretching longer and the sun blazing, birds from the homeland made their arrival, Layard's Parakeets, Yellow Orioles, and Black-Capped Bulbuls, each adding their own flair to the unfolding spectacle. Pinwheel bushes twirled into bloom with cheerful yellow blossoms that seemed to whisper a welcome to the warmer months. The grand Na tree, a national icon doing its best to belong on foreign soil, stood bowed under the weight of its tender leaves, painted in soft reds and yellows. They fluttered gently in the breeze like little prayer flags waiting for the next enlightened one to pass through. Nearby, the plantain bushes underwent their own quiet transformation, heavy with vibrant yellow bunches that hung proud, like the pleated skirt of a Kandyan dancer.

In the front yards, hibiscus, bougainvillea, and frangipani exploded from every corner, turning each garden into a carnival of blooms, competing for the prime spot on the altars in the houses.

As the newcomer wandered further into this sensory labyrinth, things only grew more bizarre, and more wonderful. Small shrines, complete with flickering oil lamps, popped up in unexpected places like roadside kiosks. Posters of cricket players, revered as much as any deity, were pinned to notice boards along streets, grinning down at passersby like benevolent demigods.

The houses here held fast to tradition, built around inner courtyards as though the very soul of the home resided there. Modernist minimalism and towering high-rises were politely, but firmly, kept at bay. Whitewashed bungalows dotted the landscape, each adorned with columned verandas that wrapped around them. They were charming echoes of Colombo 7, complete with a generous living room, a dining area that could comfortably host a feast, a kitchen tucked discreetly at the back, and bedrooms encircling the courtyard. Every house came with a portico just large enough for a car, and a terracotta-tiled roof, painstakingly laid by an imported artisan who clearly understood the poetry of roofing.

Inside these homes, biriyani, pongal, breudher, kavum, kokis, and Christmas cake all mingled at the same table, while a colourful cast of characters, appachchis, thaththas, appas, daddies, ammas, ummas, and mummies upheld their traditions and beliefs with the zeal of game show contestants.

Though the tables were always piled high with a delightful mishmash of treats, and the community itself was a lively mix of different ethnicities, marriages here were rarely a mishmash. Unions across different castes, faiths, and races weren't outright forbidden, but they were about as likely as snow falling in Nuwara Eliya. When they did happen, though, they came with enough drama to rival a full-blown Bollywood blockbuster. Take Kumari Madampe, the estate's resident rebel, for example. She sent shockwaves through the community when she decided to marry Richard Krester, a Burgher with mixed heritage and just enough charm to make even the sternest aunties crack a smile. Or Sugath Kotakadeniya, who didn't even flinch when his father disowned him for falling head over heels for Mali Perera, whose caste didn't exactly match his family's gold-plated expectations. Word on the street is, they eloped with the help of the estate's very own exorcist-slash-Ayurvedic healer, who, interestingly enough, had a soft spot for love stories herself.

That healer? Gayatri was not just an exorcist, healer, or matchmaker. Oh no, she was practically royalty around the estate. She was the most sought-after woman in Little Sri Lanka, with residents lining up for a consult whenever she stepped into the coffee house. Of course, for a more scientific approach to healing, there was also Douglas, the dashing, sixty-something doctor, equally in demand, and a constant thorn in Gayatri's side. The estate was split into two camps: Team Gayatri, loyal to her every chant and charm, flocked to her for everything from horoscopes to baby names; and Team Douglas, firm believers in his prescriptions, and no-nonsense logic. The two clashed more heatedly than politicians during election season, each certain their way was right.

Once, when little Maya screamed with an earache, Gayatri was already at the house stuffing cloves of garlic in the girl's ear when Douglas arrived, thermometer and antibiotics in hand. What followed was a standoff in the living room, murmured Pali verses on one side, clinical explanations on the other, while the bewildered parents hovered between two belief systems, afraid to offend either. It was moments like these that had made their rivalry estate folklore.

Yet, despite these mini soap operas and the internal politics swirling around, the estate somehow remained harmonious.

That said, they weren't so fond of outsiders. With a healthy dose of historical resentment towards colonisers in their collective memory, the estate dwellers viewed Westerners as temporary guests. Sure, they'd serve them a nice cup of English breakfast tea with a slice of homemade butter cake and engage in just enough small talk to brush up on their English. But the unspoken rule was clear: enjoy your tea, then kindly be on your way, no one's sticking around long enough to unpack! With the likes of the Madugalles, Dunuwilas, and Ratwattes taking the lead at every Sri Lankan cultural event, the estate was practically suffocating under the weight of historical grievances. These descendants of families once close to the king could drone on endlessly about the fall of the Kandyan kingdom and every slight ever dealt by the West.

This resentment reached its peak when it came to matrimonials. The moment a child of the estate so much as entertained the idea of a life partner outside the sacred lines of caste, religion, or race, chaos erupted. Marry a foreigner? Especially one with *white skin*? Cue the gasps, frowns, and dramatic fainting. All those unspoken agreements to keep things civil were thrown out the window. Metaphorical fangs were bared, and migrant parents, masters of sharp-tongued reprimands, were quick to wield their ultimate weapon: disowning a rebellious child faster than you could say 'forbidden love'.

Madugayani, for instance, practically broke records for disowning her son the moment he fell for a white woman. One minute she was blessing his job promotion with milk rice and betel leaves, the next she was tossing his baby photos into a suitcase and declaring him a traitor to his race. And what about Parinda? The Ratnayake's only son who couldn't bring himself to introduce his girlfriend to his parents, simply because her skin colour didn't match his mother's ideal for a daughter-in-law. The relationship, already in its fourth year, remained a secret. He met her only in suburbs far enough from the estate where no aunties roamed.

The children of the estate grew up under a rigorous discipline that drilled one golden rule into their heads: never argue with your elders. Defying your parents wasn't just a bad idea. It was haram, a cardinal sin, punishable by eternal side-eye at family gatherings. Even though there were occasional love-disaster stories like that of Madugayani's son, most of the young folks on the estate played it safe when it came to marriage. They preferred to let the elders do the matchmaking, saving themselves from all the drama.

Take Ratna for instance. Radiant with bridal bliss, she was poised to become the picture-perfect virgin bride to a man her parents had carefully chosen. Gayatri, with her horoscope-reading prowess, had given the match her stamp of approval.

Meanwhile, the estate's most eligible bachelors, Kithsiri and Nathan, revelled in their own charm, basking in flirtations and fleeting attractions, just skimming the surface but never diving deep. Nathan, with his perfectly sculpted beard, gym-honed arms, and a penchant for shirts that never quite stayed buttoned, and Kithsiri, always clad in crisp linen with aviators permanently on his nose, knew the art of attracting attention. But when it came to the real business of choosing a wife? Neither would dare trust their instincts. No, that was where tradition stepped in, grand, rehearsed, as unwavering as a perahera weaving through the streets of Kandy. The boys leaned back, relaxed, letting the elders take the reins, assured that their ideal brides would be ushered in with the same strategic precision as arranging chess pieces.

The kids on the estate were generally obedient, though not always predictable. Now and then, one or two would test the limits. Malaka, for instance, refused to wear the Arya Sinhala sarong, no matter how much it upset his mother. Vaishnavi, the only daughter of a prominent Tamil family, rejected speaking her mother tongue. Young Praha even started a dhobi business, a calling not meant for his caste, for a quick profit. These kinds of rebellious acts were rare. The youth of Little Sri Lanka stayed in line mostly, careful not to give their parents cause for sleepless nights, or worse, trigger a cardiac arrest.

The mothers, aunties, and women of a certain age, mostly housewives, were dedicated to a morning ritual of peeking over bougainvillea bushes and swapping the juiciest estate gossip. These ladies didn't just exchange sugar and spices; they traded news like prized commodities. Known as the 'Gossip Aunties', they ran an underground network that could rival any spy agency.

At the helm of this lively council was Sheila, the grand duchess of gossip, whose storytelling could transform even the juiciest scandal into a comedy sketch. She delivered news with the enthusiasm of someone handing out fresh, hot, sweet treacle-dripping oilcakes.

Fatima and Tania, occasional members of the group, were often the punchline of jokes due to their frequent absences from the gossip sessions.

Meanwhile, the husbands, mostly retired, lounged in their easy chairs, tackling 'serious' matters like politics and cricket. These self-appointed gatekeepers of tradition ensured every cultural ritual on the estate was carried out with military precision.

The youngest residents of the estate, cricket-crazy like the rest, turned the streets into their personal cricket pitch, completely indifferent to traffic. Motorised vehicles that dared to venture through were met with casual, dismissive waves, as if the drivers were intruding on an international test match. A ball smacking off the hood of a passing car? Not a problem. It was just another boundary, a glorious six or four, and part of the game. In fact, passengers often rolled down their windows, joining the excitement with cheers and thumbs-ups.

Little Sri Lanka was perhaps the only place in Sydney, maybe even all of Australia, where religious chanting poured from loudspeakers like clockwork. The melodious call to prayer from the mosque rose and fell five times a day, gliding over tiled roofs and weaving through bougainvillea fences. On full moon nights, the *pirit sajjayana*, led by the estate's revered chief monk, thundered down the lanes. The sounds rang crisp and sure, not just rituals but reminders, soft, persistent rebukes aimed at a West that had traded sacred silence for wellness podcasts, and the soul's yearning for the algorithm's approval. They whispered gently, *You've forgotten something, haven't you?* But for the residents, these chants were as natural as breathing, so embedded in the rhythm of daily life that silence felt more alarming than noise, like someone had pulled the plug on the spirit of the neighbourhood.

In Little Sri Lanka, every intersection had its own bronze celebrity squad, celebrating the old-school heroes who still held a special place in the hearts of the locals. Puran Appu, the post-Kandyan hero, stood at the gate, riding his trusty steed and wielding a sword. Nearby, Anagarika Dharmapala, the Buddhist revivalist, stood in his humble attire, gazing down with kind bronze eyes.

TB Jayah and Ponnambalam Arunachelam, the political champions of Ceylon's Muslim and Tamil communities, stood frozen in time, making sure their stories weren't swept aside like yesterday's rice packet. In this estate, no junction was just a junction. Each crossroads came with its own historical heavyweight, a revered monk mid-blessing, a sharp-suited politician mid-speech, or a quiet dissenter with arms folded, defiant in his silence. They stood tall, expressions permanently caught somewhere between solemn and stern, their presence imported with care and planted with pride.

Little Sri Lanka drew water from the Hawkesbury, filling a vast reservoir that evoked the grand designs of ancient kings and their timeless visions. The giant tank wasn't just for show, it fed a sprawling rice paddy the size of a football field, turning it into a vibrant green haven with a mix of imported know-how and timeless tradition.

In a bid to transport everyone back to their homeland, the masterminds behind 'Project Little Sri Lanka' had designed a full-blown replica of a village market square. All the streets led to this bustling hub, where spice shops, eateries, and kiosks hawking traditional knickknacks made it feel like a cultural carnival.

Every morning and noon, crowds gathered at the Ruhunu Siri Kopi Kade, the village-style coffee house, situated smack bang in the middle of the market square. They had their daily dose of gossip and daam while sipping on ginger tea that could have doubled as a dessert. The market square that hosted this coffee joint was a free-for-all for local wildlife; dogs roamed with the confidence of streetwise gangsters, and cows wandered around casually munching on whatever they fancied.

Mornings on the estate were anything but quiet. The sounds of the homeland poured out of open windows in a glorious cacophony: tablas, violins, sarpinas, and sitars all vying for dominance, yet somehow forming a chaotic harmony that tugged at the heartstrings of nostalgia. Lakshmi Bhai's powerful voice belted out 'Pita Desa Deepa Jaya Gaththa', the old anthem of ancestral conquests. For Chandrasekara and the retired banker Munaweera, this was no mere tune. It was a daily call to arms. True patriots at heart, their routines were set to the stirring soundtrack of history and victory, as if every morning was a chance to relive their ancestors' glories.

In Little Sri Lanka, the religious leaders, estate elders, aunties, and uncles worked together to ensure that culture and tradition moved through the community with ease. It wasn't just about rituals on holidays; it was in the everyday. The air was filled with the mingling aroma of incense and the soft rustle of sacred trees, while the soothing hum of familiar customs wrapped the community in a timeless embrace, preserving their heritage in every corner.

But each morning, as the sun made its grand entrance, a migration spectacle unfolded. Little Sri Lankans, decked out in a kaleidoscope of colours that reflected their vibrant heritage, swarmed the bus stop outside the main gate. The bus, an unlikely chariot navigating the concrete jungle of Sydney, became the lifeline for dreams and aspirations reaching far beyond their familiarity of the estate.

Sydney, with its buzzing opportunities and educational allure, called out like an overly enthusiastic carnival barker, beckoning them to explore the world beyond. As the bus arrived, the Little Sri Lankans dispersed like seeds blown by the wind, settling into every nook and cranny, from classrooms to boardrooms, stitching their unique stories into Sydney's vibrant urban quilt.

But come evening, as the sun took its bow and darkness rolled in, the homeward buses whisked the estate dwellers back to their enclave. They streamed through the gates like ants scurrying home to their anthill, shedding the day's city hustle with each step, eager to plunge back into the cocoon of their little sanctuary. Here, in this whimsical world, the stress of city life melted away, and the only drama left of the day was who would take the last piece of fish from the pot of ambulthiyal at dinner.

Gossip Aunties

'Here, not that, aney. Did you hear about the latest hullabaloo between doctor Douglas and Gayatri last week?'

'Ai-o, again? What happened this time?'

'Okay, listen. You know Sabitha? The family in the blue single-storey down Wijerama. Sanath and Sabitha. The woman with the mole on her chin. Anyway, her son was sick, noh. Sabitha had called Gayatri to have a look. Gayatri had chanted some magic words and slapped him three times on the cheek. Something about a Naga Yaka possessing the boy.'

'Oh, my! Slapped? Child abuse, noh!'

'What child, aney. That boy is an adult. Twenty-two, I think. So, listen will you; Gayatri had prescribed some guli, kalka like things and brewed a potion. Then only Doctor Douglas had stormed in. Sabitha's husband had asked him to come.'

'Oh my God! So, what happened then?'

'The Doctor had gone absolute bonkers. Had started blaggarding all. You know how he is, gets pretty nasty when it comes to Gayatri's treatments, noh.'

‘True, true. It’s like watching a cricket match – this ongoing Doctor, Gayatri battle. Am I wrong?’

‘Exactly! We’re caught in the middle, having to pick sides, devil dancing or pills.’

‘Kottu roti or pancakes.’

‘Sari or denim jeans.’

‘East or West. Muwa, ha ha. Muwa, ha ha.’

‘East is East, and West is West, never will they meet!’

‘Shaa, look at this one will you. Her daughter’s doing the PhD, but the mother talks like she’s delivering lectures at the university. Muwa, ha ha, so funny, noh? *East will never meet West. My foot!*’

Part 1

Restless and Young

Chapter 1

‘Arrgh,’ Malaka’s throat gargled as he sat up in bed, feeling every muscle in his body ache. Kottu roti and beer was a bad combination. He realised this too late. Way too late. His head was like a flour mill; thump, thump, thump it went, the wooden mortar hitting the pestle. He hadn’t felt anything like that for a long time.

The sounds drifting from outside weren’t a great help to his situation. A true cacophony drifted in – Uncle Chandrasekara, just two doors away, torturing his violin. The instrument screeching in agony. Aunty Mary Martha shouting in a high-pitched reedy voice, ‘Hi-o, hi-o … O, mala karada-re, nobody’s cats … bloody menace.’ Uncle Munaweera’s Great Dane howling at the fading moon and the repeated *koho, koho* just outside his window. Malaka blinked the haze from his eyes and looked around. The windows were open. His mother had been in his room. ‘Fuck!’ he muttered head in hand.

The gong of the grandfather clock was the last toll. Malaka felt like it was out to get him, a different sound than usual; five, six, he counted its screams and then he remembered. ‘Ohh. Em. Gee!’ he shouted, and jumped from the bed. It was the morning he was meeting Dhara’s sister, the all-important sister, the one Dhara worshipped. He absolutely couldn’t fuck it up. He staggered forward in true day-after-a-drunken-haze fashion, caught the bed and steadied himself. He felt his blood rush through his veins, hot and reaching his brain. He had to recover. Recover fast. Dhara was counting on him. He was counting on himself.

Dhara-related details flooded his aching, throbbing head.

It had been a gloomy Monday morning when he fell for Dhara. The doors of the metro parted, and she walked in, wearing proper metro-unworthy stilettos and a proper metro unworthy tight skirt and a white blouse. There was some pretty jewellery and fragrant hair and a smile like that of a toothpaste advert involved, and that was it. Hook, line, and sinker, he was a goner.

Pre-Dhara era was a disturbing period for him. He was on a quest to find love – of course it had to be a ‘brown’ girl, he wouldn’t settle for any other. It’s just, he seemed not able to find one who didn’t break the mould his mother and grandmother were cut from, the conqueror of the kitchen, the damsel in distress, the obedient kind. Malaka loved his mother, but her type wasn’t what he wanted as a life partner. Dhara was! She was vibrant, someone who lived life on her own terms. A traveller, a do-gooder, a learner, a party-goer, a nurturer, an entrepreneur, a hunter, a gatherer, everything rolled into one. She’d spent time in Nepal

after an earthquake, helping. She had climbed base camp, she had a startup, she lived alone, was an influencer. There were so many layers to peel and it excited Malaka.

And she wasn't at all bad looking. On the contrary, she was the complete opposite to bad looking. If he used the little bit of poetic training he got from doing a creative writing elective at university, Malaka would liken Dhara's lips to young Na leaves, the shape of her eyes to lotus petals, her skin to polished moonstone. He could go on and on, but for now it was time to get the thumbs up from Dhara's sister, a step forward in making Dhara his.

With unsteady feet he reached his desk and dived to drink a whole glass of water long and deep. Then he wobbled towards the bathroom.

His amma was in full amma mode already, holding court in the kitchen like a tornado whipping up breakfast. Her hair, a glorious explosion of curls, was 'morning chic', strands shooting out in every direction, creating a wild halo.

Her housecoat was a canvas for turmeric stains, splotches of coconut milk, and dhal splatter. Her flip-flops made a clack-clack against the tiled floor. Amma wasn't just cooking; she was conducting a culinary symphony. 'La, la, la,' she hummed, belting out an old tune. Every stir of a curry was accompanied by a hip shake, every flip of a coconut roti was an opportunity for a bit of drama.

Malaka's appachchi was at the breakfast table, seated as the head. He was cheering, clapping and even jeering. His mobile was on full volume; a homeland news reader spitting out homeland news. Appachchi's booming voice ricocheted off the kitchen walls.

He cheered, 'Aanna, that's the way to do it. Promote local!'

He jeered, 'The country is full of murderers. Humpff!'

His fists met the table. Plates laid for breakfast rattled.

'Ah, Putha,' Appachchi's eyes caught Malaka. 'Look at this. They haven't even caught Lasantha's killers and now ...'

Malaka moved fast towards the bathroom, not wanting to be roped into his father's morning antics. Not today. No way.

When he returned from bathing, smelling of Dior Sauvage, Malaka found Amma standing at his bedroom door. A mug in hand. Rakatan, rakatan, the spoon provided a rhythm, hitting the porcelain. Amma's eyes lit up like lanterns. 'Ah, Putha, you are up!' she observed handing over the mug. 'I was coming to wake you.'

'I must leave a bit early Amma. Ermm.' Anxiety on overdrive, Malaka stuttered. Dhara was still a secret to his family, and he wasn't sure how to bring her up. He imagined his mother's reaction to Dhara's bold wardrobe, her fierce independence, and her busy social

life: rolling eyes, the clicking of her tongue. His mind also conjured his father's head shake and *tsk, tsk* at the thought. Dhara's family being outside-of-the-estate Sri Lankans, he feared his father, a die-hard fan of the estate's tight-knit community, wouldn't approve. So, for now, Dhara stayed a secret.

'Office needs me to come early,' he said. Guilt made him choke on his coffee.

'Ha ha, slow down Putha,' Amma said, rubbing his back.

'Thank you Amma,' he said treating her with an extra warm smile, hoping that would get him off the hook from the cardinal sin of lying to the mother.

'Oh, if you have to rush to work, I'll get breakfast ready soon.' Amma swished away. She was like a large bat in flight, her housecoat flapping like a pair of wings with a 'sutter, sutter'.

Malaka sipped the sweet coffee as he entered his bedroom. The throb in his head had reduced to a soft manageable pulse. His excitement surpassed the anxiety he felt about meeting the all-important, all-mighty elder sister.

Flinging the almirah open, he scanned for something 'Dhara's-sister-worthy' to wear. His eyes immediately went to a pair of beige chinos and a crisp white shirt. Smart and casual, the perfect attire to charm the stiletto-wielding duo of Dhara and her sister.

Just as he put the final touches to himself, brushing a good amount of gel through his hair, a gush of cold wind breezed in and circled around him. 'What the?' He looked at the open window. Outside, the summer sun was already scorching the earth, the heat shimmering off the concrete. The chill made no sense. Where the hell did that come from? Maybe the beer-kottu combo in his blood stream was playing tricks? He didn't want to give that thought any room. Instead, he gave himself a thumbs-up in the full-length mirror. He was ready to rumble.

That's when the trouble began. The right leg, the leg he wanted to move didn't move. He tried to move his left leg. That too didn't move. He tried again and again, one leg and then the other. But there were no movements from his legs at all. They felt like pillars made of a heavy metal, cemented to the floor. He commanded mentally, step, push, pull, slide; but there still was no movement.

'What the absolute fuck?' he muttered, squinting at himself in the mirror and noting nothing had moved, hair glued to his head, with no wayward strands; legs the same place as before. Malaka hissed and bent down. Both legs looked perfectly normal. Still long, still attached. He slapped his thigh – hard. The sound echoed in the room like a judge's gavel. 'Okay ... okay ... feeling is there,' he whispered, mildly reassured.

But the relief was short-lived.

He tried to walk. Nothing. His legs remained immobile. ‘What the hell is this? Booze paralysis?’ His mind spiralled. In a desperate bid, he then began to rock his body. Side to side like a ship caught in rough seas. Then forward. Then back. His upper body complied. Shoulders swaying like a baila dancer, but his lower half stubbornly refused to budge.

He stared at his image in the mirror, now jerking and wriggling like someone possessed.

‘C’mon, man,’ he pleaded.

Thoughts of Dhara’s elder sister crept into his mind; the one, according to Dhara, who could curdle milk with a single glance. Sweat bubbled on Malaka’s forehead and his back. He was panicking. ‘Oh man, oh man!’ he spoke to the reflection, ‘What the F do I do?’ Seeing the stress on his own face was enough for more stress. He lunged forwards like a monkey leaping from a branch, lost his balance and came crashing down. His face hit the floor first and a scream escaped his throat. Pain radiated from nose to brain instantly and he screamed again.

Sounds of chaos erupted outside, chair’s screeching, feet running and then the door flew open, two men shooting in. Kithsiri, Malaka’s elder brother, was first. He skidded on his knees and halted inches from Malaka, ‘What the devil? What happened?!’ he shouted.

Appachchi was next. ‘Budu ammo!’ he summoned Buddha and the mother in one breath. ‘Putha, Putha, Putha.’ His panic repeated, like a vinyl record gone astray.

Malaka grunted.

Kithsiri, on his haunches, poked Malaka with the suspicion of a police officer inspecting an unattended bag on a Colombo-bound bus.

Malaka couldn’t see much. He lifted his torso up. His body hovered inches above the ground, stiff as a felled coconut trunk.

‘Duuude,’ Kithsiri drawled. ‘Kick-ass plank!’

Malaka inhaled deep. The nose’s collision with the floor had disturbed mucus. A thick, glistening strand of snort dangled from his nostril, trembling. It splattered onto the floor with a soft, wet plop, spreading like a tiny jellyfish. An unintended sigh escaped Malaka. He was happy there was no blood.

‘My le ...,’ he opened his mouth to complain, but Deepti, his sister, who was on her way to becoming a doctor, zoomed in. In his plank Malaka could only see her Uggs. He turned his head and caught his mother barging in. ‘I was … Oh!’ Her hand went to her chest.

‘Don’t move him. Get Uncle Douglas. Amantha, get Uncle Douglas!’ Deepti shouted.

Letting go of the plank Malaka crumpled to the floor.

There was a beat of stunned silence first, then the sound of Amantha's feet thundering down the hallway. A lock rattled, a door flung open, then slammed shut. 'Uncle! Uncle!' Amantha's voice bounced off the wall outside, trailing a streak of pure panic in his wake.

Malaka heard his mother then. She was sobbing softly at first, which then turned to a wail. 'Wah, wah, wah,' she went as if Malaka was pushing up daisies. Adding to the funeral vibes was the lamentation on the radio in the kitchen, the homeland's golden voice singing a song about sorrow and impermanence of life. 'Mathakaye suwada thawamath …,' it went, the voice of the male singer aggravating Amma's 'wah, wah, wah.'

'Ai-o Mala, no need for tears.' Appachchi pacified Amma the way he knew how, tapping her shoulder. 'The boy isn't hurt.'

Malaka shifted, attempting to find comfort in discomfort.

'What did you do, Punchi Aiya?' Deepti asked. There was accusation in her voice. Malaka wasn't surprised, given that she was the one who had dealt with him when he returned after the kottu and beer party, squeezing lime on his head and keeping the parents away when he was violently sick in the toilet.

'I fell,' he said. 'I was, I mean …' He didn't know where to begin.

Footsteps outside the door and raised voices made the room go quiet. Everyone in the room shuffled to one side to let the newcomer in.

'Malaka Putha. What have we here now?' the newcomer inquired. A benevolent neighbour with a handy MBBS to his name, Douglas was the quintessential Sri Lankan man, retired but perpetually working. His home surgery was always open for business, with home visits being his specialty. In his mid-sixties, Douglas had lived a good life. He was the Amitabh Bachchan type of old. Gracefully aged, with an athletic figure, a charming smile, and a deep, resonant voice. Light-skinned for someone from the region, he rocked a squarish jaw and a Grecian nose. With a luscious head of salt-and-pepper hair, he was attractive, handsome enough to have had three wives, all beauties a decade or so younger than him.

Douglas was down on his haunches with the ease of a yoga guru. Not a bone rattled. 'Malaka?' he prompted.

Malaka, cheek on the cement floor, opened his mouth to speak but was cut off by his mother.

'You know, Doctor, usual morning. He was up a bit early. I made him Harischandra coffee. Malaka Putha likes it with powdered milk and a lot of sugar.' She barely paused for breath before continuing, her words tumbling out like coins spilling from a broken piggy

bank. ‘He was up a bit earlier than usual. I gave the coffee and went. Then this hullabaloo happened. But … he *was* throwing up last night. Food poisoning, noh, Duwa?’

‘Aha. Aha. Aha.’ Douglas acknowledged every bit of Amma’s vibrant tale.

Then he was addressing Malaka again. ‘So, Putha, late night I see! Tell me what’s wrong. Where’s hurting?’

‘It’s my foot,’ Malaka managed at last. ‘My feet … actually. My feet,’ he whined nasally, biting his lower lip to keep the tears pooling in his eyes from spilling over. ‘I can’t move my feet … my legs … feet,’ he declared, giving a demonstration, taking pains trying to make his legs work. His neck muscles tightened, his lungs grunted but, in his feet, in his legs, not a muscle moved.

Malaka shifted uncomfortably. He was like a baby bird fallen belly down. His hands fluttered, showing this and that, explaining. ‘I was there, taking these out. Then I got dressed just here, in front of the mirror. I put gel in, combed my hair and I couldn’t move. My legs wouldn’t move. I couldn’t … just couldn’t walk. My legs weigh, like, a ton.’

‘All the exercising, Doctor. You should see the equipment in the garage.’ Amma was quick.

‘Exercising is good for them, Mala.’ Appachchi was annoyed.

‘Hmm, so it’s from waist down, huh?’ Douglas was interested. ‘Can you turn? Roll on to your back?’

‘I don’t … I can try,’ Malaka said and tried to roll. His torso turned but not his legs. ‘Useless!’ he said, his eyes full of fear.

‘Is anywhere hurting?’ Douglas asked. ‘Head? Back? Anywhere?’

Malaka shook his head. ‘Just the nose.’

Douglas stood up while Malaka stayed where he was, neck turned awkwardly, looking up.

‘Let’s roll him,’ Douglas suggested. ‘Malaka is not in any pain. It’s fine to move him. He’ll be more comfortable that way … easier to examine.’

There were nods, and ‘hmms’ and then all at once there were hands everywhere. Sliding under, lifting, pushing and pulling. Soon Malaka was on his back. Despite his seeming paralysis, Malaka, supported by his well-toned biceps, quickly sat up. His eyes went straight to the small clock on his bedside table. A thread of air escaped his lips as a sigh. Brushing off moisture from his eyes, he declared with urgency, ‘I have to ... I really *need* to be the at office, like now!’

‘You and I both. You and I both, mate,’ Kithsiri said. He didn’t look pleased. ‘You brought this on yourself, man. Who the hell parties on a weeknight?’

‘What party?’ Appachchi’s head turned so violently Deepti gasped.

‘Party?’ Amma echoed.

Malaka felt a small ball of anger ignite inside of him. He stared at his elder brother.

‘What should we do now, Uncle?’ Deepti cut in.

Douglas stood there for a moment, his ample brows arching.

Amma locked in, scanning the good doctor’s face. Appachchi stood close to Douglas.

‘Waist down,’ Douglas contemplated, tapping his chin with a finger, ‘Hmmm, could very well be the pants. Are they tight?’

‘Nope. Not these,’ Malaka protested, and before he knew it words started tumbling past his lips. ‘These are new, perfect size. There’s plenty of room. They’re not like skintight jeans or whatever. They’re for work, so no, they’re not tight!’

‘I see, I see,’ Douglas agreed but didn’t leave it at that. ‘Nevertheless, why don’t we take them off, Putha.’

‘Ha.’ Amantha, the youngest of the brothers made a noise. He let out a small chuckle.

‘Whatever,’ Malaka said. He unbuttoned and unzipped and wiggled his bottom while at the same time pushing the trousers down. But what was an everyday task was proving impossible given his no-leg-movement situation.

Appachchi crouched on the floor and held the pants from the hems. He was like a fisherman pulling a canoe out of mud. ‘Lie down, Malaka,’ he commanded.

There was a tug of war between the father and the son’s pants. The father won when the pants gave way and slid off.

Appachchi stood up and waved the pants in the air like a triumphant general at war.

Amma clapped like a delighted third grader at a school play. ‘Oh, thank goodness!’

When his feet responded immediately – flexing, extending, abducting, adducting, Malaka jumped straight up. He wouldn’t have been able to put into words how he felt at that moment. It was too large, too liberating for words.

‘Yippee, yay!’ he managed, dancing in his underpants. His mind had already begun to celebrate. He still had ample time to change trousers and get to the meet-up with the sister on time.

Amma sighed and beamed at Douglas like he was the saviour sent from up above.

Deepti allowed herself a small cheer.

Kithsiri rolled his eyes, threw up his hands. ‘Great,’ he said, ‘This circus is too much for me.’

Amma’s voice followed him down the hallway. ‘Don’t forget to pack a fish roti for lunch!’

Appachchi and Douglas remained in the room, cheeks puffed, eyes glinting, their barely-contained laughter threatening to burst. It was Douglas who reached Malaka first.

‘Wear comfortable clothes, Putha,’ he said, patting Malaka’s shoulder. ‘Even if it’s the current trend, best not to buy anything that cuts off your circulation, you know.’

Heat surged from Malaka’s neck and settled squarely on his cheeks.

‘Listen to Doctor Uncle, Malaka,’ Appachchi chimed in, nodding with mock seriousness; then, with the grace of a man dodging further embarrassment on his son’s behalf, he swiftly changed lanes.

‘You know, the new jersey for our cricket team? Apparently, it’s made from *echo-friendly* material now ...’

His voice trailed off as he shuffled out with Douglas. Soon the back of the house became livelier and louder. Harry Styles sang about a ‘watermelon sugar high’ on the television. Loku Sadu chanted a joyous blessing on Appachchi’s mobile phone. The voice carried, sweeping away evil in every nook and cranny of the house.

Alone again in his room, Malaka became busy. He shifted through the trouser section and picked up a pair of wide-legged pants. Back at the floor-length mirror, he pulled the trousers up, buttoned and zipped. The belt went through the loops, buckle secured and he was ready to rumble, yet again. ‘Akki, here I come,’ he said with a cheeky grin and lifted his left leg to move. But the leg didn’t respond. It didn’t move at all.

‘Argh,’ he said shutting his eyes tight for a moment. ‘Effing hell!’

He tried moving forwards, then backwards, again and then again. But there was no movement whatsoever.

Instead of lunging forward as he did the first time around, he unbuckled the belt, unzipped the trousers and rolled them off his legs. He then moved swiftly to the almirah and pulled out the first trousers that caught his eyes. He secured them around his waist in record speed like a man on a mission, which he truly was. He took a step forward. Again, there was no stepping forward. Malaka yanked the trousers off and tried another pair.

Up, down, off, and on, the ritual continued until a small mountain of discarded pants piled up near the almirah. In the midst of pulling trousers on and pulling them off, Malaka’s

awareness of the tick, tock, tick, tock of the grandfather clock heightened, and a rush of anger ran through his veins like hot sauce.

Finally, frustration made him yelp, 'Amma!' he cried, ' Appachchiiii!'

'Tap, slap, tap, slap' went the footsteps outside and bang went the door hitting the wall. The breakfast brigade shot through, tripping over one another. Malaka was rooted in front of the mirror, a pair of light denim jeans on, face twisted, hands thrashing, mouth whining, legs unmoving.

'What did you do, Malaka?' Amma asked in a fit of annoyance, her eyes on the pile of pants on the floor.

'I can't move!' A whimper escaped Malaka's lips. Amma, Appachchi and Douglas stood in a line and watched, their eyes sharp, like eagles circling over paddy fields.

Malaka continued. 'Again! Tried all these pants. Nothing works. Not any. See! I can't walk. Again.'

Douglas moved forward. His jaw worked on the last bit of whatever breakfast offerings Amma had treated him to. He picked up each discarded trousers and inspected.

'Seems like you have tried every texture and every size of pants, Putha,' Douglas observed. 'Hmmm. What about something else other than pants?' He looked at Malaka's face. 'A sarong maybe?'

Appachchi grunted the brown way, 'Humpff,' but it was Amma who spoke. 'Malaka in a sarong! You must be joking,' she cackled, spewing out particles of breakfast. 'This boy refuses to wear it, Doctor. Says the sarong looks like a skirt, they are only for old people, blah, blah, blah. Some of the kids brought up here act like foreigners, noh. Humpff!'

'Now is a good time as any to try, Malaka.'

The doctor's approval was all Amma needed. Without wasting a moment, she bent down and pulled out the neatly folded sarongs from their hiding place at the bottom of the almirah.

Douglas stepped forward and chose a bright blue sarong. Malaka watched, still stuck to the ground. He couldn't tell if there was a smirk on Douglas's face when he handed over the sarong to him, but Malaka took it.

'Wear it over,' Douglas instructed.

'Over the jeans?' Malaka asked, his bushy eyebrows knotting, 'or remove?'

'Over.' Douglas moved aside.

Douglas moved aside. Malaka flicked open the sarong and lifted it high over his head. He let the cotton drape over him and then tugged at it. The sarong fell, the fabric cascading

down his back and shoulders before settling at his waist. He then secured it with a tuck and gave a slight shake of his hips to let the cloth settle naturally. As he did so he lost his balance and stepped forward. He grasped the edge of the bed and gasped. Mouth gaping, he looked around the room.

'Whaa?'

Amma reacted first, clapping. Appachchi's shoulders relaxed. Douglas was lost in thought, watching Malaka. Dhara danced through Malaka's head in a vision, smiling. Malaka smiled, his eyes darting to the clock as his legs began walking.

'Ha ha, Putha.' Douglas put a hand out. 'Not done yet.'

'Why? I can walk.'

'With the sarong, yes. But without?' Douglas asked.

Malaka looked up and choked on an answer. 'Ermm, wa ...'

His father came to the rescue. 'Good to be certain, Putha,' he said, tapping Malaka on the shoulder.

'Remove the sarong and try walking again, Putha.'

Malaka rolled his eyes, yet loosened the tuck at his waist, and let the sarong unravel. With a slight shift of his weight, he tried to step over the sarong but his leg hesitated. He tried with the other, but that too did not move.

Malaka grunted. 'This is so fucked up!'

'Putha!' Appachchi thundered.

'Sorry, Appachchi, Sorry, Amma, Sorry. Uncle Douglas,' he said. In his denim jeans, he stood, rooted like the scarecrow in his mother's backyard. 'This is really strange.' He waved his hands about.

'This is what I wanted to see. Now, Putha, pull up the sarong and remove the jeans.'

Like a robot, Malaka acted, pulling the sarong back to the waist, tying it. Unbuttoning the trousers and sliding them off. He was confused and defeated, aware of the echoing gong of the grandfather clock, announcing that he had just missed the Metro carrying Dhara to the city.

'Try walking now,' Douglas urged.

Malaka tried and failed.

'It's the garment!' Douglas announced.

'Traditional garment and the Western …' Douglas addressed Malaka's father now. 'Do you see Nihal? Looks like … I mean, it's puzzling to say the least.'

Appachchi narrowed his eyes. When he finally managed to put his thoughts into words, they flowed out of him unrestrained.

'Serves these hooligans right, if you ask me! This Westernised generation, Doctor, no appreciation for our culture. Don't you think? Now look, Malaka blatantly refused to wear the sarong. Won't kill you to show some respect, right? Don't get me started on Buddha garden statues. Chik, chik. Water bubbling from the top of his sacred head! Didn't you just hear this fellow curse in front of his mother, Doctor? What did I tell you!'

With a humpff, he folded his arms over his chest and stood legs wide apart.

Dhara's face flashed before Malaka's very eyes, nostrils flaring slightly. Shoulders slumped. The corners of her mouth curling downward. Eyes pooling with tears. Lost for words, a sight he never wanted to see. He shifted on his heels, looked up and blinked away the moisture in his eyes. 'Really, Appachchi?' he groaned, 'What on earth are you going on about? Buddha garden statues? This is a trouser problem, for crying out loud!' His voice cracked.

In his sarong-on-top, jeans-under garb, he paced. 'How on earth am I supposed to go to work like this?' He stopped in the middle of the room and repeated, gesturing with his hands. 'Think about that, Appachchi. How. Can. I. Go. To. Work. Like. This?'

'Huh? What's wrong with that? Why can't you go to work in a sarong? Tell me … tell me what is wrong with that? Isn't the sarong our national costume? Didn't I wear it to work in Kurunegala? Humpph.'

'Kurunegala! Really?' Malaka snapped, his voice going an octave high. 'Kurunegala? This is no Kununegala, Appachchi. People already think we're weird, extremists, living in a compound dedicated to the browns, and I rock up outside of the estate wearing this? Not happening, Appachchi! Not happening!'

Douglas shook his head and when he spoke his voice was soothing. 'You better take the day off, Malaka Putha.'

Chapter 2

Lunch had barely begun, but Thaththa was already mid-saga, carving the morning's passport-office drama into a three-act epic between spoonful's of curry.

'So, there I was,' he declared, pausing just long enough to scoop a mountain of rice onto his plate, 'in that god-forsaken building, sweating like a porter in Pettah, trying to convince them to fit *all five* of Yashodara's names onto a single page!' He waved his hand, nearly knocking over the pol sambal dish.

Across the table, Yashodara sat quietly, chewing and half-smiling, letting the familiar performance wash over her. In the passport queue, her father had been grumbling and rubbing his temples. Now, at home with a plate of rice and his audience of two, he was part political satirist, part street theatre star. The gem merchant from Ratnapura had vanished, replaced by a man who spun stories.

'And then came David Copper!' Thaththa boomed, pointing a curry-pasted finger like a sceptre. 'A tall fellow. Trousers too tight. Tie too loose. Said he would "personally assist." *Personally!* It wasn't a client-official kind of interest. I don't think so.' He looked at Yashodara.

'Ho ho ho,' Yashodara's amma interrupted.

'I'm just saying, he lingered a bit longer than necessary,' Thaththa muttered, poking at a carrot. 'Asked about *her* plans, studies, future …'

Amma's 'ho hos' rang out again. Leaning forward with raised hands, she looked like she was trying to flag down a CTB bus in the middle of Colombo Fort. 'Those outsiders need not worry. Our Yashodara will be married soon,' she declared, voice calm but loaded.

'Huh?' Yashodara blinked. The handful of rice and curry she'd just mixed slipped unceremoniously back onto her plate. 'What? Who?'

But Amma didn't answer. Not immediately. No, first came the duties, duties of a long-married woman. She dug into the fried potato dish and scooped a good spoonful of potatoes and onions. Reverently serving it on to her husband's plate, she then moved on to the dhal curry, then to the fiery red chicken pot, still sizzling. Once she served bits of everything onto Thaththa's plate, Amma leaned back and sighed, a happy exhale of breath. She then helped herself to two crispy mackerels, letting them fall onto her plate with a clatter.

'So?' Thaththa cleared his throat. 'A marriage proposal for Yashodara? Who? From where?' he prompted.

‘Yes!’ Amma beamed. She rested both elbows on the table, eyes bright like fireflies at dusk, ‘A Ratnayake boy from the estate!’

Thaththa swallowed a mouthful of rice. ‘This is exactly what I say, Surangani.’ His brows shot up, and he nodded. ‘I knew it won’t be hard to find a suitable boy for our Yashodara. Outsiders need not pay that kind of attention to our girl. Certainly not white men! I’d have given that Copper fellow a piece of my mind, I tell you. Eyeing our Yashodara like she’s on display at a toy store! Humpff.’ He stabbed at the rice on his plate like a potter handling clay.

Yashodara felt a warm flush creep up her cheeks. She lowered her eyes, trying in vain to push away the thoughts crowding her mind, thoughts that, inconveniently, revolved around the somewhat close encounters she had with *white* men. There was Timothy from the library, a soft-spoken man with wire-rimmed glasses. He’d once leaned over the returns desk, their fingertips brushing ever so lightly over a copy of *Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. It had felt almost … intimate. Almost. Then there was Jonathan Lumley from TAFE admin, crisp shirt, knowing smile. He had *definitely* lingered longer than necessary when she picked up some documents, lowering his voice to a conspiratorial murmur as he explained what she needed to do. She had smiled back, maybe even giggled.

And then the latest, David Cooper, from the passport office. Just some casual exchanges of glances and smiles. Nothing too serious. Except, of course, when he bypassed Thaththa and addressed her directly, sending her heart into some sort of chaotic backflip.

Each encounter had felt harmless in the moment. No vows broken. No cardinal sin committed. Just ... fleeting pleasures.

But now, seated at the dining table with her father stabbing his rice like a man wronged by the entire Western hemisphere, Yashodara felt her insides curl. She coughed, clearing her throat. She drummed her finger on the plate and shuffled her feet under the table. Sweat bubbled up all over her face. She wondered, was she to be blamed for David Cooper paying attention to her? She had, after all, taken extra care to get ready that morning; no ulterior motives, but just because she felt like it. Her *Princess Highway* bodycon dress, a cheerful explosion of retro flower motifs, had been nothing short of perfection. She remembered the first time she wore the dress. An Aunty at the coffee house had made a connection between her hips and the dress. If she remembered right, it went something like, ‘Nice big hips in that dress. Big hips make childbearing easy.’ The exact words eluded her.

But one thing she was certain of: the Aunty’s observations definitely had a connection between childbearing and her hips. But when Yashodara decided to wear the dress that

morning, bearing children was the last thing on her mind. The same for the way she painted her face, with newly bought Fenty products. She did it just because she had time to spare. There was no ulterior motive or expectations whatsoever. In the grand scheme of things, catching David Cooper's attention was like brushing past a stranger who smiled a second too long. Unexpected and mildly thrilling.

Yashodara wondered if her father was disappointed in her. She didn't want any misunderstanding. She didn't want Thaththa to think the dress, the makeup, all that was intentional, to attract a man. A white one at that! She took her eyes off the plate and looked up. Her father was nodding, a smile on his lip as her mother was talking. 'What Copper, Thaththa? Our Yasho is not that stupid! So, listen to this will you … I went to that book club in the morning, noh.'

'Book club?' Thaththa asked. 'You don't read books, Surangani,' he chuckled. Extending his arm he pointed. 'Polos, polos.' Amma picked up the dish that held the tender jackfruit curry and passed it to him.

'Hari, Hari,' Amma said. 'True. I don't read. But this is not a reading book club. They do cookery books and cook, sewing books and sew. You know, it's a different book club, to meet new people. Mala, the boy's mother, was new. Sheila suggested Mala's son is a good match for our Yashodara. Mala seemed keen you know. Said we should let the kids meet. The boy is a construction engineer. Working in Toe-ran-gah zoo.'

Thaththa reacted. 'Surangani!' he said, eyes locking on Amma. He spoke with his mouth full, a smile dancing at the edge of his lip. 'Taronga, Surangani. It's *Ta. Ron. Ga!*' he corrected.

'Ta. Ron. Ga,' Amma made a face, and laughed. 'Anyways, the boy passed out from Sydney University. Very hard university to get in to, noh. Best in Sydney! All four kids are bright sparks you know. The younger sister is studying to be a lady-doctor. Govigama and Buddhists, Thaththa. A very good match for Yashodara. Kithsiri, Malaka's elder brother.' Amma looked at Yashodara.

Yashodara pulled a dish closer and inhaled its spicy aroma. Malaka, Malaka, she repeated in her head, letting the chant unlock a memory. She had indeed met the said Malaka, right there in the very room, at the very table they were having lunch at, not long ago, at a Sydney Sri Lankan Lions Club meeting her father had hosted. Malaka had been running for president. He gave a stellar speech. Yashodara and her mother had listened standing at the door. 'What a fine young man!' Amma had admired. 'If only he was two years older, would have been a great match for you!'

Yashodara remembered the incident. She focused on Malaka. He was, if she remembered right, quite eye pleasing. With a prominent jawline, smooth skin and dark curls. He was tall and lean. Yashodara took a sip of water and swirled it in her mouth, wondering if the elder brother would present the same.

The thought lingered, setting her imagination in motion, until an intense itch on her cheek snapped her back to reality. Yashodara tilted her head and glanced at the mirror behind her father. The reflection staring back at her was blurry. A flicker of unease crossed her mind. Did she need a visit to the optometrist?

It wasn't the first time this had happened. She remembered the same strange sensation in David Cooper's office, that prickling itch, like ants crawling beneath her skin. She had turned to the polished window, expecting to see herself clearly, but what met her gaze was an indistinct, ghostly figure shaped like her. At the time, she hadn't given it much thought. Too much was happening in that cramped cubicle: Thaththa arguing, David Cooper explaining, and tap tapping of keyboards all around them. The eerie reflection had been just another passing oddity, swallowed by the moment.

'Yashodara! Don't.'

Yashodara didn't realise she was scratching her face till her mother shouted.

'Wash the city dirt off after lunch, Duwa. Rub lime. I'll grind some sandalwood for you. Lime and sandalwood are the best cleansers.' She didn't need to pause for breath, the transition back to the topic of marriage was seamless. 'Mala is a nice sort. the mother of the boy. Homely type. You know, perfect mother-in-law material. She was very keen to meet Yashodara. I mean, I am sure they are also looking for a suitable partner for the son. Eldest son, noh. And, get this, Mala suggested ...' Amma was gearing up for the grand revelation when the doorbell interrupted, ding-dong, ding-dong.

Yashodara sighed, deflated. The story paused. She glanced at her parents. Thaththa absentmindedly mixed his rice. Amma sipped her water slowly. With a nod from Amma, Yashodara stood, licking curry off her fingers.

At the door stood Aunty Sheila, smiling widely, wearing a sea-green singlet and tan pedal pushers, cradling a clay pot wrapped in a vibrant tea towel.

'Oh!' Sheila exclaimed. 'Having lunch already?'

Yashodara hid her curry-crusted hand.

'Duwe, who is it?' Amma called.

'Come in, Aunty.' Yashodara led Sheila inside.

'Sheila!' Amma beamed. 'Come in, come in!'

‘I brought this for lunch!’ Sheila placed the clay pot on the table, lifting the lid. Fragrant steam filled the air, the tang of brindle berry and black pepper wrapping the room.

‘Oh, my my, Sheila. Your Ambulthiyal,’ Amma said, hands over her chest.

‘Ambulthiyal!’ Thaththa echoed, his mouth watering.

Yashodara swallowed, saliva pooling. Thaththa eagerly dug in, scooping blackened tuna onto his plate, then passed the spoon to Amma.

‘Join us, Sheila,’ Amma invited.

Sheila smiled, sitting down and dipping her fingers in the finger bowl. Amma left and immediately returned with a plate, and the adults served themselves, chatting casually. As the conversation flowed around her, Yashodara sat down and mixed her leftover rice.

‘Wickrama Madagamage Yashodara Kumari Wickramasinghe,’ Thaththa began. He didn’t dive into the marriage proposal. No, that was too dangerous. With an outsider at the table, he probably feared attracting the evil eye. Instead, he launched into the passport office saga as entertainment. ‘How can you squeeze all that into the passport form, Sheila? These whiteys only have one name! They don’t understand the weight our names carry!’

Sheila and Amma exchanged a knowing glance.

‘The word “surname”, “vasagama”, it’s our history, our roots, noh!’ Thaththa continued and paused just to take a sip of water. ‘Some of these fellows in government offices …’

Yashodara shifted uncomfortably, the familiar itch returning. Noticing her unease, Amma quickly urged, ‘Ai-o Duwa. Go wash that dirt off your face. Pimples might come!’

‘Yes, dirty city,’ Sheila agreed, breaking a piece of ambulthiyal. ‘Dust and sweat, recipe for pimples.’

As Yashodara washed her hands and stood up, Thaththa continued, oblivious to the conversation shifting. ‘At the passport office, a Sri Lankan woman suggested we drop a “ge” surname to fit in the form! These “wannabe suddho”, shedding heritage!’

‘Go, Duwa, go,’ Amma urged again, nudging Yashodara out.

In the bathroom, Yashodara hummed softly, feeling weightless. She made a mental list for the evening. Wash off the makeup, immerse in a bath, read, and think of Malaka’s brother. She wondered about him again. Was he tall? Was he dark? Did he have a smile that would make her stomach flutter? Letting the water run, she wheeled towards the window.

Though she had never taken much notice of the house before, she knew Malaka’s place. She passed it on her way to the market square, always catching a glimpse of the yellowish hue that painted the exterior. It was a house like theirs, the same size but with a

garden adorned with fresh blooms. She could only see the top of the house from her bathroom, its tiled roof and the tops of the frangipani trees. A riot of white and pink petals swayed gently in the afternoon breeze. Yashodara stretched her neck, yearning for a glimpse of more.

She remained perched at the window for as long as the pesky itch would allow, before finally giving in. The bath was now ready. She dipped her hand in, feeling the water's warmth against her skin, and switched off the tap. As she turned toward the wall-mounted mirror, a sudden rush of icy-cold wind swirled in through the open window. She shivered. The chill crept up her spine. She wrapped her arms around herself. Standing in the middle of the bathroom she wondered if she should close the window. The sun was blazing hot outside. She shook her head and turned to the mirror instead.

'What the devil?' she gasped and leant in, pushing her face towards the mirror, turning this way and that. Then she blinked, wiped both eyes with the back of her hand and looked closely again. The face staring back at her shifted and twisted, a foggy haze spreading across the glass, like something out of a low-budget horror movie. She jerked back a step. Her eyes darted around the room, taking in every detail with sharp clarity. The tap, the bath, the tiles beneath her feet. Her hands, her dress, the curve of her hips. Everything was there, solid, real.

Her gaze landed on the sink. 'Caroma,' she read the small-lettered stamp aloud. But when she looked back at the mirror, her mouth went dry as sandpaper. Where her reflection should be, there was still only a blurred shape. Her head spun. A lump rose in her throat. She stepped forward, pressing a trembling palm against the mirror, wiping once, twice, three times. Nothing changed. The blur remained. The mirror refused to return her image.

She felt the chill in the air again and shivered.

The fluorescent light above her head hissed, pulling her attention briefly away from her distorted image. She looked up, the light danced and settled. With a sigh she turned her attention back to the mirror. But there was nothing. Even the blurry shape had disappeared, leaving absolutely nothing, like she wasn't even there.

Thud, thud, thud, her heartbeat went loud and fast in her chest. She felt a chill enter her veins like frozen coke was injected. It flashed from her toes to her head and back again. Grasping the edge of the granite, she tried to yell 'Ammaaa!' But her voice faltered. It didn't achieve its full potential. There was no volume at all. 'Ammaaa, Thaththaa,' she whispered and stumbled out of the bathroom.

In a dizzy haze, like a child spun in circles, Yashodara made her way down the corridor towards the dining room

Amma's eyes locked in first. 'Wah?' Her voice cracked. She shot up from her seat, curry-crusted fingers reaching out. 'Duwa? Yashodara? Wah? Why?' She was at her daughter's side in a flash. Thaththa stumbled off his chair, almost crashing to the floor in his haste. 'Du … Duwa!' he stuttered.

'Ai-o!' Sheila's unsoiled hand flew to her head. But she didn't rise from her seat. Instead, she dipped her curry smeared hand into the finger bowl and washed quickly.

'Ammaaaa!' Yashodara's voice cracked. The ground shifted beneath her. She felt four hands gripping her by the arms and holding her upright. A storm churned inside her stomach, twisting and tightening. She barely had time to gasp before her insides heaved violently, forcing out the meal she had just eaten. It erupted with the grace of a malfunctioning garden hose, splattering in sickly waves across the dining room rug.

'Ane apoi!' Sheila gasped, jumping from her seat.

Thaththa was frozen, his mouth opening and closing like a fish stranded on land.

'Oh, baba, ohhh, oh!' Amma cried out, rubbing Yashodara's back in frantic circles. 'Ai-o Duwa. Ai, ai-o, What did you eat in the city? Huh?'

Chapter 3

Gossip Aunties

‘Oh, my word, how many times did I call you yesterday. How come you didn’t pick up?’
‘Grocery day, noh. So sorry, aney. I was meaning to call but you know how it is. Didn’t get a break at all yesterday. Why the hurry? What happened?’

‘I went to Surangani’s after book club, noh. Don’t tell anyone, okay? I don’t want her to think badly of me. I made ambulthiyal with fresh tuna, went to Parklea Markets on Friday. Worth it, I tell you. Surangani loves my ambulthiyal, so I took some for her. Shaa, her house is always spotless. No cleaner, too!’

‘Apo, cleaners these days, untrustworthy fellows! Had two before, things started going missing; half a loaf of bread, potatoes, lamb. I sacked them right away. Can’t let thieves in, noh.’

‘You should get Koreans, ane. They’re the best. Lin and Jun have been cleaning my house for five years. Not even a needle lost. Of course, I tidy up a bit before they come … carpets out, kitchen cleaned. But Korean cleaners? Top-notch.’

‘You clean before the cleaners come? Muwa, ha ha.’

‘So, what happened with Surangani and your ambulthiyal?’

‘Tell quick, I can’t stay long. I need to make potato curry.’

‘Yes, yes, hurry up! Mahinda’s working from home, noh. Ai-o, it’s a nuisance. Husbands should go to the office. Otherwise double the work for us!’

‘Okay, okay. Listen, listen. I took the ambulthiyal to Surangani’s, made it in a clay pot this time. Nimal’s has good pots, imported from Wattala.’

‘Ai-o, there you go again! Tell us what happened to the fish curry, not about pots!’

‘Okay, okay. So, when I went, they were having lunch. Father, mother, and daughter. Yashodara. Pretty girl, noh? Spotless skin, good childbearing hips. If I had a son! Anyway, they’d just returned from the passport office. Some drama there … with the ‘Ge’ name, all the usual. Surangani’s husband, that talkative chap, was going on about it. Remember him? Anyway, Yashodara opened the door for me. She looked like a young Aishwarya Rai from *Devdas*. Charming girl. Anyway, while I was there, she finished eating and went to the bathroom. Next thing, she came back and threw up all over the carpet.’

‘Oh no! Food poisoning? Your ambulthiyal?’

‘Are you mad? No poisoning with my ambulthiyal! I always make it fresh. Humpff!’

‘Okay, okay. Sorry, sorry. Tell, will you. The girl vomited. Why? Pregnant da?

‘No, ane. Some other nonsense. She couldn’t see herself in the mirror.’

‘What? Went blind? Just like that? Hai-o, paw. Sad, no? So young! Must call Surangani. She must be devastated!’

‘Oh no. Poor thing. Very young, noh? In her twenties, I think. Only child also, noh. Ai-o, and all that gem money. What for, right? Only child gone blind! Hai-o, ha-poi!’

‘No, no, not gone blind! What are you all saying! Pissuda? Are you all mad? Yashodara didn’t go blind. She couldn’t see herself in the mirror. No reflection. Hiss. Empty! Strange. Creepy as! Can’t explain why though. I got goosebumps. A scene like from a horror movie.’

‘Mirrors can do that, you know. My grandmother used to cover all the mirrors in the house at night. Grandmother said devils jump out of mirrors in the dark. She has seen with her own eyes. I cover mirrors in my house, every night. Change of country doesn’t mean change of practice. Devil over there is the same devil over here too. Serious stuff I tell you.’

‘Ow, ow. Yes, yes. I also have heard that. Evil spirits jumping out of mirrors! I don’t cover mirrors though. A good prayer before bed keeps us safe.’

‘You know what I think? Surangani’s husband would have made such a racket at the passport office, someone there must have put a hex on the girl.’

‘What happened to the girl after?’

‘Oh, I don’t know ane. Surangani’s husband called Doctor Douglas. I didn’t wait. I ran away as fast as I could. Didn’t even wait to get my clay pot, you know? I mean, with Ratna’s wedding so close, I didn’t want to conjure any ill luck. What if this mirror thing is infectious? You never know with these things.’

But you know what, if it was me, I would have called Gayatri. She would know what to do. I mean, what can Doctor Douglas do? How is he going to find a lost reflection. Really, huh?’

Chapter 4

Vaishnavi was upset. But she didn't know which upset her more; the fact that she was missing Deepti's pyjama party, or that she had to be present for Ammachchi's arrival. Both felt like they were weighing her down like a ton of bricks. Deepti wasn't the party-throwing type, yet she was throwing a party. 'With my GAMSAT score I can choose where I want to go.' She wasn't boasting, just stating facts. 'Who knows, I might be interstate for my next birthday. Let's have a party. A sleepover like good old days!'

Excitement took hold immediately. The young women dived straight into planning mode. But Vaishnavi had a roadblock – a hefty one, tall, skin as dark as the night sky, large feet and a mole on the cheek: *Ammachchi.* It was Vaishnavi's maternal grandmother's time for a visit, the first for that year. Once upon a time, Vaishnavi looked forward to her ammachchi's visits. They were filled with a whole lot of presents and bags full of sweets. But when puberty changed Vaishnavi's face and body, she decided her grandmother had a vile mouth. Ammachchi dished out criticism like free food – ai-yah this, ai-yah that. 'Ai-yah, you have put on weight, noh? Eating fast food? Bloated-up cheeks nah. Ai-yah, look, your face so much acne, noh. Ai-yah, what is this child, chubby arms!' The body shaming poured out. Praises from her were few and far between. So it was no wonder Vaishnavi was anxious.

'Oh no, no, no. Are you crazy, Vaishnavi?' That was Vaishnavi's amma. Vaishnavi knew the instant her mother called her by her full name, no mahan, chinny, or even Vaishi, she was fighting a losing battle. But battle on she did. Her grievance was not purely about missing Deepti's sleepover party; it was about missing it *because of* Ammachchi. She didn't hate her grandmother, not quite, but she didn't mind the thought of avoiding the old woman's shenanigans, especially during the first few hours of her visit when her senses were the sharpest. Vaishnavi knew Ammachchi's usual style, arriving like a tornado, sweeping in with a burst of changes, dishing out criticism, and unsolicited advice. To top it all, the old woman's disapproval wasn't just direct; it *lingered* like the smell of durian, clinging and suffocating. Who wouldn't want to avoid that?

'Do I really have to go?' Vaishnavi dragged her feet across the living room like a prisoner on death row. Radhika, her mother, was bustling around in high spirits. She inserted old cushions into new covers, pale blue and grey, and placed new ornaments strategically in various corners of the house, shades of white and grey.

Radhika's mother's visit was a celebration for Radhika, though Vaishnavi failed to understand *why*. After all, the old woman dished out to her daughter from the same plate as for her granddaughter, the same hurtful stuff: 'Ai-yah, Radhika! Why face gone so dark? Ai-yah, look at you, chubby cheeks.' Ai-yah this, ai-yah that. That criticism went beyond body shaming, spreading to Vaishnavi's mother's interior designing and fashion sense. 'Ai-yah, why this cheap furniture, Radhika? Ai-yah, look at your clothes, widows wear more colours.' Ai-yah this, ai-yah that.

'Seriously, Amma? A welcome balloon?' Vaishnavi couldn't resist saying.

'Why not? Doesn't your grandmother deserve a warm welcome from her family?' Amma snapped.

'Can't I just not go to the airport, Amma? Please? I have a ton of uni work to do.'

'Don't be ridihi-cu-los, child!' Amma's newly threaded eyebrows shot up. 'Those university lecturers, they will understand! They have families too, noh?'

Proving brown kids rarely won an argument with their brown mothers, Vaishnavi sat in the back seat of her father's Yaris that evening, speeding down the M5, squashed between the door and her brother's ample rear end. Vaishnavi was deflated, quite in contrast to the 'welcome' balloon bopping on her lap. The constant ping of her phone aggravated matters.

Ping. 'Hey gurrl, missing you bae!' was Nazreen, tagging Vaishnavi on a post of her and Deepti braiding each other's hair.

Ping. This time it was Deepti, posting a shot of them in front of the TV screen. Vaishnavi grunted and punched the bopping balloon.

'Vaishnavi!' Amma wasn't impressed.

When Ammachchi shuffled out of arrivals it was a right royal circus. She was a one-woman carnival float, festooned in batik and bedecked in gold, with bags and baggage spilling from everywhere, trolley, shoulders and hands. Heads turned and eyes popped. Even a passing flight attended blinked twice.

Ammachchi's complaints began immediately. First it was the weather.

'Ai-yah, so very hot, noh. Why you asked me to wear all this? I am boiling!' She pointed to her socked and sandaled feet. Then her eyes caught the sight of her granddaughter, balloon in hand, sporting a new look, ten kilos off her weight.

'Ai-yah, like a scarecrow, noh. Don't tell me … Ozempic?' She scanned Vaishnavi top to toe. Even the favoured grandson, Vaishnavi's younger brother, wasn't spared.

'Ai-yah, my prince, why gone dark?'

The ai-yahs went on and on. As the Yaris stuffed to the brim sped down the motorway, Ammachchi hurled Tamil words all over the car. Plumpety plump plump, they went bouncing off windows, seats, roof and ears. Vaishnavi understood snippets. There were more ai-yahs.

'Ai-yah, Raju, this car is too small for this family.' Directed at Vaishnavi's appa.

'100 kilometres per hour? Ai-yah, too high speed!' That was for Transport NSW.

'Ai-yah, how ugly, these mattresses and broken furniture on the pavement!' Hills Shire council, take that!

Vaishnavi sighed. The balloon bopped on her lap. Her phone pinged, punching her in the gut. She glanced out the window at the passing streetlights, hoping the plumpety plumpety conversation would come to an end, but that wasn't to be.

'Plumpety plump plump,' Ammachchi went. 'Plumpety plump plump plump.'

'English!' came out as a command. Vaishnavi wasn't sure who said that – not till all heads turned to her and Amma thundered, 'Vaishnavi! Respect!'

Her phone pinged again, and her eyes went to the screen. 'We miss you, bae!' It was the whole gang, Deepti, Simone, Nazreen, all holding up pizza slices.

'Ai-yah, Vaishnavi, still not speaking your mother tongue? Tamil is the oldest living language in the world, you know. Shame on you, shame on you!'

Shoving the buds in her ear, Vaishnavi cranked up Dua Lipa. The annoyance carried on; down Old Windsor Road, past the Lion Gate and into the streets of Little Sri Lanka. Passing the Murugan kovil, and into their bungalow. Inside their home, Ammachchi spat out a whole new set of ai-yahs. 'Ai-yah, no personality in your home, Radhika!' Unzipping her many bags, Ammachchi pulled out cushion covers, table runners, bedsheets and whatnot. They were laid, spread and inserted, the house exploded in colour, screaming louder than an overexcited Holi festival.

Amma didn't protest. Then came the next ai-yah. This time directed at the whole family – Appa, Amma, Vaishnavi and the brother.

'Ai-yah, do heathens live here!' That particular 'ai-yah' was followed by a divine invasion. A small statue of Vishnu with his many arms appeared on the mantelpiece, flanked by a sari-clad clay Saraswathi and a plump brass Ganesh. In the kitchen, a wooden Nataraja danced casually next to the toaster, while a brass Lord Murugan sat proudly atop a peacock, lording over the veranda like it was his personal temple.

The morning after Ammachchi's arrival, Vaishnavi's annoyance soared to new heights. She woke up very early, startled by an instrument screaming. It was worse than the usual morning cacophony of uncle Chandrasekara's violin outside. 'Yahuweee yahuwee' it

went, screeching through to Vaishnavi's ear cavities and to all her brain cells. It was an unbearable sound, like a whole lot of mice being tortured. 'Ai-yahhh!' Vaishnavi shouted. *Ai-yah? What the hell?*

An unholy chant followed, 'Plump plump plumpety', blending in with the screeching 'yahuwee yahuwee, plumpety, plump, plump. Yahuwee.'

'Ammaaaa!' Vaishnavi yelled over the almighty racket.

Amma bopped in like a summer sunflower, blindingly yellow and happy. Vaishnavi squinted. What the hell? Was she hallucinating? Was this her mother? What happened to her usual muted tones?

'Ai-yah, Amma. What is that noise?' *Ai-yah again? What the hell?*

'Morning puja mahan, puja,' Amma chirped.

Vaishnavi's eyes darted to the window. The morning outside was still new, violet softening to streaks of saffron and rosy hues.

'What the … it's still night, Amma!'

'Shush, child. Respect!' Amma wasn't pleased, yet she fashioned her face with a smile. 'Come, my darling, join us for morning puja!' she sang.

Vishnavi's eyes bulged out. Her pointy dug in her ear. *My darling?*

'Come. Join us. We should make our space spiritual again!'

'Urrghh,' Vaishnavi groaned, smothering herself with a pillow.

Amma stood at the door a moment longer, humming. When the sound faded Vaishnavi lifted the pillow off of her face. She watched the ceiling, knowing sleep wasn't an option before dragging herself out of bed and toward the racket.

The family room was a religious circus. A trestle table was erected – covering it was a yellow cloth as blindingly bright as Amma's clothes. There were more gods, miniature, clay, wooden and brass, in all the colours of the rainbow. There were plastic flowers and clay lamps and then there was a plate full of sweets.

Vaishnavi's family sat on coir mats in front of that orderly mess, chanting. On Ammachchi's lap was the instrument, Appa's pulluvan veena, taken out of storage and dusted. It continued to screech with the movement of the old fingers. Ammachchi had her eyes closed.

'Come.' Amma disrupted the flow of the room. Ammachchi opened her eyes. The screeching stopped. Tapping her hand on the empty space at her side, Ammachchi gestured Vaishnavi to sit. Vaishnavi protested in her head, but her legs were in complete obedience to the old woman's command. Vaishnavi felt a chill. An unusually cold morning breeze swirled

in as she sat lotus near her grandmother, thighs touching close. Vaishnavi looked outside and wrapped her arms around herself and shivered. Ammachchi flipped an A4 sheet onto Vaishnavi's lap and commanded, 'Sing!'

No way! Vaishnavi thought. But her eyes darted to the sheet in total obedience to the old woman's command. They skimmed the doodles on the sheet. Tamil script, transliterated in English. Vaishnavi knew she wouldn't be able to read the words, not efficiently enough to join a chanting chorus. Or so she thought. Before she could protest, her mouth began to move, 'Vakratunda Maha-Kaaya …', and there in front of her eyes the neatly written letters began to waltz and shimmer. *What the …* Vaishnavi rubbed her eyes. She read and sang the chants effortlessly. 'Nirvighnam Kuru Me Deva Sarva-Kaaryeshu Sarvadaa …' Her hands began to clap, her neck began to move, all without effort. When it was all over, Amma's eyes turned to Vaishnavi, like headlights on high beam. Appa's clapping intensified, applauding the gods and his daughter. The younger brother chucked a small milk sweet onto Vaishnavi's lap. Ammachchi nodded and grinned, showing off a set of uneven betel-stained teeth.

Vaishnavi sat frozen, the final syllable still hanging in the air. She blinked. *Wait, what just happened? How did I? Tamil? Whaa?* Her hands stayed mid-air, caught between clap and confusion. Her mouth opened slightly, as if to say something. Then closed again.

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Later that afternoon, Vaishnavi said goodbye to Ammachchi, who strangely didn't bombard her with any more ai-yahs, and then headed to campus. The moment she arrived, a wave of relief washed over her like breaking free from invisible shackles. The relentless noise, the riot of colours, and the new sharp, spicy aromas that clung to her home had begun to wear on her nerves. Here, away from it all, she could finally breathe.

She quickened her steps down Wally's Walk, eager to escape into the calm of the central courtyard. Simone was already there, comfortably settled in their usual shaded nook.

'Finally, I am free!' Vaishnavi exclaimed, twirling around. She fluttered her hands.

Simone laughed, clapping. 'What's the celebration?' she asked.

A couple of twirls later, Vaishnavi sighed and plopped herself on the bench. 'Not even twenty-four freaking hours, and the house is a total shit show already. She brought a ship-load of spices. Smell my hair. *This* even after a shower!' Vaishnavi made a face and tilted her head.

Simone sniffed. ‘Hmm. And you came in the Metro smelling like curry!’ she chuckled. Vaishnavi and Simone grew up together. Their friendship started at preschool and continued to university. Simone was allowed to joke about curry smells.

‘Right!’ Vaishnavi answered.

Simone continued peeling a mandarin. The sweet citrus scent filled Vaishnavi’s lungs.

‘One month of this!’ – she mimicked an explosion with both her hands, puffing out her cheeks. ‘I will end myself! You would *not* guess what time I woke up today. Guess!’

‘Six?’

‘Pfft! Six? *The woman* started singing at four. Four! My mother is cool with it! “Making the place spiritual again”, that’s their mission statement! That’s not even the worst …’

In her rage Vaishnavi had forgotten to breathe. She inhaled deeply. Cold air flowed through, freezing her airways. The day was unusually hot. Vaishnavi rubbed the tip of her cold nose, shivered and continued, ‘You know how she plays the language card. “Tamil is the oldest language”, blah, blah. She is at it again, forcing Tamil on me. Arghhh, why can’t the woman just come for a holiday without making this a revolution! She thinks we are all savages needing to be saved. Honestly, Sims, I’m about to crash-bloody-out!’ Slapping her hands on her thighs she picked up a mandarin.

Simone studied Vaishnavi with intense eyes and shook her head before getting back to her own mandarin. They peeled mandarins in silence while the world around them chatted and laughed.

‘By the end of her visit, you’ll be speaking just like her,’ Simone observed. With her eyes fixed far, she stuffed a mandarin segment into her mouth, sucked, munched, and spat out pips one at a time. The weather was turning, candle melting hot. Vaishnavi, desperate for some relief, sucked on her mandarin like it was life-giving water. ‘Amma, for one, is fully transformed, I te ...’

Before she could finish, Simone’s eyes snapped to her, her gaze sharp as a whip. The mandarin she was peeling fell on her lap. ‘What the hell, Vaishi. What are you saying?’

‘My mother, oh man, you …’

Simone held her hands up, palms out. ‘What the H, bruh?!’

‘What?’

‘Huh?’ Simone rolled her eyes.

‘What are *you* on about …’ Vaishnavi couldn't finish the thought. Simone threw up her hands and blew out frustration.

‘Seriously? Forcing the “world’s oldest language” on me now?’ Simone’s cheeks twitched.

Vaishnavi blinked. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘You just said ...’ Simone hesitated. ‘You weren’t speaking ... blah blah… what nonsense? I don’t even understand.’

‘Wait ... What?’ Vaishnavi’s breath caught in her chest.

‘There you go again! Blah and blah,’ Simone interrupted. ‘Speak English, will you. Please!’

Vaishnavi’s mouth opened but closed. A loud group bee-lined towards the pair. Chomping on Soul Origin sandwiches, they were buzzing with pre-exam panic.

‘Did you read the assignment?’ One stopped at Simone’s side. ‘The question is longer than any answer we can write. Right?!’ Everyone chimed in. ‘Yes!’ ‘Ridiculous.’ ‘Crazy.’

‘How does he even have time to write all that? Isn’t he the head of department or something?’ Simone asked, looking as bewildered as the rest. ‘I’m more confused than ever. How does one do “Eastern perspective” if not Eastern? It’ll be easy for Vaish.’ She looked at Vaishnavi and said, ‘You have *the* “Eastern perspective”, roots in the East and all.’

‘I actually emailed him.’

All heads whipped around to stare at Vaishnavi, mouths slightly agape. Even those mid-sandwich paused. Then, *thud!* A sharp kick landed under the table.

‘Ouch!’ Vaishnavi yelped, jerking in her seat. ‘Whaat the actual ...!’ she hissed, clutching her shin. Simone was staring. She wasn’t amused. She mouthed a ‘shut up!’ to Vaishnavi and turned to the sandwich-eating bunch. Vaishnavi stopped commenting altogether and listened. After another minute of laughing and chatting, the crowd said their goodbyes and left. Simone waited till they were far from radar and took a long-drawn breath.

‘You have no idea you are not speaking English. Do you? Maybe you think you are,’ she spoke to herself. ‘In your head, sure, but the words coming out of your mouth? Not English, Vaishi. The perils of speaking two languages, I guess. Your brain’s totally messed up. Or … maybe your grandma’s like, possessing you or something? Yikes!’

Vaishnavi wasn’t amused, sitting up straight in her seat.

‘You know what?’ Simone added, beaming in a ‘Eureka’ moment for her, as she tapped on the screen of her phone, ‘Text me!’

Vaishnavi hesitated. Simone shook her head, gesturing to the phone on the table.

Vaishnavi picked up her phone and began punching the screen: *What's going on? What do you mean I am not speaking English? And what? My grandmother has possessed me? Explain!*

Simone read, sighed and explained. 'Vaish, listen. When you talk, do you think you are speaking English?'

Vaishnavi opened her mouth but changed her mind and nodded.

'No, you're not! You are talking gibberish – not English at all.'

'*Then what?*' Simone peered at Vaishnavi's phone screen.

'Okay, okay.' Simone turned her whole body towards Vaishnavi with a new excitement. She aimed her phone at her friend's face: 'Say something. Anything.'

Vaishnavi's expression remained flat. Simone tried again, 'Okay, tell me about the home situ … erm, your mum. How is she handling?'

That seemed to spark something. Vaishnavi launched into her explanation: 'Amma's entire wardrobe has changed, you know. Gone are her usual whites and greys and the muted shit. It's bright yellows, greens and pinks. And get this … she calls me "my darling"! She is a whole …'

'Done!' Simone cut her off. Turning the phone, she replayed the recording.

'Look at this. You are speaking in tongues! Like bible stuff.'

'Oh come on! Speaking in tongues?' Vaishnavi snatched the phone, narrowing her eyes as she watched herself on the screen.

'Not English, right?!' Simone chimed from the background. She popped a segment of mandarin into her mouth and chewed slowly.

Vaishnavi's mouth hung open, her hand frozen halfway to her temple like she was about to salute but forgot why. On the screen, she watched herself speak, fluid, confident, not a single stumble. Her fingers gripped the phone tighter. A storm raged in her stomach. It felt like all the spice-drenched curry she had forced down her throat that morning was conspiring to escape, right then and there. Was that really *her*, Tamil rolling off her tongue like she was an auntie at a Diwali celebration? What the devil is going on? she thought, panic bubbling.

'Certainly not English, right?' Simone asked. 'Maybe your grandmother is channelling through you? Like …' Simone snapped her fingers, searching for a memory. 'Like in that movie ... you know the one ... Uhh, what's it called?'

Vaishnavi gripped the sides of her chair her knuckles white. *Was that possible? Could Ammachchi really be in her head, pulling strings?* Her grandmother did come from a country with a million gods, where rebirth was a common belief and children often spoke of their past

lives. Would it be a surprise if the old woman was working a bit of abracadabra, mixed with a bit of hocus-pocus, to force Tamil into her granddaughter's system? The thought mortified Vaishnavi. Ammachchi's crow-coloured spirit inside her? Yuk! Sari, coat, socks and sandals, mole on the face, chanting, and playing the veena, Urrgh!

'Burrr.' Vaishnavi shivered in her singlet top. 'Did the news say there'd be a cold snap or something? I am *so* not dressed for this.'

'Text!' Simone commanded.

The friends spent the next hour or so picking through the developing mystery. They were like forensic pathologists, going through the evidence and examining every detail. Vaishnavi's words were tools and so were Simone's.

'Book,' Vaishnavi spat out.

'Pat.tak.am,' Simone interpreted. Plumpety plump, the jaw that was used to angular words twisted, and rounded sounds jumped out.

'Friend,' said Vaishnavi.

'Nan.pan,' sounded Simone.

'Go.'

'Po.'

It went on for a while. The pair videoed themselves and replayed, discussed and deduced, and once they had exhausted all possibilities, Simone asked, 'Now what?'

Elbows on knees, Vaishnavi exhaled. 'Eṉakku tannir vēṇṭum.' Her thirst spoke wanting to be quenched. Simone rolled her eyes and tapped on her phone screen.

'Text!'

Chapter 5

With all her BFFs settled in Vaishnavi's room, it looked like a poster for multicultural Australia – many shades, sizes, religions and ethnicities represented. Vaishnavi glanced around, a smile tugging at her lips. Perched on the edge of her bed, she let her eyes wander over her friends. In her head, she played her usual game: *If our lives were a series: The Girls of LSL, how would it be?*

Vaishnavi wondered if Mindy Kaling would be the perfect actress to play her. They shared the same height and skin tone. Mindy had even recently lost a significant amount of weight, just like Vaishnavi had. Smiling to herself, she decided that her character was officially dedicated to Mindy Kaling.

Simone, of course, would star in the most controversial storylines. There she was, cross-legged, a cushion conveniently planted on her lap. Vaishnavi smirked. It was a move perfected through years of visitations to the brown household. Ever since Ammachchi smacked Simone with a rolled-up Tamil newspaper for 'sitting like an open magazine', Simone had learned the art of strategic modesty.

At the dressing table, Nazreen sat like serenity incarnate. Her hijab was neatly pinned, her sleeves rolled down even in the heat, but it was her eyes that held fire. Vaishnavi had known her the longest, from chaotic childhoods at Aunty Bernadette's daycare to late-night phone calls that turned into debates about religion, freedom, and feminism. Nazreen never whispered what could be shouted. The hijab didn't tame her. It armed her. Vaishnavi never quite understood how someone could be both traditional and rebellious at once, but Nazreen had made it an artform.

Across from them, Deepti perched on the edge of a rotating chair, eyes glued to a dusty old *Vogue* she'd unearthed from Vaishnavi's desk. She flipped through it like she was searching for something more profound than glossy fashion spreads. Deepti was always like that – serious, deliberate, and slow to warm up, like an old gas heater that took its time before flooding the space with warmth. Vaishnavi smiled, locking eyes with Deepti.

'Hey, Vaishi, you didn't tell us what *your* people think about the language issue. Your family?'

All eyes shifted to Vaishnavi. She flitted her eyes from one friend to the other before taking a great gasp of oxygen in. 'I haven't mentioned it to them,' she blurted out.

Nazreen, the only other person in the room who could speak the 'world's oldest language' translated.

'What?' There was surprise in the room, tones rising in unison.

'Wait! Hear me out, guys. Hear. Me. Out,' Vaishnavi offered. Nazreen translated.

'I think, like … did I just end Ammachchi's reign of terror? Why rock the boat? I say. With my Tamil abilities, which, by the way, I am still processing, I think the vibe in the house has changed. I mean, no more long lectures, no lessons on morality or for that matter mortality. I think I have cracked the Ammachchi code! Besides, a couple more weeks and then she will be gone. And all this will settle? Right? Right? I mean … I think, all these pujas must do me good ...' She ranted on like a brakeless bicycle. Nazreen translated in a similar speed.

Simone shook her head. Nazreen took her teeth to her nails. Deepti rolled her eyes. 'You should actually ask your people. Family. Tell them.' She was extra serious. The old *Vogue* slipped from her hands as she leaned in. But before she could transform more thoughts into words, Ammachchi appeared at the door.

The old woman shuffled in, tray first, her bangles jingling and anklets chiming. Barefoot, with coconut-oiled hair flat against her head, she handed out mugs of Horlicks to the gathered group. The room went quiet. 'The Girls of LSL' were muted at their posts. When the tray was empty, Ammachchi fished out a small vessel hidden in her bosom, flipped the lid and pinched an ashy dust between her fingers. She smeared it on Vaishnavi's forehead with a low chant. Vaishnavi held her palms together, her eyes to her friends, her lip curled. Ammachchi patted Vaishnavi's cheek gently next and strutted out.

'See! Peace!' Vaishnavi beamed.

'Hmm …' Deepti pondered, sipping her Horlicks. 'Peace is good!' She nodded and slurped. 'But, actually Vaishi, I don't think this is something you keep to yourself. Peace or not! You have to tell your family. Listen! Something weird is happening in LSL.' She paused and leant in. 'My brother isn't doing too well also.'

'Oh?' Simone was interested.

'Which brother? Kithsiri?' Nazreen translated.

'Punchi Aiya. Malaka. Number two,' Deepti replied. 'His is also like your Tamil issue, strange … different.' She allowed her words to settle in. 'Malaka's been struggling with this strange condition. With his trousers on, he can't move his legs … at all. Been like that for days.'

Jaws dropped. Mugs paused mid-air.

‘What? You mean he has to be naked to walk?’ Simone asked, and Deepti’s face hardened a little. Nazreen shot Simone a stern-teacher look.

‘Naked? Are you insane!’ Deepti took a bit of time. ‘A sarong,’ she gathered her words, ‘a sarong. That’s his power. He can walk only when he is in a sarong. Can’t quite explain. But that’s how.’

Just then, a car revved up outside. The friends paused, listening as dog barks competed with the beats blaring from the speakers.

‘Oh, em, gee, Nathan!’ Vaishnavi said, eyes wide. No translation was needed.

‘Ohh!’ Deepti raced to the window. Vaishnavi followed. The pair clung to the iron railing like monkeys at the zoo, hoping for a glimpse of the man behind the wheel.

‘He’s such a snack, right?’ Deepti dreamt.

Nathan, tall, dark, and handsome, was the estate’s heartthrob. Except maybe for Nazreen and Simone, who stayed put.

‘A tool, not a snack,’ Nazreen interrupted, wrinkling her nose. ‘Womaniser, if you ask me.’

Vaishnavi wasn’t having it. ‘Pfft,’ she scoffed, passing the baton to Deepti.

‘Hey, no one’s asking you!’ Deepti snapped. ‘He’s our Siddharth Malhotra, our Ranveer Kapoor! Womanise me any day!’ She fluttered her eyelashes.

Nazreen slid on Vaishnavi’s Ray-Bans, peering over the frame, and mimicked Ammachchi’s sharp tone. ‘Na-dan, not Na-than! Anglicising good Tamil names … phefft!’

Laughter erupted, fading quickly into a sigh.

‘Oh well,’ Deepti dialled the mood down. ‘Vaish, you *gotta* let your family know what’s going on. No point in waiting.’

‘Or,’ Nazreen said as she reached Vaishnavi and draped her arm around her, ‘you could talk to Aunty Gayatri. Some people think she’s weird, but I swear there’s something real about her. She *senses* things, you know? Like, the other day, the strangest thing happened.’ Nazreen leaned in, lowering her voice. ‘Aunty Gayatri was literally sniffing the air at the market square. I’m not even joking! She asked if I smelled anything weird. I couldn’t smell anything, just the usual, kottu, seeni sambal, but she was convinced something was off.’

Vaishnavi arched her brow. Aunty Gayatri, the floral smelling sage of the estate doing scent surveillance in public? Typical.

‘She was sweet though,’ Nazreen continued. ‘Kept asking if I was okay, if my friends were okay. But the weirdest part? Right as she was saying all that, Simone called me about *your* issue. Like, talk about timing.’

Vaishnavi blinked. *Of course Aunty Gayatri would sniff a cosmic disturbance before it fully landed. After all, she was the one who predicted a shift before the pandemic hit.*

‘I think you should talk to her,’ Nazreen rattled on like a Singer sewing machine on high speed. ‘Aunty Gayatri’s got ... something. Not sure what, but *something.*’

Vaishnavi swallowed.

‘Nonsense!’ Deepti was sharp. ‘If you’re talking to someone outside the family, talk to the doctor. Uncle Douglas would be the best person for this, no doubt.’

Simone perked up, interested. ‘Wait, what? You think there’s a pill to fix Vaishnavi’s English?’

‘Maybe.’ Deepti’s tone was serious. ‘You know how chemicals in the air and water can mess with people? Like after Hiroshima or Chernobyl. Maybe something like that is happening here. There’s gotta be a scientific reason. Talk to Uncle Douglas.’

Chapter 6

‘I can never say if loading is worse than unloading.’ Jenny, Simone’s mother made a face. ‘Both, I guess,’ she added. There was a banging and clattering of plates, spoons, and pots as Jenny attempted to empty the dishwasher.

Nazreen watched. She was fond of Simone’s mother. Had been ever since she laid eyes on her striding towards the school gate in red stilettos. That had been when she was in kindergarten. It was the very day Simone and Nazreen had decided that they would be friends for ever.

Jenny was nothing like the mothers Nazreen knew. She didn’t live for her kids or her husband, nor did she spend her days buried in cooking, cleaning, and washing. Far from it. Jenny flaunted her figure in tight clothes, unbothered by modesty. She sang with a raspy voice and smoked cigarettes on the back patio. She entertained with ease, and spent weekends hunting for new clothes. Divorced and living with her parents, Jenny was a force of her own, untamed, unapologetic, and free.

Strangely, she was the only white woman whom Nazreen’s mother trusted Nazreen with. Umma liked Jenny. When they had playdates, instead of dropping Nazreen at the door and saying goodbye like all the other mothers did, Umma walked into Jenny’s place as if she was entitled and stayed there. Jenny allowed this. Jenny, in her shortest skirts and figure-hugging tops, and Umma, in her cover-alls, sat on kitchen stools and chatted in hushed voices.

‘My mum is teaching your mum sexual things,’ Simone observed once when they were kids. ‘She is teaching how to pleasur-ise your dad.’

‘Eeww.’ Nazreen was disgusted. ‘No way!’

‘Umma and Appa sitting in a tree, K.I.S.S.I.N.G,’ Simone teased, smacking her lips.

Nazreen smiled at the memory and turned her attention to the woman at the dishwasher.

‘What should we do for lunch?’ Jenny asked. She looked at her wristwatch. ‘Late lunch.’

Jenny crossed the room and pulled the fridge door open. ‘Beef, eggs, bread, salami, oh, you can’t eat that. Jam, butter, sweet potato.’

‘Tuna.’ Simone appeared and enveloped Nazreen in an embrace. Clean after a bath, she had on a pink singlet top, and a pair of flower printed shorts with a ruffled hem. Jenny’s

eyes landed on Nazreen and Simone, a gentle smile tugging at her lips. ‘Tuna sandwiches it is,’ she declared and pulled out a loaf of bread and a stick of butter.

‘All’s fine in bee-land,’ Simone announced. She was the family beekeeper in her grandfather’s absence. Grandfather was still a week away from returning after his cruise. Simone performed her duties diligently. ‘No dead bees to report,’ Simone chuckled, hopping on a bar stool.

Jenny flipped open the top of a can of tuna and shook the contents into a big glass bowl. She then added half a stick of butter. After grinding some salt and pepper over it, she pushed it towards Simone and crossed to the fridge. With a spoon and a fork, Simone crushed and mixed the tuna till it became a paste.

The three sat at the kitchen bench, assembling their own food, a piece of bread, topped with the tuna paste and some baby spinach. They squeezed strands of mayonnaise on top of the pile and topped it with another piece of bread. The women ate in silence looking out the window.

Nazreen enjoyed the informality of the way things happened at Simone’s house. At her own home, everything was a song and a dance. Mealtimes had to be done right, the table covered with a cloth, ideally spun in the homeland. Spice-drenched curries had to be placed ceremoniously in their respective dishes. Rice in a large platter was at centre stage. Plates sat upside down to be turned the right way by those who ate from them. The seats were pre-allocated according to hierarchy. Nazreen’s appa at the head of the table, and the rest down the sides. No one ate until Appa returned home. Their routine was that rigid. The family didn’t get many chances to eat by themselves. There was always someone dropping by.

Friday evenings were especially busy. When the sun went down, the guests began to arrive. The men and the women occupied separate spaces in the house. Men ventured into the living room and dissected homeland politics. The women retreated to the kitchen and discussed their children’s affairs. Practically every Friday since Nazreen’s puberty, the aunties who gathered in the kitchen attempted to arrange a marriage match for Nazreen:

‘Haneefa’s nephew Karim is such a good match, only son in that massive house near the mosque.’

‘Rumsiyah’s youngest brother is a better match. A bit younger than Nazreen, true. But five years is nothing; look at Priyanka Chopra and that Jonas boy.’

‘Ten-year age gap, noh, Imran is more suited. CIMA qualified! Hasan Ali can start a family accounting business. Willing to migrate to Australia also!’

‘Fatima, your daughter Nazreen, such a beautiful girl, Mashallah! What is she studying for? Girls should excel at housework. Happiness guaranteed.’

The estate aunties were persistent. Nazreen just smiled, nodded and accepted. She never protested. The community didn’t allow it. Elders were to be listened to. But there were Fridays when she felt like she had landed in a chicken coop, too much noise in her head. Those were the days when she fled to Simone’s. Umma allowed it reluctantly: ‘If you need to study, then you need to study,’ she would say, making a face.

Fridays weren’t the only days Nazreen was at Simone’s place. She was there often, of course with Umma’s blessing, to ‘study’. Nazreen was the most comfortable at Simone’s. It was the only place she could be herself. It was the only place they could be a couple. Everyone who knew about Nazreen’s and Simone’s relationship lived under that roof. Of course, with one exception.

Nazreen was still in high school when one day Umma sent her off to Gayatri’s to pick up a concoction for Appa’s ‘wind problem’. She had barely slept the night before. Her brain looping the failed confession she’d mumbled to Simone like a scratched-up CD. She hadn’t planned to go inside. She was just going to knock, grab the jar, box or whatever the concoction came in, and sprint away. But Gayatri had invited her in. Her voice smooth and melodic, making it impossible to turn down.

Nazreen stepped into a world that smelled like sandalwood, lime leaves and of freshly baked cookies. In her flowing dress, shoulders draped in a cream shawl, Gayatri seemed to float rather than walk. Her hair, long and untouched by time, coiled at the top of her head like a serpent at rest. ‘Drink,’ she had said, handing over a mug of rasam soup and motioning Nazreen to sit. Nazreen had obeyed, curling into an antique cane chair. The room had pulsed with a strange serenity. Somewhere in the background, a bell chimed on its own. The air around her had a weight to it, like something sacred was hovering, watching, listening.

One sip of the rasam had been enough. The floodgates cracked open, and Nazreen’s words poured out in torrents.

‘I’m so upset …’ she had begun, her voice thick, hands trembling around the cup. ‘Aunty, I’m in love with my best friend Simone!’

Gayatri hadn’t flinched. No surprise, no disgust. She didn’t even blink. There was no wisdom wrapped in metaphor, no ancient texts quoted, no cryptic parables. Instead, Gayatri had simply placed a warm hand on Nazreen’s forehead and offered a blessing, as if to say: *you are allowed*.

Nazreen had left lighter that day. The next morning, she found Simone, took a breath, and said it all again, clear and without hesitation. They had been a couple ever since. The memory made Nazreen smile.

'Okay, girls. I am off,' Jenny said. She hurled the plate into the dishwasher, washed her hands and left, closing the door behind her. Jenny was a spiritual type of sex therapist who worked her magic in a yurt in the backyard.

'Okay, she won't be back for another few hours,' Simone announced, pulling a scrunchy and letting her hair unravel like a silk cloth. 'What do we do?'

'I don't know … hmm … I can't think of anything.' Nazreen rolled her eyes and chuckled.

'Oh, come on!' Simone jumped off the stool and grabbed Nazreen's hand.

Simone's bedroom was most unlike Nazreen's, the minimalistic room with sturdy wooden furniture her umma had shipped from her grandfather's house in Mawenella. It was exciting and colourful and had a dark, mystic feel with a purple feature wall, sheer red curtains, a gallery wall and lamps. Standing in the middle of the room, Nazreen waited, while Simone moved around, switching on lamps and fluffing pillows. She connected her phone to a speaker, letting Taylor Swift's voice fill the space. Swaying to the rhythm, she slipped off her shorts playfully and hopped onto the bed.

Nazreen took a couple of steps forward and leaned against the foot of the bed, taking in the scene before her. Simone was a shapely girl who was comfortable in her body. She wore clothes to accentuate her hips and breasts, and booty shorts to show off her creamy skin. In contrast, Nazreen was always covered from head to toe. Their differences were striking, especially in the way they dressed. 'Opposites attract,' Jenny had remarked when they first announced their relationship.

'Come,' Simone beckoned with a playful flick of her finger.

Nazreen giggled, then slowly removed her head covering, letting her thick, dark locks cascade down and frame her face. Simone shuffled closer on the bed, kneeling as she reached for Nazreen. Running her fingers through the dark waves, she whispered, 'I like that you show your hair only to me.' Nazreen unbuttoned her shirt slowly, parting her lips before leaning in to kiss Simone. As the kiss deepened, Simone lay back, allowing Nazreen to curl up beside her.

It was then that a sharp 'ding dong' jolted through the house. Ding dong' and then 'ding dong' again.

‘Oh. Em. Gee, this woman!’ Simone shrieked. ‘It’s Jenny! Just leave it. I’m sure she just forgot the snacks.

Ding dong. The bell chimed again.

Nazreen sat up, her eyes flicking to the door.

‘Honestly, Naz, I don’t understand why she has to feed her clients. Just leave it,’ Simone said, burrowing deeper into the pile of cushions. ‘Shh. Shh.’ Her finger went to her lips. ‘If we are very quiet, she will just leave,’ she said in a whisper.

Ding dong went the bell again.

‘Such a horrible daughter!’ Nazreen declared, springing to her feet. She flicked a cushion squarely at Simone’s face and dashed out, Simone’s laughter chasing her down the hallway. In the kitchen, Nazreen grabbed the Woolworths bag Jenny had packed with snacks, sitting forgotten on the table. When she opened the front door, there stood Umma under the portico, framed by the dappled afternoon light filtering through the pomegranate leaves. Her hijab, a crisp navy blue, was perfectly pinned but slightly askew from the hurried walk. A shimmer of sweat lined her brow.

‘Nazreen.’ She beamed, but that warmth flickered and vanished like sunlight snuffed out by a passing cloud. Her hand lifted mid-air, trembling slightly.

‘Hair …,’ she stammered, her eyes darting to Nazreen’s chest. ‘Buttons …’ Her other hand flew to her mouth. ‘Oh!’

Nazreen’s stomach lurched. She grabbed at the open sides of her shirt, crumpling them together. Behind her, there was movement, followed by Simone’s voice.

‘What’s …?’ Simone’s words cut off abruptly.

Umma’s gaze drifted past Nazreen, her eyes widening. A strangled noise escaped her lips, a mix of ‘eee’ and ‘squee,’ like a mouse caught in a trap.

Nazreen turned slightly, just enough to see over her shoulder. Simone stood behind her, stopped mid-step, her damp hair clinging to her skin, dressed only in her panties. She had one arm wrapped tightly across her chest, attempting to cover her exposed breasts, her face frozen in mid-panic.

Umma let out another squeal.

‘Umma!’ Nazreen’s voice cracked as she turned back, locking eyes with her mother.

But Umma didn’t respond. She didn’t wait. She spun on her heels and bolted, her hands flapping as if she were trying to take flight.

‘Oh. Em. Gee. Naz,’ Simone said. ‘Now what?’

Thud. Nazreen dropped the Woolworths bag on to the floor. She shook her head glumly.

'Go,' Simone said gesturing towards the running figure. 'Go after her.'

'The worst …,' Nazreen stammered. 'It's … it's too late?' She looked at Simone and then at her mother, eyes glistening like polished marbles.

'I mean ... I, I, she … your mother had to find out, right? One way or the other ... right? Right?' Simone asked. 'Go,' she urged. 'Go, Naz.'

Nazreen flew down the steps and into the garden. She broke into a run, skidding over loose gravel, nearly tripping as she fumbled to button up her shirt mid-sprint. When she reached her mother's Swift, a sudden icy gush stopped her. Nazreen shivered, goose bumps on her skin. Her hair went in her mouth. She placed her hand on the car to steady herself and peered inside. Umma was draped over the steering wheel, crying. 'Hoha, hoha, ho,' she went, sounding like some exotic bird.

Heart sinking into her stomach, Nazreen slid into the passenger seat. 'Umma,' she said. Umma didn't respond.

'Umma. Umma.' Nazreen laid a hand on her mother's back gently rubbing. Umma's sobs eventually trailed away to silence.

'Umma. Please. Talk to me. Please,' Nazreen pleaded.

Umma was silent for a moment longer. She then turned the engine on. Without even a glance behind, she stepped on the accelerator and let the Swift fly. Kids in the estate were out on the streets, playing cricket. Umma blared the horn, impatient. The tiny cricketers took offence. They stared at the passing car showing their clenched fists.

'Careful, Umma,' Nazreen urged.

The Swift came to a halt on the driveway next to Appa's car. Umma looked in the mirror and fixed herself, dabbing at the smudged kohl, rubbing off the raccoon-eyed disaster. A few honking blows into a tissue later, she opened the door and rolled out.

Alone in the car, Nazreen watched the shadows of the Na branches shift across the house. She was reluctant to go inside without a plan. Running away wouldn't solve anything and confrontation would make things worse. Ignorance the best strategy? Hmm.

When she cracked opened the car door and let her foot slip out, the whisper of a cold breeze brushed past. A shiver tiptoed up her spine. Nazreen drew her foot back for a moment rubbing her arms through her sleeves. Then, with a small sigh, she gathered her curls into a knot at the nape of her neck and slid out of her mother's car.

Entering the house, she paused at the alcove and breathed in. The house smelled of spices. Nazreen licked her lips and took a step forward. From where she stood, she could see her parents. They were sitting in silence at the dining table. Appa had a Sri Lankan broadsheet open. Umma sat at her usual spot, fanning herself with an Aldi newsletter. Nazreen stayed where she had halted, between the living room, where guests were entertained, and the private quarters the family used.

Her father's house, built to the estate's specifications, was a near replica of her maternal grandfather's home in Mawanella. Every detail had been recreated: the arched entryways, the green-painted panelled windows, each element a deliberate echo of the past. The house was Appa's grand gesture, his own personal Taj Mahal, an architectural apology for uprooting Umma from her familiar world and planting her in this foreign land.

Reluctant to go any closer, Nazreen plopped herself down on an easy chair at the alcove where she could monitor the goings on inside.

'Nazreen?' Appa took a while to put the newspaper down to inquire. His eyes scanned the alcove and flitted to Umma. 'You didn't bring her?'

'She will come on her own,' Umma said. Nazreen took it as Umma's way of telling her not to join them at the table.

'Humm. You went to bring her though?'

'Yes. But that's okay.'

'Humm.' Appa hid his face behind the paper again.

The evening light filtered through the green windows, casting a muted glow on the walls. In the hush of the room, Umma and Appa sat, each absorbed in their own silence. Umma chewed her nails. Every so often, she lifted the Aldi catalogue, scanning it with feigned interest before fluttering it for a breeze. Appa remained fixed to his newspaper, his eyes moving methodically from top to bottom, page after page.

Nazreen stayed in the alcove, her mind spinning with possibilities. What would Umma do now? What did mothers in her community do when confronted with a truth too scandalous to speak of? Would she turn a blind eye, feigning ignorance? Or would she confide in Appa, brace herself for the storm his fury would unleash? Consider an honour killing? Or worse still, call Aunty Rumsiyah and expedite a marriage to the CIMA-qualified Imran to escape the shame?

Nazreen sighed, shaking her legs and waiting for the parents to make a move.

'Allahu Akbar …' the adhan blasted over the loudspeaker, which finally stirred movement from the newspaper-reading father and the nail-biting mother. The paper rustled as

Appa folded it neatly and set it on the table. Umma straightened her back. The hum of the air-conditioner faded into the background as the familiar cadence of the call from the mosque filled the house. Without exchanging words, the family dispersed like performers leaving the stage.

Appa retreated to his room. Umma adjusted her hijab, then disappeared into the space between the kitchen and dining hall. Nazreen lingered, her gaze flickering toward the door. For a fleeting moment, she considered slipping out. But guilt bothered her. With a sigh, she stepped out of her hiding place and padded into her room, unrolling her own prayer mat. She whispered the verse, and touched her forehead to the woven threads beneath her. Somewhere between her whispered verses and chapters, the weight of the day pressed down on her.

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Later, she blinked awake, cheek pressed into a pillow she didn't remember reaching for. Her first thought was that she had slept through till morning. It took a moment for her to realise that the day had turned to night. Memories of that day returned to her in flashes, and her mouth went dry. She could hear Appa shouting in the kitchen. She sat up in bed, held her breath and listened.

'All your fault, Fathima!' Appa's voice thundered through the house. 'All the freedoms you give your daughter!' His words dripped with frustration. 'For what? Like a fool, I listened to you! Look at Ramzia, look at Farah, both younger than Nazreen, happily married now! And your daughter? Gallivanting around Westfield Parramatta like she has no faith, no shame! These are not our ways, Fathima.' His voice cracked with emotion. 'Ohh,' he lamented.

Nazreen felt a headache creeping in. *The fireworks had begun.* Umma had wasted no time telling Appa about Simone and her. She sat still for a moment, bracing herself. There was no escaping this, it was better to walk into the lion's den and get it over with she decided, and with a deep breath she dragged herself out of bed. At the kitchen doorway, she stopped cold.

Appa stood with his back to her, phone wedged between shoulder and ear. 'What time?' he snapped. 'What time did she leave? Do you even know?' His free hand curled into a fist. 'No, she didn't come home! Not with Fathima. Not at all!' A pause, then he jabbed the phone screen. 'Mad woman!' he barked, turning to Umma. 'She says *you* picked her up!'

Umma trembled, her mouth working around words that wouldn't come. 'What do we do?' she whispered, rocking back and forth, tears spilling freely.

'Umma, I *did* come with you,' Nazreen said, gripping the counter.

No reaction.

Appa turned to the clock on the wall. 'Should she be walking home at this hour? Huh? You should have picked her up!'

'I … I … went to Namal's, bought a clay pot … I came straight home,' Umma stuttered.

Nazreen blinked. 'What?'

The family cat purred and twirled around her ankle.

'Poosa, at least *you* are not ignoring me,' she whispered, kneeling to pat its fur.

Appa picked up the cat, stroking it absently. 'Are you looking for her too?'

Nazreen's voice broke. 'Umma? Appa?' She grabbed at her mother's arm, tapped her father's shoulder. No reaction from either. Like she wasn't there.

'Call Simone,' Appa ordered.

'I don't want to call her,' Umma said quickly, then froze, eyes wide as if the truth had slipped out too easily.

Nazreen reached again. Her hands trembled. 'Please. Speak to me.' Her voice cracked. 'Please don't ignore me, Umma!'

Still nothing. Appa shoved past her without a glance, storming out. 'If something happens to her …' His voice cracked. Then silence, followed by the car's engine revving and disappearing into the night.

Nazreen stumbled and collapsed to the floor like someone had cut her strings. The cat jumped down beside her and curled into her side. Hugging her knees, Nazreen sobbed uncontrollably. *Am I dead?* The question echoed in her skull. Across the room, Umma's wailing resumed. They were a mother and a daughter, yet lost to each other, grieving in separate worlds. Then, a voice cut through the sorrow.

'Naz! Naz!'

Umma stiffened. Her hand shot out, grabbing the feather duster, the only weapon within reach.

'Sims?' Nazreen lifted her head, blinking through her tears. She scrambled to her feet.

'Hello? Is anybody here?' Simone's voice echoed as she stormed into the kitchen. 'What have you, I swear to God …' She whirled on Umma, ready to unleash her fury, but then she froze. Her gaze landed on Nazreen.

‘Oh! What the … Your father … You were missing?’ Simone wiped at her nose with the back of her hand. Her mouth twitched, unsure which way to curve.

Umma leapt back like a startled hen, flailing the feather duster at Simone. ‘You! Oh you!’ she spluttered, her voice trembling. ‘That Jenny … Sexual healing my foot! I should have …’ Her words fractured into a wheezing gasp, her chest rising and falling like a monsoon tide. ‘You disgraceful, ungrateful girl! How dare you! Nazreen is sinning because of you … and now missing!’

‘Missing?’ Simone’s eyes ballooned. She jabbed a finger toward Nazreen. ‘What are you talking about?’

Nazreen shot forward, her heart hammering. ‘You can see me?’ She spun between Simone and her mother. ‘You *can* see me?’

‘Yes! Of course, I can! What the hell is going on?’ Simone’s voice climbed and she looked at Umma. But Umma wasn’t paying attention. She was still pointing the feather duster at Simone like it was a sacred relic warding off evil. ‘Missing, yes!’ she screeched. ‘My daughter is missing. Thanks to you!’

‘Phew. Naz!’ Simone exhaled loudly, brushing past Umma's hysteria. ‘You gave me such a fright, babe!’ She lunged forward, grabbing at Nazreen’s hand. ‘Oh, Naz, Naz. I nearly died! Your Appa ...’

A crash took her words. Umma had collided with a barstool, sending it clattering to the floor. She stood frozen, eyes wide with surprise, confusion, and pure fear. It was clear she was in shock, understandably so, watching Simone speak to thin air. Umma’s face drained of colour, turning a pale white of a king coconut. She didn’t blink. Her pupils ballooned, black as midnight, like an owl caught in sudden torchlight.

‘Heeee,’ she exhaled in a strangled whisper, her grip tightening on the feather duster. Her hand rose, trembling like a banana leaf in a storm. Chaos erupted.

High on relief, Nazreen was shouting. ‘Oh, Sim, you can see me! They can’t. Umma and Appa *can’t* see me. At all! I’m invisible. Oh, Sim,’

Simone, mouth hung open, kept questioning. ‘What do you mean, *can’t see*? What does that even ...’

‘You … you … Shaytan!’ Umma shrieked. She clutched her chest and spat out prayers, rapid-fire duas for protection and waved the feather duster. Dust particles burst into the air, raining onto the countertops like fresh snow. The cat, startled, arched its back and let out a hiss. Then, a sudden flash of light slipped through the Venetian blinds, followed by the sound of engines cutting off and car doors slamming shut.

Umma dropped the feather duster, spun around, and rushed out of the kitchen. Simone ran after her, and Nazreen followed.

Appa stepped through to the porch, looking exhausted. Two uniformed officers followed closely behind him. Nazreen approached them, positioning herself beside the older female officer. She was close enough to see the crisp crease running down the officer's dark blue pants and the neatly gelled strands of her short hair. Nazreen's closeness seemed to bother the cop. She took a step back.

'Is this your daughter?' she asked. Nazreen's breath caught. Her eyes darted to Simone in shock.

Umma looked up at Appa. 'Any news? You didn't find her?' Her voice was small.

Porch lights flickered on. The rustle of feet signalled an audience gathering, Little Sri Lankans, always in each other's business, especially when a police car was involved. Appa exhaled, shaking his head. His forehead creased deep.

'Sir, is this your daughter?' the female cop asked again, firmer this time.

Appa turned to Simone who was standing beside Nazreen. 'She?' He jabbed a finger in her direction. 'Does she *look* like my daugh …' He stopped and sighed. His fingers started kneading his forehead. 'No. This isn't my daughter. This is Simone,' he said. His voice was tight, tired. Turning his head he gestured towards the estate's main gate. '*She* is the one who last saw Nazreen. Nazreen was at her place.'

All heads snapped to Simone.

'They've been friends since primary school,' Appa continued. 'Now at university together.' Umma snorted, muttering something under her breath. The female cop took a step forward, placing a gentle hand on Nazreen's shoulder. 'Mr Ali,' she said, a small smile tugging at her lips. 'Is *this* your daughter?'

Nazreen's heart leapt. Relief poured through her, thick and golden, like sweet honey. But Appa didn't react. He didn't move. He just kept pressing his forehead.

'I am …' Nazreen interjected quickly. Her voice wavered. 'I am Nazreen. The daughter.'

Simone stepped in, her voice rising. 'They can't see her though.' She gestured wildly. 'Can't hear her. Can't feel her. *Nothing.* Naz here? Completely *invisible* to both of her parents.'

'Whaa …?' Umma breathed in, a sound like a hiccup escaping her throat. Appa stopped attacking his forehead and stared at Simone, his eyes bulging like jackfruit seeds. Simone wasn't backing down.

‘Okay, listen. Something *really* weird is going on in LSL, Little Sri Lanka.’ She glanced over at the officers. ‘I’m not even exaggerating. Our friend used to speak English, right? And now? *Poof!* Gone. Not mute or anything, she just … can’t. But here’s the kicker: out of nowhere, she’s speaking her grandmother’s language. Like, *what?*’

Heads shook. Chins were tapped. The male officer absentmindedly tapped a pen against a small notebook. Simone wasn’t done.

‘And that’s not even the craziest part. There’s this other guy, a friend’s brother. Paralysed, can’t walk. But here’s the weird part: he can walk, but only when he’s wearing a sarong. You know, that skirt thing they wear.’ The officers exchanged looks. Simone barrelled on. ‘Yeah, sounds insane, right? But seriously, dude can’t walk in trousers.’

The female officer rolled the skin under her chin with her knuckles, while the other officer flipped open the notebook and started scribbling.

Simone let out a half-snort, half-laugh. ‘I sound insane, don’t I?’ She crossed her arms. ‘But that’s the truth. The guy literally can only walk in a sarong. Get what I’m saying?’

No one answered. Umma shifted from one leg to the other, her stare unwavering, dead straight at Simone. Simone swallowed and looked down.

‘So,’ Appa stuttered, sweat darkening the fabric under his armpits, forming damp half-moons, ‘so Nazreen is here?’ His trembling hand pointed to his right, missing its mark entirely. Simone grabbed his arm gently and redirected it.

‘Here. She is here.’

Umma continued with her hiccupping. Both of her hands flew to her throat, her face darkening, as if the words she wasn’t uttering were choking her. Appa’s voice trembled with disbelief, cutting Umma’s silent sobs. ‘So, oh, so ... she can see us? Nazreen, you can see us.’ His eyes glistened like fish roe.

Simone let out a deep sigh. ‘Yep. She can see and hear. Both of you. All of you. But you ... you both can’t see her. Can’t hear her. The rest of us can.’

The older officer raised an eyebrow, exchanging a quick, questioning glance with her partner. She held up a hand, trying to process. ‘So, let me get this straight. Your parents can’t see you?’

‘Exactly,’ Simone confirmed, her voice tense. ‘I can see her. You can see her. They can’t.’

Chapter 7

‘What a shit show, Uncle! This is a curse!’ Malaka groaned. He walked over to the wooden railing and stared down into the street below. Malaka wasn’t a usual fixture on Douglas’s veranda, but he was there. Typically, he found little reason to visit the doctor, and even less to sit around idle. It was the whole sarong-trouser debacle which had pushed him to do things differently, and somehow, for him, on that day, Douglas’s veranda was the perfect place to be.

‘All the na na nas and la la las from my brothers and sister. Shit! I have no comeback whatsoever,’ he complained. His siblings weren’t the unkind, cruel sort, but they had taken every opportunity to poke fun at him, his current situation too ripe for their humour to ignore.

‘Really, Uncle. I have had it up to here!’

It had been five whole days since the sarong-trouser saga began. Malaka had endured much during that time. To begin with, the much anticipated ‘sister meet’ had to be postponed. Though the Covid lie worked, Dhara wasn’t pleased. ‘I mean, Covid isn’t a thing now, is it?’ she had said first, still wanting to go ahead with the meetup.

‘But it won’t look good if I give Covid to your sister the very first time I meet her. Would it?’ Malaka was glad he had the power to change her mind. Convincing the office was no easy task either. It had taken a whole hour before the boss reluctantly agreed to Malaka working from home. Again, the Covid lie had worked. But there still was no possible remedy for the problem, being stuck inside the estate all day, every day, in a sarong with absolutely no resolve in sight. He let out a sharp exhale, his fingers raking through his hair before gripping the edge of his sarong in exasperation. He tugged at it, then at his trousers underneath. ‘A bloody curse!’

‘I can understand your frustration, Putha,’ Douglas murmured. ‘But the thing is, this *is* a strange phenomenon.’ he mused.

Douglas was in no hurry to expand his explanation. His attention seemed more on the thick, dark roll of expertly wrapped cigar resting between his fingers. He was delicate with it. Drawing each puff slowly and exhaling smoke rings so precise the whole act looked like a performance-art piece.

‘I’m working from home, but for how long, Uncle? Forever? I need to get back to normalcy. I can’t live like this, this … sarong-swathed twilight zone!’ Malaka slumped into the chair, gesturing helplessly to the fabric wound around his waist. ‘This morning, it was blue batik,’ Malaka groaned. ‘Yesterday? A radioactive orange thing. Last night a checked

horror.' He shifted uncomfortably, tugging at the sarong's edge. 'I look like someone gift-wrapped me.'

Douglas's eyes traced the lazy ascent of smoke rings. 'You see, Putha, this sarong-over-trousers look isn't new,' he declared. 'It's historical.'

Malaka looked up, eyebrows twitching. Douglas fished out his phone and tapped the screen. 'There are articles explaining this. Read this,' he said passing the phone over to Malaka.

Malaka squinted at the screen. 'Men wore a cloth over their trousers, leaving only the bottom part visible,' he read aloud. 'This gave rise to the epithet redda asse …,' he inhaled. 'Redda asse mahaththaya. A gentleman beneath the cloth. huh?' He paused, blinking. 'Wait … what?' He kept reading, the screen glowing like a portal to another realm. 'Hmm … But...but, but uncle, what's this got to do with *me*?' Malaka set the phone down with a thud.

'That's exactly what I can't understand,' Douglas said. 'You see, Putha, your father will know this – ask him. He would have seen. Probably your grandfather, or great grandfather wore this kind of garment.' He leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees. 'During the latter part of British occupation in Ceylon,' he continued, 'this was *the* look. Redda asse mahataya or "gentleman under the cloth" look. Capitalist natives came up with this genius attire. It wasn't a rejection of Western wear, no no, it was more like ... a duality. Two identities in one. The traditional sarong on top of the Western pants. They were blending in while standing out. Genius, really.'

He paused, leant back and took another slow, deliberate puff of his cigar. The smoke curled lazily upwards. 'But that was a deliberate choice. A statement. A negotiation with colonialism. But your case,' he said, his tone shifting and becoming more contemplative, 'this … this is a cultural oddity.' He gestured toward Malaka's outfit, his hand moving in a slow, circular motion, as if outlining its full form. 'This look, this situation, not a medical condition. Definitely not logical, right?!' he declared, shutting the leather-bound book on his lap like a professor unveiling a revolutionary theory.

The book fell on top of the teetering pile of books on the teapoy between them, an increasingly hopeless monument to their desperate search for a Western medical explanation. They had tried for hours, as if they believed, somewhere between Guyton's *Textbook of Physiology* and *Gray's Anatomy*, a footnote on 'sarong-leg syndrome' might magically appear.

‘Now what?’ Malaka wriggled in frustration. Douglas remained silent. Malaka’s knee bobbed up and down and set the sarong in motion. The fabric rippled over his trouser legs and made a swish swish sound.

‘Here’s what puzzles me,’ Douglas said, before taking one last deep drag of the cigar, releasing it slowly, watching the final plume curl and fade like a whispered farewell, ‘why *you*?’ he asked. ‘How did this whole sarong rebellion land on your lap? Is your body staging a revolt against Western attire?’

‘Maybe, just maybe, they, those old redda asse mahattayas had a reason for the trousers under the sarong situation,’ Malaka mused, still tugging at his neon-green sarong, the fabric glowing like a misplaced traffic signal. ‘Like, like ... for vanity, you know what I mean? A sort of undergarment to … like, to hide their balls!’ A chuckle escaped. Turning to Douglas with barely concealed glee, he nudged, ‘Remember, Uncle? Remember that cultural day at the farm?’ His eyes sparkled, one breath away from cracking up entirely.

‘How could I forget?’ Douglas grinned.

A shared memory bubbled up from the depths of their mental closets, a group of Little Sri Lankan elders at the annual Independence Day celebration, standing proudly atop a hill, wrapped in white sarongs. The event had taken place at a council-run farm overlooking the Hawkesbury River. There the men were singing the national anthem with full patriotic fervour, completely unaware that the blazing afternoon sun was illuminating their sarongs in all the wrong ways. The translucent fabric had put on an unintended show, revealing the outline of their most personal belongings, swinging in time with the beat of the anthem.

The pair exploded into laughter, doubling over until tears streamed down their faces. Douglas leaned back in his chair and let his shoulders relax as the last bit of laughter fizzled into contented sighs.

‘But, again I ask, Putha, why you? Why are you hiding your balls? Huh? Why? And more pressing is the question how do we fix this?’

Malaka blinked, trying to clear the cobwebs of confusion, when out of the corner of his eye, he saw movement: a silhouette first, then slowly coming into full view. A tall, lean woman sauntering down the road with a woven market basket brimming with lotus flowers. A single braid swung like a pendulum, keeping time with her graceful stride. She wore a long white dress that billowed around her legs, fluttering as she sashayed, every movement embodying a serene confidence.

‘Aunty Gayatri!’ Malaka exclaimed.

As if on cue, a car screeched to a halt beside the woman. After a brief exchange the vehicle slunk away, and the woman resumed her walk. Malaka couldn't help but snicker, jabbing a finger toward the street. 'Did you see that? Uncle Munaweera's been trying to get Aunty Gayatri's attention for ages. And I'm not just talking about literally trying to pick her up!' He winked. 'Am I wrong, or what, Uncle?' He paused, mischief dancing in his eyes. 'Isn't Aunty Gayatri, like, a total MILF?'

Douglas looked at Malaka and opened his mouth but the sound of the creaking gate swallowed his thought. They both shifted to the edge of their chairs and peered down. Two figures emerged through the gate. The light was still soft, and Malaka could easily recognise them. One was Nazreen and the other Simone. Both his sister's friends. The pair marched up the steps and came to a synchronised halt at the top. Douglas and Malaka rose from their seats and a chorus of awkward 'hellos' and 'hi theres' followed. Malaka noticed Nazreen's red and swollen eyes. She looked like she'd been through a washing machine spin cycle. The moment her gaze met Malaka's, she wilted. Her eyes darted down to her sandals and she adjusted her hijab.

'I'll catch you later, Uncle,' Malaka declared.

Like an expert sarong-wearer, he hitched up his sarong and hurried down the steps.

Part 2

Love and Other Mishaps

Chapter 8

The faint ping of a notification jolted Parinda out of his blissful sleep. He groaned, reaching for his phone and squinting at the glaring screen. Of course, it was Amma, likely checking if he had eaten, her usual concern. As he braced himself for the flood of motherly questions, Katie shifted beside him, her warm body instinctively curling closer.

He couldn't help but smile at how naturally they fit together, like two puzzle pieces that had finally found their place. When Katie pulled the sheets, brushing against him, Parinda pushed thoughts of his mother's text aside and tightened his arms around her. Katie burrowed against him as she playfully shifted her hand, letting it roam his thighs. She was Parinda's Viagra. Aroused, he grabbed her roughly, playfully, and hoisted her on top of him. Katie giggled, playing with the curtain of auburn that covered her face.

'Already wide awake I see!' she teased.

Parinda traced his lips with his tongue.

Katie moved, swirling her hips slowly, her eyes closed as always, almost meditative, waiting for that expectant release of tension and the influx of pleasure. The morning sun was streaming through the Venetian slats, the light creating a pattern of bars on the walls. It haloed around Katie's tanned naked body. Holding her tiny waist Parinda assisted her with her movements. As she moved her breath became erratic and she moaned a soft song that built up into a crescendo. Skin to skin they exploded until they were both too numb to move.

Later, after a catnap, when Katie extracted herself, Parinda's body shook. 'Oh,' Katie said, 'I didn't mean to wake you up.' Throwing the duvet aside, he invited her back in.

'Again?' she giggled. 'Oh, wait.' Rolling off the bed and padding across the checkerboard tile, she disappeared into the tiny bathroom. As the sound of water rained down on the bathroom tiles, Parinda picked up his phone and read his mother's text messages:

'Uncle Desmond will see us on Saturday. Good proposals. You're free to choose, but we want you happy.'

'String hoppers for dinner, come on time. I'll get Necto for you.'

'I'm disappointed you didn't take lunch. Wasting money.'

'Why no answer? Am I just wallpaper? You need to find me a good daughter-in-law. Serious.'

He put his phone down, thoughts shifting between his mother's expectations and Katie's carefree nature. His mother's world was steeped in tradition, rigid and clear, while Katie was a free spirit, untouched by the rules of a family.

The room was scattered with the aftermath of their midday rendezvous. Clothes, shoes, and the faint traces of their shared moments. Parinda bent down, picked up his trousers, and fished out the small velvet box that had weighed on his mind for days. He flipped open the lid, gazing at the antique ring nestled in satin.

His thoughts wandered back to Ratna, the girl his mother had chosen for him. She was everything his family expected: well-mannered, modest, perfect in the kitchen. Amma had once lit up at the sight of Ratna managing a food stall, ticking off qualities like a shopping list: 'good childbearing hips', 'Govigama Kandyan', 'fair skin'. Amma's enthusiasm was like the monsoon wind, sweeping Parinda along with it.

But it had taken only a handful of dates for him to realise they weren't a perfect match. The rigid boundaries Ratna set for herself didn't align with his own flexible, modern values. They'd parted ways amicably, understanding they didn't fit, despite ticking all the right boxes on his mother's list.

Katie, whom Parinda had discovered on a dating app, felt like a breath of fresh air. With a body reminiscent of Nicole Kidman, elongated and elegant, she defied the traditional expectations of a Sri Lankan bride. She lacked the societal markers of childbearing hips, was free from caste, and her spirituality revolved around yoga poses like Ardha Matsyendrasana and Janu Sirsasana, which she practised twice a week at a studio in Newtown. She possessed none of the traditional 'goodnesses' his mother valued in a prospective daughter-in-law.

But none of that mattered to Parinda. In his eyes, Katie was everything he had ever wanted. With her striking blue eyes, translucent skin, and long, thick auburn hair, she embodied the fairy-tale beauty he had fantasised about since childhood. She was his Elena the Beautiful, his Marfusha, and his Vasilisa the Wise, all rolled into one. And waking up beside her felt like a dream come true.

Several days ago, he had removed his grandmother's ring from the ebony box that housed Amma's treasured items, feeling no guilt about it. Amma had made it clear that the navaratna ring was intended for the right person when the time was right. Despite the stark contrast between Amma's expectations and his own vision of the 'right person', Parinda was unwavering in his belief that the woman humming in the shower was meant for him.

Turning the blue velvet box in his hand, he sat momentarily listening to the slips and slaps under the running water. The ring came off its cushion, and he placed it on his palm.

Sunlight fell on the tiny solar system and made a disco ball pattern. But then a voice, Appachchi's, whispered in his head. The voice was able to sway his decision again. Leaving the ring for another day, he placed the velvet box on the teapoy and stood up.

When Katie re-emerged from the bathroom, Parinda had picked up all their clothes and placed them on the bed, ready to be put back on. Katie deliberately brushed past, her fingers dancing on Parinda's shoulders for a moment. He smiled, knowing their clothes would have to remain in place for a while longer. Katie had towel-dried her hair, but water droplets still hung on the ends of strands, reluctantly escaping and making dark spots on the mustard velvet lovers' seat she plopped herself on.

'What's this?' she asked, reaching out to pick up the velvet box Parinda had placed on the teapoy. His limbs promptly sprang into action, like a mantis, reaching Katie in two long strides and grabbing the box off her hand. He then knelt on the floor as exposed as the day he was born, opened the box, and presented the ring to her.

'Katie Anne-Marie Fox,' Parinda's voice trembled, 'will you marry me?'

Katie gasped, her eyes wide in disbelief. Her face lit up with a grin so wide it practically split her cheeks. 'Yes! Of course, yes!' she shouted, her arm shooting out with such speed it was a miracle it didn't dislocate.

Her hand was shaking when Parinda gently took it in his own. His large, steady palm enveloped her smaller one as he carefully slid his great-grandmother's navaratne ring onto her finger. The ring, obviously not made to size, resisted. Parinda twisted and turned until it slid down Katie's finger and halted at the base.

Her eyes lit up, sparkling with the uncontainable excitement of a child in a Christmas store. The gold band on her finger caught the light, scattering tiny rainbows of red, green, yellow, and blue dancing across the room. A cold breeze slipped in through the open window, brushing against Parinda's bare skin and raising goosebumps, but neither of them noticed. They stood rooted in place, frozen in their shared joy, their gaze fixed on the rare antique piece before them.

Parinda was still on his knees, his flaccid member dangling between his legs when the ring, resting on Katie's finger, ignited right before their eyes, a fireball gripping her ring finger. Katie jolted up from the lover's seat, her towel dropping right onto Parinda's head, plunging him into darkness. 'Shit!' he shouted, wrestling with the towel. When he emerged, Katie was hunched over, clutching her arm. Her face was contorted in pain, tears streaming down her flushed cheeks. Her voice morphed into a series of frantic, guttural sounds, half sob, half scream, a symphony of panic.

‘Whaaa, whaaa,’ she cried. ‘Fuck, shit, fuck, fuck, shit!’ she chanted.

Parinda lurched forward, nearly falling flat on his face. Katie’s finger was literally smouldering, a thin plume of smoke snaking up. The ring glowed a furious red, pulsing as if alive.

‘Katie, take it off! Now!’ he shouted, diving toward her hand.

Her wails and screams startled him to the core but what bothered him the most was the smell. The thick unmistakable stench of burning flesh engulfing the room transported him two decades or so back to a day in his homeland: young and innocent, he was standing at the foot of the hill open to the vast cricket grounds in the highlands of Sri Lanka. In the middle of the field, a giant pyre stood, covered in white tissue paper, burning ferociously. Parinda recalled the sting in his eyes and the words he uttered, ‘What’s that smell?’ The tall thin man in military uniform, his dead grandfather’s footman wept and told Parinda that it was the smell of his grandfather’s flesh burning in the scorching fire. Parinda remembered how his stomach leapt to his throat, regurgitating his entire afternoon meal. Dried fish, red rice, and pumpkin white curry.

There, with Katie’s hand in his, Parinda inhaled the nauseating scent of burning flesh again. It churned his stomach and brought up to his throat the brunch he had shared with her earlier, spaghetti in Bolognese sauce.

‘Hold still, Katie! Just hold still!’ Parinda shouted over Katie’s screams. He held her hand, the towel shielding him from the flames. ‘I’ve got it! I’ve got it!’

Katie’s cries intensified when he yanked the glowing ring off her finger. The ring clattered to the floor, sending sparks skittering across the tiles. Her body went limp, and she fell, her forehead colliding with the edge of the bed.

Half an hour later, Parinda’s face was a portrait of dismay as he wheeled a disoriented Katie down the fluorescent-lit corridor to the RPA’s emergency room. His heart raced with a mix of anger, guilt, and confusion. What had just happened? The ring, the fire – was this some kind of cosmic punishment for disobeying his parents? As he pushed the wheelchair, his thoughts spun.

A young medic in blue scrubs appeared, looking as if they had just stepped out of a medical drama. With a tone that hovered between concern and curiosity, they asked, ‘A branding ritual gone wrong?’

‘Eh?,’ Parinda stammered in disbelief.

The medic shrugged dismissively and began tending to Katie’s finger. Parinda stood awkwardly by, feeling like an extra in a movie.

When Katie was finally discharged, her hand bandaged and her dignity barely intact, she muted herself like a phone on airplane mode. In the Uber, every attempt Parinda made to start a conversation was met with the kind of silence that felt like a black hole, cold, empty, and sucking all joy.

Once they reached the flat, Katie remained committed to her vow of silence. She changed into her cotton nightdress and slid under the covers like a turtle retreating into its shell. Parinda stood there, watching the lump she made under the duvet, scratching his head.

Determined to patch things up, he then swung into action, bustling around the apartment like an overzealous butler. Though small, Katie's apartment was a charming showcase of vintage elegance. She was the homely sort, the kind who embroidered tea towels, hand-stitched teapoy covers, and baked delicious goods in her cozy kitchen. Her space was adorned with carefully selected bric-a-brac. In the centre of the living room sat a Balinese-style divan, paired with an ebony armchair intricately carved with patterns on the armrests, reminiscent of the two chairs Parinda's amma had shipped from her ancestral home. On one side of her small bedroom stood a large Indian almirah inherited from her great-aunt Louise, restored to its original beauty. The focal point of the room was a writer's desk she used as a dressing table, a polished mahogany piece with brass fixtures, more than a hundred years old. Katie's maximalist approach left little room to move in the minimal space, reminding Parinda of his own home where he had to navigate through the sea of imported antique mahogany furniture and brassware.

He felt like a clumsy giant, pacing the room awkwardly. Shoeless, he stumbled over the edge of a rug, his elbow grazing a bookshelf. A row of delicate elephants teetered, and the brass knickknacks jingled in protest. His eyes darted to Katie. There was no movement.

He approached the kitchenette and made tea. English breakfast, calming vibes, a perfect offering for a lover of tea. He placed the cup on Katie's bedside table. 'Tea, Katie,' he whispered to the duvet lump.

Nothing.

Next, he straightened up the pillows, fluffing them and rearranging them.

Not a peep from Katie.

As a last resort, Parinda dimmed the lights and fumbled around for a candle to light. In his clumsy search, his large hands toppled over a row of Babushka dolls lined up on her dresser, causing a small commotion that finally got a reaction.

'Please,' Katie hissed from under the duvet.

‘Can’t we at least try to figure this out together?’ Parinda pleaded, approaching the bed and smoothing the sheet over her body, as if ironing out the wrinkles. Katie stirred but remained quiet. Taking her silence as a sign of progress, Parinda cautiously lay down beside her. But no sooner had he settled than Katie sprang away from him with the agility of a startled cat, rolling to the far edge of the bed.

‘Please. Leave,’ she commanded from beneath the duvet, her voice muffled but unmistakably firm.

Chapter 9

On the fourth day of Katie's silence, Parinda woke with an all-too-enthusiastic morning greeting from his body, a clear sign that his longing for her had reached unbearable levels. His frustration matched his desire, both growing with each unanswered call, each ignored message. He had been relentless, calling at all hours, pouring out apologies, nearly begging for a response. But her silence was deafening, leaving him in a constant state of anguish.

That morning, however, felt different. There was a flicker of hope, something new simmering beneath the frustration. Fumbling for his phone with the clumsiness of a desperate man, he dialled Katie's number once more, half-expecting the same crushing silence. Holding his breath, he pressed the phone to his ear. And then, her voice.

'Hello,' she said.

Parinda froze, heart racing. 'Katieee, Katie,' he stammered, his voice cracking.

'Hello,' Katie said again, her voice groggy, as though she hadn't fully shaken off sleep.

'Listen ... Katie. Oh, Katie…' Parinda's words tumbled out, desperate to keep her on the line, to make the most of this fragile opportunity.

'Hello,' Katie repeated. 'Parinda. Hi. Hello!' She, too, seemed to be fishing for words, unsure where to begin.

Their brief, lopsided conversation of mostly Parinda pleading and stumbling over apologies felt like it could dissolve at any second. But then, just as he was about to lose hope, Katie said, 'Okay. Let's meet.'

Parinda nearly dropped the phone.

Later that afternoon, he sat at the restaurant, eyes fixed on the door waiting for Katie. He had almost given up hope of seeing her when she arrived, half an hour late. Katie spotted him and made her way through the tables. Parinda's eyes followed her, lip curled up. She was dressed in an ankle-length skirt, a sleeved lace top and dangly earrings. Her makeup was flawless, kohl-lined eyes, a rosy blush that highlighted her cheeks, and a soft baby pink lipstick that tied the look together. She'd clearly put in the effort, and Parinda took it as a positive sign, a flicker of hope in the sea of uncertainty.

Her hand, still bandaged but freshly dressed, caught his eye. Parinda's heart ached to reach out, to hold her hand and soothe her. But the guarded look on her face held him back,

forcing him to restrain himself like a child waiting for permission to raid the traditional New Year table.

She didn't wait for him to pull out the chair for her – a clear sign that her anger still simmered beneath the surface. Her feminist streak always flared up when she was upset. She sat down, glancing at him before raising an eyebrow and asking, slightly incredulous, 'Sri Lankan?'

Parinda hesitated. He didn't want to explain. The restaurant, a small Sri Lankan spot in Glebe, was a deliberate choice. True, it was close for Katie from Chippendale, but more than convenience, it was the familiar scent of spices and the towering portrait of King Rajasinghe on the wall that Parinda hoped would bolster his courage. This was where he wanted to make things right, to confront the ring-shaped elephant in the room.

'How have you been?' Parinda asked, trying to puncture the silence that felt thicker than a monsoon cloud. Katie raised her bandaged hand. Her lips remained tightly sealed.

'Cheese kottu is mild. Goes well with mild fried chicken,' a server with a man bun intercepted, a thick menu in hand. Katies eyes darted to Parinda, the faintest glint of amusement flickering in her eyes. Grinning, Parinda ordered.

'One chicken kottu, dhal curry, lunu miris, two egg hoppers, four plain hoppers, pumpkin curry ... and pol sambal. Oh, and a Lion lager too, please,' he rattled off, then adding, 'Go full spice.'

The waiter shook his head, unimpressed. 'Sure?' he asked.

Parinda nodded. He caught Katie's lip curling ever so slightly. Her eyes glinted with a certain excitement only Parinda knew. Oil drenched, spicy food did that to her. Infused with a glow of hope, he waited till the server dashed off to continue.

'Did you walk?' he asked, leaning in. He breathed in the cloud of perfume that circled around her. A strand of her hair fell across her face, Parinda fought the urge to tuck it behind her ear. 'This restaurant wasn't here then, right? When you were an undergrad? Or was it? I've been on this street, but I don't remember.'

'I can't remember … maybe?'

Their conversation sputtered, stalling like an old engine struggling to start on a frosty morning. Parinda searched for words, but nothing seemed quite right.

'This is hot. Chilli hot,' the server warned, now back, filling the space and the table, sliding bowls of curries, dangerously red. 'And this,' as he placed the Lion lager beside Katie's plate, 'is the rescue. Definitely will put out the fire!' he chuckled.

The table was a colourful battlefield of delicacies. Egg hoppers and plain hoppers took centre stage, flanked by a platter of kottu roti, a bowl of dhal, and the fiery lunu miris. The pumpkin curry and the pol sambal sat meekly at the table's edge.

Katie dived straight in like a pro. She served herself an egg hopper, dolloped some dhal, heaped a mountain of kottu, then ladled on the lunu miris and pol sambal. Without hesitation, she tore off a piece of hopper, scooped up bits of the curry, and popped it into her mouth with precision. The transformation was immediate. Her face lit up in a slow-motion montage of pure satisfaction.

'You missed this, didn't you?' Parinda asked, a small smile tugging at his lips.

Wiping her mouth with the napkin, Katie exhaled deeply, then took a measured sip of water before looking directly at Parinda.

'What really happened?' she asked, her eyes narrowing. 'Was it some kind of ... branding? Ownership?'

'Huh? What? Branding?!' Parinda gasped, swallowed wrong and coughed. 'Katie … branding? What the devil?' He hesitated. 'Aha! The medic at the emergency!' he exclaimed, a chuckle escaping his mouth. 'Of course! Savage us! Branding! Women aren't cattle, Katie!' His voice took on an unintentionally high-pitched, squeaky edge that he instantly regretted. Desperate to dial it back, he reached out and gently took her bandaged hand.

She didn't pull away.

'Please,' Parinda begged, 'Hear me out. You can't keep blaming me for what happened. It wasn't my doing, honestly! The ring combusting, burning you, it just *happened*!' He threw his hands in the air. 'Totally unexpected. I was just as stunned as you were. True! It is an antique ring … made for the king's son, or something like that, and then it became ours. That's what my mother told me.'

As Parinda rambled on, Katie listened without a word, her eyes narrowing slightly. When she finally broke her silence, her question blindsided Parinda.

'Did you steal it?'

Parinda blinked. '*What*? No! Of course not!' His voice shot up an octave. 'It's a family heirloom! Passed down through generations!' He gestured wildly. 'My mother *wanted* me to propose with it when I found the right person. She *told* me so!'

'Maybe there's more to it,' Katie muttered, and asked, 'Witchcraft, hexes, spells ... Maybe the ring is cursed?'

'Cursed?' Parinda echoed, turning the thought over in his mind. Witchcraft and hexes weren't entirely foreign to him. His parents believed in such things, things of the occult. He'd

never paid much attention, but he knew the stories tied to Aunty Gayatri who lived two doors away from his parents' house. Amma had told him about her rituals, blessings, curses, and exorcisms to chase away devils. He took a deep breath.

'You know what, Katie?' His eyes gleamed with a conspiratorial spark. 'Maybe you're onto something. Just maybe … there could be some magic involved.'

He launched into tales he had heard over the years, stories from the homeland his father shared, about a man in his village who buried a cursed ornament in a rival's garden, bringing ruin upon the household. Of a woman who won the heart of a younger man by feeding him a hexed concoction. He trailed off with the last story. He stared hard at the bandaged hand. 'It *is* an heirloom,' he murmured, almost to himself. 'No idea what kind of energy it carries, right?' His mind drifted for a moment before snapping back. 'But one thing's for sure, let's get this straight now.' He crossed his arms, voice firm. 'I did not steal the ring. It's mine, okay? Passed down through generations, saved by my mother specifically for my future bride. Cursed or not, that part's legit.'

Parinda rubbed at his temple, Katie's stare unwavering on him.

'Honest to God, Kat, this is my ring. My ring for my bride!' Parinda bit his lip, hesitating, 'My parents, though ... how should I put this ... they're, uh, not exactly going to be your biggest fans.'

Katie folded her arms over her chest and pushed herself against the backrest. 'Huh?' escaped her lips.

'They don't even know about us. It's not you, it's them,' he rushed, the words spilling out faster than he could stop them. 'The whole, you not being brown thing ... yeah, that's, uh, not gonna fly with them.'

'Not being brown?' Katie echoed. 'Seriously?' She shook her head and played with a strand of her hair. 'You're kidding, right? That's insane, Pari. Completely insane! I mean … what century are they from? What could they possibly have against me?'

Parinda barely got the words out, 'It's not you specifically', before he swung his arm a little too enthusiastically, a 'salang' vibrated the space, as the copper bowl of pumpkin curry launched into the air like a rogue discus, did an acrobatic spin and landed on the floor. Before he could process this, the server, man-bun bouncing, swooped in. Without a word, he scooped up the fallen bowl and knelt beside Parinda's chair. The couple watched in silence until at last the server wiped the last off the floor, stood up and left.

From the bar, there was a sudden eruption of laughter. Then just as quickly it died down. Katie's eyes shot to the sound. Her nose wrinkled, but she didn't say a word. Looking

at her, Parinda felt a small sense of relief, a subtle truce, a nod toward normalcy between them. As he leaned forward and clasped her hands in his, her jaw relaxed, and a smile tugged at her lip. Parinda took it as a green light to continue.

'You see,' he began, 'ours is a culture where parents shape every part of their children's future. And ... well, you're not exactly the girl they envisioned for me.'

Katie pursed her lips.

'I don't mean that I feel the same way!' Parinda added quickly, squeezing her unaffected hand a little tighter. 'But the truth is, my parents are ... old-fashioned. Leaving the homeland didn't change their mindset. My mother has always had this picture of the perfect daughter-in-law, brown, Buddhist. Kandyan would be best but that could have been overlooked as long as she is a Sinhalese. But definitely one skilled at making curry, a homemaker, an antique lover … and all that … also the obedient type, absolutely not someone who talks back.' He chuckled nervously.

Katie's smile faltered.

'And definitely not ... well, white,' Parinda mumbled, shifting uncomfortably. 'It's this strange leftover idea from colonial times.' His lip curled up as he added in a whisper, 'like whites are the enemy or something, sneaking around to steal all our cinnamon.'

Katie pulled her hands back slowly, her expression hardening as she stared at him, digesting his words.

'Reverse racism.' she said, half-whispering.

Parinda shook his head but didn't speak. While Katie took a moment to compose herself, he seized the opportunity to roll up a plain hopper and drag it across the plate, scooping up the last remnants of curry like a culinary bulldozer. Breaking off a generous chunk of the curry-soaked hopper, he chewed it slowly, knowing he'd said enough for now.

'I know how important your family is to you, Pari,' Katie picked her words carefully. 'That makes them important to me too. I'm going to charm the sari right off your mother,' she added with a playful grin. 'Tell me what to do.'

There was an almost mischievous sparkle in her eyes, like Dorothy ready to take on the Yellow Brick Road.

'Would a deeper tan help?' she laughed, her carefree spirit back in full swing.

Parinda nearly choked on his hopper. As he looked at her, the thought hit him like a spoonful of fiery lunu miris: Katie was practically the daughter-in-law his mother had always dreamed of. She was dressed in a long skirt that swept the floor. She didn't take alcohol. She kept her home spotless, loved to cook, treasured antiques, and, he had to admit, she took care

of him in a way that mirrored his amma's TLC. And to top it all off, today she had her hair in a single braid, just like his mother usually did. It was like Katie was accidentally ticking off boxes on some unwritten list of 'how to impress your Sri Lankan boyfriend's mother'.

'Oh, and one more thing,' Parinda added with a chuckle, leaning in like he was about to drop some ancient secret. 'The bride has to be a virgin.'

Water sprayed out of Katie's mouth. 'Good luck finding a white virgin!' she quipped, delivering a kick under the table. Her laughter rang.

Parinda winced, rubbing his shin. 'Hey! I'm just the messenger here! It's part of the *ancient* criteria!'

Katie smirked. 'Well, tell your parents the factory stopped producing those around the same time Facebook was born. You might need to lower their expectations, like way down.'

As the lightness of the moment settled over them, Parinda gently caressed Katie's bandaged hand. His thoughts wandered back to Gayatri and the stories he'd heard over the years, the whispers of her peculiar abilities, her knack for untangling the inexplicable.

'I think we should sneak into LSL and talk to Aunty Gayatri,' he said, his eyes flickering to Katie's hand. 'She might be able to explain this whole ring combustion thing.'

Katie tilted her head. 'Huh? Aunty who now?'

'Aunty Gayatri, she is like a shaman, or … a sha-woman? A woman shaman,' Parinda tried. 'Anyway, this aunty is into mystical magical stuff. My mother swears by her, home remedies, chanting, blessings, you name it she's got it. I have a feeling she'd know what's going on with this.' He tapped her bandaged hand lightly.

'So, does this mean I'm meeting your parents soon, then?'

Parinda hesitated. 'Not quite … hmm. But while we are there, we might as well see the estate doctor, too. I know the burn's already been handled at emergency, but he is a Sri Lankan doctor. And that ring is, after all, a Sri Lankan problem.'

Chapter 10

‘So, who gave you this? Your mum or his mum?’ Christine asked, watching Ratna fold the white cloth and place it neatly in her suitcase like someone packing the crown jewels.

‘His mother gave it to my mother, and my mother gave it to me,’ Ratna explained.

‘Is that how it’s done then? Like normally?’

‘I don’t really know, but that’s how it went down for me.’ Ratna wasn’t offended.

‘I honestly can’t believe you’re going along with this. It feels kinda … primitive, yeah?’

‘Nothing wrong with traditions,’ Ratna shrugged. ‘I mean, aren’t you all about sneaking some Sri Lankan vibes into your music?’

Christine had got into composing. She was experimenting with mashups of English and Sinhala songs. ‘Hmm, touché,’ she smirked.

‘Besides,’ Ratna said, with a smug little grin, ‘I have nothing to worry about.’

‘True dat, gurl, true dat!’ Christine laughed, flipping her hair. ‘You got that right, *Virgin Bride*!’ She winked.

Ratna chuckled. ‘Virgin Bride – that’s me!’ she exclaimed.

Ratna was proud of her unwavering commitment to keeping her legs tightly shut until the wedding night. She was absolutely certain she’d pass the ‘white cloth virgin test’ with flying colours, like a star student acing an exam.

Getting ready for the big event now, she puffed up with pride, feeling as radiant as a peacock flaunting its feathers. After all, she’d remained a virgin to the day, pure as the first frangipani bloom of spring. She had been twelve when it all began. As soon as she showed her blood-stained panty to her mother, everything had changed for her.

‘Drink up. You need protein,’ her amma had said, handing over a mug of coffee in which an egg was floating, the yolk still raw. Then she was guided to her room. New bed sheets were laid, and the blinds were shut. ‘Males can’t see you now. For several days Duwa. Not even Thaththa. Not till the auspicious day.’

Aunties of the estate marched in, to be the life gurus of the girl who turned to womanhood. Gayatri was summoned. She arrived as if gliding in from another realm, draped in a long white dress that whispered around her ankles, her thick hair braided neatly down her back, a stack of weathered books peeking from the mouth of a satchel slung across her shoulder.

A desk had already been cleared in Ratna's room, waiting like an altar. Gayatri sat, opened her books, and began – scribbling, flipping pages, murmuring calculations under her breath. When she finally looked up, her eyes sparkled with the sort of certainty that left no room for argument.

'Four-thirty in the morning,' she said, her voice soft but somehow echoing, 'on the fourth of July. That is her time. Gold is her colour.'

Just like that, a switch flipped. Amma and the aunties snapped into action like devotees after a sermon. Yards of gold fabric were bought. Amma sat at the machine and stitched a dress with puffed sleeves. Surangani took over the kitchen. All kinds of delicious aromas flew out for days, fried, steamed and cooked. Heirloom gold jewellery was taken out and polished, some separated for Ratna to wear after she was bathed in the ritualistic medicinal water. Those were all good memories Ratna carried with her. It was when Amma had the 'eel and the cave' talk that Ratna was left with a sense of permanent excitement.

'Wouldn't it be an excellent gift to give my husband? "Virgin bride" has a ring to it. I am going to do it!' A determined young Ratna confided to her friends.

'Admirable gurrl. Really! I don't know how you did it. When all of us fell like dominos. I mean, I really thought you would give in to Parinda. Ohhh, my lordy, lord ... bench pressing with that body on display! I would have melted. You my dear are a saint. A saint!' Christine was laughing when Ratna's mother walked in.

'Almost packed?' She reached the open suitcase and ran her fingers over the folded clothes. 'Come have tea when you are done. Christine, we will miss her when she leaves noh?' Her lips quivered but she smiled.

'Aww, Aunty Sheila!' Christine draped her arms around Ratna's mother. 'Her home is only a ten-minute drive. You wait and see, she'll be at your place every day!'

The women chuckled but there was an unspoken sadness. Sheila nodded and strutted out. Ratna blinked and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

'Here.' Christine pulled a wrapped box out of her backpack. 'This is for you. For your "virginity on a platter" ceremony.' She laughed. 'Wear this and seduce that husband of yours.'

'Husband!' Ratna let the words swirl in her mouth. 'Husband,' she said, sitting on the bed. She grabbed the box from Christine's hand and tore the wrapper open. 'What is it … what is it?' she asked, pulling out a garment in soft fabric. 'Oh, my my!' she said, unravelling a pink see-through lacy nighty. Gathering it to her chest she said, 'Seduce Lalith Bandara with this? Sure, can do!'

Their giggles faded into a silence. With the lacy number still to her chest, Ratna let thoughts of the man she was about to wed flood her mind. Lalith Bandara always smelled beautiful like he habitually showered with Aqua Di Gio. His skin always glistened like he had slathered coconut oil all over his body. He wasn't a tall, pretty, no-body-fat kind of guy, but he was an actual man, projecting caveman sort of vibes, with skin the colour of an over-fried Sri Lankan oil cake, boasting a well-manicured beard with a Volodymyr Zelenskyy sort of walk, a purposeful walk to a rhythm in his head. Ratna liked his walk. Ratna liked his smile. Ratna liked the way he smelt. She licked her lips before folding the garment carefully and placing it on top of the pile in her suitcase.

'It's going to be good!' Ratna voiced. 'You know, Aunty Gayatri said Lalith is a native of the watery sign of Cancer, whatever that means, and I am native of earthy Capricorn. She said that's the best match for marriage.'

'You and your Aunty Gayatri!' Christine elbowed her friend. 'She is God to you and your mother!'

'Honestly though, if Aunty Gayatri had said the horoscopes don't match, I wouldn't have gone through it, you know. Aunty Gayatri is amazing! You should let her read your horoscope, Christine. You should! She can read you your love life.'

'I don't think I have one of those … a horoscope I mean!' Christine laughed. 'Hey, predictions aside, anyone can see the two of you are a perfect match. Lalith and you, you guys will have a happy marriage, mark my words. He is not a bad looking guy, ehe?' Christine whistled. 'And that walk of his … hmmm. Lucky girl!' They both burst out laughing.

On her wedding day, Ratna's transformation had begun very early in the morning, even before Uncle Chandrasekara started attacking his violin. The white Buddhi batik osari her amma had flown in from Sri Lanka draped flawlessly over her figure. She looked radiant, glittering in the twenty-six pieces of jewellery, with a jewel flashing in the centre of her forehead. It had taken three makeup artists to transform her into a vision, but when it was time to remove it all, Ratna was left to fend for herself.

It was close to midnight when the newlyweds settled in the honeymoon suite. After a brief chatting session, Lalith Bandara disappeared for a shower. Ratna sat for a moment devising a plan to escape the finery attached to her body. The thick gold bangles slipped off easily. She unpinned the hawadiya, and placed it aside carefully. The real battle came next. Her hands ached trying to dislodge the sun and moon pinned and threaded through her hair. It

was like some medieval booby trap refusing to budge. After a quiet struggle, she freed her head from its celestial captivity, only to be met with the true enemy, the seven necklaces.

The more she tried the more the swans and the lotuses got entangled. Separating them was like trying to untangle Christmas lights after a hurricane.

By the time Lalith Bandara emerged from the bathroom, dripping wet and wrapped only in a towel that clung to his hips, Ratna was still entangled in her jewellery. She lifted her head and looked at him. Droplets of water clung to her new husband's chest, catching the light in a way that made his skin shimmer. Ratna swallowed hard. She felt heat radiating in her veins and putting a dust of pink on her cheeks.

Lalith stood with his hands on his hips, a smile splitting his face. 'Need a hand?' he asked, swallowing a laugh. Ratna nodded, all words disappeared. Lalith Bandara moved quickly. His stubby fingers worked with surprising efficiency, unpinning, pulling, and tossing aside each stubborn piece of jewellery. He was breathing with his mouth opened, spreading minty freshness. He muttered at intervals:

'Heck.'

'How many …'

'What the …?'

As the number of untangled, unpinned and removed items grew, so did his breathing, each exhale a little heavier, each movement a little shakier.

When the batik sari and the blouse finally fell to the floor in a heap, Ratna breathed in, feeling like she'd just been freed from the weight of a small cow.

Lalith stood frozen momentarily, his eyes shifting all over Ratna's half-naked body. His mouth forgot to close. There was a slow moan building. He jolted abruptly. The towel tied on his hip dislodged, and there in full view was his member, standing guard, pointing right at Ratna.

Ratna felt heat rising from the pit of her stomach, entering her veins and spreading all over her. Her eyes stayed glued to the member, standing at attention. Lalith Bandara was a speed demon. Before Ratna could even blink, he was on top of her, moving with the urgency of someone late for an important meeting. Lifting her underskirt with all the finesse of unwrapping a lunch packet, he yanked her panties down, his breath hot and rushed near her ear. Ratna tried to participate, scraping his shoulders with her nails and fixing her body under him. But there were no best-seller romance vibes. No ambiance-setting dimmer switch flipped, no whispers of sweet nothings in her ears and foreplay was completely skipped.

Lalith, seemingly an expert at this sort of thing, located the entrance like a seasoned GPS. No fumbling. No awkward detours.

Ratna, for her part, was ready. She had her legs spread. Her hands gripped his shoulders, bracing for impact. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she imagined a tiny ceremonial conch shell being blown. *Prrrrrr! Gifting of Virginity!* And then, entry. Not a fanfare, not a spark, but a definite *something*. Ratna bit her lip and resisted the urge to announce, 'I think that was it!'

Lalith, meanwhile, was moving with the slow, mechanical determination of Premasiri Bappa's old sawmill: in, out, in, out. Focused. Rhythmic. Almost meditative. Then, just as suddenly as it had started, it ended. Lalith let out a moan, a sigh … and possibly a giggle?

Post-action, Lalith was all gentleness. 'You good?' he asked, patting Ratna on the head like she was a well-behaved puppy. Ratna, still processing the whirlwind of the previous few minutes, gave a smile. A reluctant smile while her mind was sprinting, trying to make sense of what just happened. Lalith Bandara nodded, grinning, rolled over and began snoring like a champion.

Ratna stared at the ceiling, at the blinding lights, wondering if she should laugh or cry. Or maybe both. Her head rested on a bed of dead flowers and sharp pins, face caked with layers of makeup, heavy earrings cutting into her flesh. Panty-less, underskirt bunched up, and boobs spilling out of her lacy white bra, Ratna felt the weight of the day's exhaustion hit her like a wave. She glanced at Lalith Bandara, snoring peacefully beside her, the supposed love of her life, the best thing that ever happened to her. Yet ... she sighed. Somehow, despite still feeling in love, she was overwhelmed with a lethargy she had never known before. Virginity had been sacrificed. Now what?

As the slimy residue between her thighs began to dry and crust, Ratna groaned. Gathering herself, dead flowers, hairpins, underskirt, bra and all, she slid off the bed. Shoulders slumped she walked across the room. Her bridal suitcase lay wide open on the floor; the *Bras and Things* lacy number Christine had gifted her for seducing Lalith Bandara mocking her from the top of the pile. She kicked the suitcase with her foot and continued to the bathroom.

Once inside, she plopped down on the toilet seat, spreading her legs wide as she gingerly poured water to soothe the sting when her urine hit her chafed skin. From her throne on the toilet seat, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. With an audible sigh she ran through the day's events in her head. From the early morning hotel trip and the laugh-fest with Christine, to her mother's warning about kajal smudges, to the noisy limo ride with her

entourage, everything was a blur of joy and chaos. She remembered the overwhelming mix of happiness and sadness when she touched her parents' feet, and how Lalith Bandara's accidental brushes sent waves of ... something, up her spine. Oh, and the butter chicken, she could practically taste it still.

She licked her lips and stood up, but a thought flickered in her head, buckled her legs and made her fall back onto the toilet seat again. 'Kirikadaheliya! O.M.G. Kirikadaheliya!' she gasped, her mind sprinting when she realised the catastrophic mistake she had made. The voices of her mother and the estate aunties came back to her as clear as if they were all in the toilet with her: 'Blood on the white cloth is the key to happiness with your in-laws!'

'Holy, holy shit!' Ratna yelped, stripping off her clothes in a frenzy and running back to the bedroom. She was like a woman possessed, skidding to the floor, and digging through her suitcase. She almost exhaled in relief when she saw the white cloth, neatly folded, several garments under the tormenting pink lingerie Christine had gifted her. 'You should have laid the cloth on the bed. Tsk, tsk, tsk.' A hologram of her mother appeared.

Ratna was shaking when she crawled to the bed. Her heart was loud in her chest. Kneeling on the bed she pushed her hands under her snoring husband and rolled him to the side. Lalith Bandara groaned and moved but didn't open his eyes. Soon the snoring began again. Ratna scanned the sheets on her knees, running her palms like she was panning for gems in Ratnapura. She beamed when she spotted the soiled spot on the bedsheet, the faintest hint of a bloodstain, barely visible, smeared across the white sheet like a smudged fingerprint. The red mark had already faded into a bluish blur, more like an accidental ink spill than the vivid, dramatic evidence she was supposed to produce.

Fresh panic surged through her. Ratna darted back to the bathroom, grabbing her phone on her way. She sat on the toilet again, dialling Christine.

'Hello?' came Christine's groggy voice on the other end.

'Christine!' Ratna hissed, barely above a whisper. 'I … I, errm, forgot the white cloth!'

'What? I can't hear you,' Christine mumbled.

'I forgot the white cloth!' Ratna repeated, louder this time. 'I forgot to put it on the bed before … you know what.'

'Oh!' Christine exclaimed, now fully alert. 'Oh no! Wait … did you bleed? At least on the bed sheet?'

'Yeah, sure did,' Ratna replied, sounding proud despite the dilemma.

'So, what's the issue? Just take the bedsheet home!' Christine suggested.

‘But ...’ Ratna hesitated. ‘The stain’s dry. It’s ... blue. Like an ink stain. Maybe the hotel fabric softener made it blue? I don’t know. Its blue. Like from a ballpoint pen. Not proper “proof of virginity” material.’

‘Oh!’ Christine exclaimed, followed by a second ‘*Oh, man!*’ There was a pause. ‘Lalith?’ she asked.

‘Snoring.’

And then, in true Christine fashion, a plan. ‘Okay, okay, hear me out,’ she said, her voice now brimming with enthusiasm. ‘Prick your finger and wipe it on your mother-in-law’s white cloth. You’re not cheating … technically, you *were* a virgin until Lalith did the deed. *How was it by the way?*’ She sped on, ‘Now, the issue is that the evidence had turned blue. You were a virgin. I can vouch for that. Anyway, give your in laws some red blood proof from a finger prick. Easy as!’ she finished triumphantly.

Ratna did as instructed. Out of the bathroom, she grabbed the white cloth from her suitcase, picked up a stray pin from the floor, and pricked her finger. Once, twice, until tiny mushroom-shaped red droplets formed on her fingertip. She blotted them onto the cloth, not once, but several times for good measure. Sitting in the stillness of the bridal suite, Ratna allowed herself a smile at her friend’s resourcefulness. But the smile quickly faded. Right before her eyes, the blood stains morphed, cyan mingled with indigo, cobalt swirled with navy, and periwinkle emerged, spreading across the white cloth like a disastrous art project.

Ratna groaned, her finger still stinging, and pricked a finger again, and then again. Each desperate attempt yielding the same result: blue. The once-reliable red that should have confirmed her purity morphed inexplicably into a defiant, bluish hue upon touching the white cloth, every time.

‘Ughhh.’ There was a drawn-out groan as she threw up her hands. The room suddenly felt colder, as if the temperature had plummeted, and a swirl of unfamiliar emotions began to overwhelm her. Without warning, she burst into tears, her sobs erupting from deep within, raw and uncontrollable.

‘Huh? Wha?’ Lalith Bandara asked, rolling over. He squinted at Ratna through one eye and propped himself on his elbows. ‘Wait,’ he mumbled, his voice thick with sleep, ‘what’s going on? What happened?’

Smiling widely, but with tears streaming down, Ratna tried to explain. ‘The kirikadaheliya … ha! … my blood … blue … oh Gos…’ A burst of giggles that soon turned into sniffles followed.

Lalith Bandara reached out instinctively, fumbling to touch Ratna's arm. He blinked against the light. Ratna gasped between giggles, wiping at her face and smearing her tears. She hiccupped mid-laugh and cried harder. 'I…hic…no! What the… Wah, wah, muwaha ha.' Lalith Bandara blinked and scooted closer.

Ratna's eyes flickered downward, at her husband's lap where his flaccid member lay nestled in a curly thicket, and just like that, a fresh wave of laughter bubbled up. She clutched her stomach, gasping between giggles. 'Oh … oh, my word,' she wheezed. She waved the white cloth in her hand and attempted to explain again.

'This … hic. Kirikada … hic.'

With a swift motion, Lalith Bandara took the cloth from her hands. 'Wait … are you serious? Who? *The* white cloth?' he stammered, his voice laced with concern. Hie eyes narrowed as he held the cloth to the light and scanned it carefully. 'Why? What? You are not hurt, are you?'

Ratna inhaled mid-laugh. 'See – blue,' she whined, reaching for the cloth.

Chapter 11

The street was empty when Christine set off for work. The noon prayer call blared from the mosque as she neared the main gate. It had been one of those weeks, the kind where she didn't get a moment to breathe. Preparations for Ratna's wedding had held her captive for almost a week and on top of that she was trying to make new music for her channel.

The night before had been especially hectic, not just because it was the wedding, and she was the maid of honour. The honeymoon shenanigans later had kept her awake. After the conversation with Ratna, Christine hadn't been able to sleep well. Just when sleep had finally begun to tug at her eyelids, a sharp *splat* jolted her upright. Then another chus, splat, and a barrage of sounds battered the roof like artillery. She shot out of bed, heart pounding.

Her father stormed out yelling, 'Sons of bitches! Your mothers should strike dead!' The bit of hair he had wrapped around his bald crown curling in the heat. He waved his hands at the empty street.

Mummy stood statue still, her lips pressed into a thin line and eyes skyward. She was summoning heavenly help, 'Our Father,' she chanted, 'who art in heaven.' But no miracle came. No culprits revealed themselves. The eggs rained down sporadically till dawn, each *splat*, and each chus more brazen than the last.

The morning was no better. The internet was down again, and Christine was fuming. Her latest mashup, 'Chant Beats Vol. 3', was trapped in limbo, unable to reach her adoring fans. Her parents were at each other's throats. Daddy was on his usual routine of 'accidental' forgetfulness, patting his chest and declaring, 'Did I take my heart pills? I can't quite remember …', which everyone knew was code for 'let's see how much attention I can milk before breakfast'.

Mummy wasn't having it. She was following him around the house like a one-woman pharmacy hotline. 'TID. Before meals. TID AC. How difficult is it? Why do you never listen, huh?'

Grandma Salome had lost her rosary beads.

'I saw then just here.' She was wobbling around speaking to walls and plants. 'Jesus, Mary, Joseph. I have been robbed blind!'

Christine felt like she was living in a mental asylum. She tore through the house like a headless chicken and found the rosary beads. She then force-fed her father his heart pills and

managed to tether the internet from her phone long enough to upload the music video. Then, with only half an hour to get to her workplace, she sprinted towards the estate's main gate.

She was approaching the Lion Gate, admiring its artistry gleaming in the sunlight, when, splat! A wet explosion hit her back. The stench of rotten eggs slammed into her face, and thick, slime-like goo slid down her shirt, like some cold, gross worm. It pooled at her waistband, some of it splattering onto the ground in yellow globs.

'Great. Just great,' she muttered, shuffling through her backpack. She fished out a gym towel and wiped furiously at her shirt, her back, her trousers. She looked around. No one. Not a soul in sight. Uneasy, she shoved the soiled towel back into her bag, checked her wristwatch, and picked up her pace.

Then, whoosh, splat! Splat! Two more eggs came soaring through the air like heat-seeking missiles. Christine barely had a second to react. One smacked her square on the forehead while the other slammed into her left cheek. She froze. The eggy slime slithered down her face. Her brain scrambled for a reaction, but nothing came, just the sticky, suffocating stench of sulphur clogging her nostrils. Her mouth opened, but no words formed.

The statues of homeland heroes stood in stony silence. Arunachalam gazed down with cement-filled compassion, while T.B. Jayah looked away, eyes fixed on the horizon. Christine lifted a trembling hand to her face and wiped. The mess smeared further, and a fresh wave of nausea swelled in her stomach. *Move. Do something.* But she just stood there, limbs leaden, mind blank.

A thin film of fog began to creep in then, blurring the lifelike heroes on their plinths. The street was eerily still, like a paused frame in a horror film. No hissing engines, no honking horns, just the wet squelch of egg yolk dripping onto pavement. Finally, Christine's voice returned, hoarse and barely above a whisper.

'Fucking … fuck.'

She sniffed and swiped at her cheek. Abandoning any hope of getting to work on time, she turned on her heel and marched back home. Mummy was in the garden. Her cotton housecoat hitched up above her knees and knotted in place. Holding the green garden hose up to her chin she was talking to herself. She was splashing water everywhere, soaking walls and the roof.

'Mummy?' Christine called out.

Mummy didn't hear her at first, too lost in her hose-wielding rage. Christine stepped closer. 'Uh, Mummy? What?' Mummy turned, blinking at her. 'Christine, oh darling, look,' she said, waving her free hand. 'Bloody rascals, egged the house again. Everywhere!'

Christine didn't know what to say. She was angry and sad at the same time. Mummy, still absorbed in her own rage, was slow to register the situation. But when she did, she went into full crisis mode.

'Oh sweet Jesus, Mary mother of God, Christine!' she gasped, rushing over. The hose slipped from her hand and fell to the ground, spraying water in all directions. Her hand flew to her chest.

'Oh, darling, darling!' She took Christine's egg-crusted face into her hands. 'Oh, the smell.' Her nose scrunched up, but her eyes softened. 'Come, come, darling,' she said, with her hand guiding Christine towards the house. Christine felt a bottomless emptiness as she walked head bent beside her mother.

Inside the house Mummy looked from Christine to the window. 'Sons of bitches! Oh, my baby, just look at you! These mindless goons ... I tell you. Go, go, honey.' She launched Christine to the bathroom. 'Go get rid of that god-awful smell ... Jobless sons of whores … There's a new Lux soap in the drawer, take one darling. And leave those clothes on the floor, I'll wash them … Unacceptable! Tsk, tsk.'

Christine scrubbed at her face and loofahed her back, feeling small. She couldn't think who would do this to her. She had no known enemies. With her hands on the tiled wall, she let lukewarm water cleanse her before drying and venturing out in the denim and t-shirt Mummy had left at the door.

Her mother was speaking in the living room. Phone wedged between shoulder and an ear, she was fixing things while waddling around the room.

'Oh, Tyrell, it's a *disaster* here. Its absolute chaos. Aha. Aha. The whole house I tell you, Tyrell. You should have seen Christine's face. And the smell. Paw aney. Poor child. Was crying also.' She paused and reduced the volume. 'Could it be some bank customer? I mean, did you antagonise anyone?'

Christine stood at the entrance arch and waited. A pail of water, a large bottle of white vinegar and a mop sat against the wall. Mummy acknowledged Christine's presence with a smile. 'Poor child, Tyrell, your daughter!' she bellowed into the phone. 'You should have seen. Dear, dear Lord!' Mummy then pulled the phone away from her ear and winked at Christine, 'Eggs are good for your skin.'

'Dear God, Tyrell,' she snapped back into the call seamlessly. 'Christine … and I? … Oh, I have *never ever* set foot in a police station. Honestly, Tyrell, the things you expect me to do! What if someone from here sees us there? You're giving me a headaches, Tyrell.' Mummy made a face, like she had bitten into brindle berry.

‘Hmm, hmmm, aha aha,’ she resorted to a series of vague noises in response. ‘What else to do, ha?’ With that, she stabbed at the screen and hurled the phone on to the sofa.

‘Can you believe this man! Ha, ha. Christine, call your work and get a leave. We have to go to the police station. Daddy said. Ohhh, that man,’ she lamented, waddling away.

Just as Christine ended the call with her workplace, Mummy hurried back. ‘Have you seen it? My handbag. Oh, there it is. Come, come,’ she said hurrying towards the door.

Forty minutes later the mother and the daughter were at Castle Hill police station.

‘Could this be some leftover tension from the war in your country?’ the officer noting down their concerns asked, flaunting his knowledge of world affairs.

‘Ohh, that war?’ Mummy shifted to the edge of her seat. ‘That was not our war to fight, noh. We are different,’ she said, looking at Christine for support. Christine sat silent. In her mind she attempted to solve the mystery of the egg throwing herself. Who could it be? Could it be connected to Ratna’s white cloth? Then shouldn’t she be the one getting egged? Christine felt silly for even thinking her friend or someone known to her was somehow connected to the egging. She sighed and turned her attention back to Mummy and the officer. Mummy was still explaining their role in the homeland war.

‘… the Dutch ruled Ceylon, Sri Lanka. We are Anglo. So, no … We don’t belong to any of those warring groups. Everyone loves us … there are no enemies,’ she assured. ‘Our people make breudher, not battle plans,’ she laughed.

‘Let’s get the house blessed,’ Mummy suggested as soon as they were outside. The visit to the police station had proven as useful as a cup made of chocolate to pour hot tea. Mummy was flustered. More than she was when the pair entered the police station. The stress had multiplied, exiting through her skin, her cheeks taking on a shade of pink. She was sweating profusely. She fanned herself, seeking relief from a domestic-abuse flyer she had nicked off a plastic holder at the police station.

‘Let’s call Aunty Gayatri?’ Christine suggested. ‘You know, when the eggs hit me, there was no one in sight. It was like some poltergeist shit, Mummy. Real Halloween vibes.’

Library goers joined them at the crossing, books in satchels. Books to chests. Cars whizzed past. Mummy’s fluttering-of-pamphlet became even more hectic.

‘Ratna and Aunty Sheila swear by Aunty Gayatri’s stuff,’ Christine continued. ‘Chasing of evil and whatnot.’

‘Hmmm.’ Mummy contemplated, eyes waiting for the red to turn green so they could cross the busy street. ‘Gayatri may be good at solving Buddhist problems, Christine. Call father Francis!’ It was a command.

Father Francis was an important person to the estate's Catholics. The hierarchy went from God, Jesus, Pope down to Father Francis in that order. Father Francis was the ordained priest who was imported from the Negombo church to tend to the flock in Little Sri Lanka. He had celebrity status and a visit from him was akin to God himself descending to earth.

The following day, Mummy's kitchen started buzzing early, in anticipation of the Father's afternoon visit. Rotten eggs serenaded the house while Mummy cracked a whole lot of good eggs and made Burgher treats.

By the time Father Francis parked his Corolla and ascended the steps, the Brohier house was feeling festive, like Christmas had come early. He inspected the walls, now clean thanks to Mummy's vinegar rub. He sniffed at certain places, wrinkled his nose and sprinkled water from a plastic bottle.

'From the Vatican.' Mummy elbowed Christine. 'Holy water. Pope himself blessed.'

The air quickly permeated with the fragrance of eau-de-cologne, the same fragrance of Mummy's home remedy for headaches.

Father Francis lingered a bit longer in Christine's room. A musical man himself, he read Christine's music sheets with interest.

'I was a choir boy since the age of six in Negombo,' he boasted. 'There was no dilly-dallying with Father Martin,' he mused, turning papers in his hand. 'Working on something new are you?' He turned to Christine.

Christine was like a turtle to water. She was eager to share. 'Yes!' she said beaming. 'I am making a mashup. Will be the anthem of our generation. There's Sinhala, Tamil and English. You know, chanting, drama songs and all that.'

Christine's musical journey had been a rollercoaster. Once a lead soprano, belting hymns like a pint-sized diva, she found choral music grew dull as puberty hit. The soaring melodies faded into background noise, like elevator music. Then, in a moment of musical crisis, she stumbled upon experimental beats and mashups – rebellious, fun, and exactly what she needed.

'Hmm, anthem of the generation,' Father Francis said, his words slow, leaving room to land. 'Youngsters these days, Tyrell, very talented you know. They have brilliant ideas. New and absolutely brilliant!' Christine felt validated. She stepped forward eager to receive praise.

Mummy was fidgeting with the biralu lace collar of her dress. Daddy listened.

'I tell you, Tyrell,' Father Francis said as he paced Christine's room sprinkling the pope-blessed water in all four corners. 'They need only one YouTube break, just like that, a

millionaire. Now, look at that Bieber boy. Doing so well, noh? YouTube!' He ventured out of the room with the family behind him, looking for unholy places to make holy.

Content that the worst was behind them, the Brohiers slept like logs that night, sinking into their pillows with the exhaustion of a family that had survived an unseen battle. Then, as the first rays of sunlight filtered in, the stench hit in full force, thick, acrid, and unmistakable.

'Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!' Mummy shouted, sprinting through the main door, clutching her nightie.

Chapter 12

Gossip Aunties

‘Christians have only one devil, noh. Not like us. We have so many devils. Who can tell which one is doing what, eh? Father Francis came, yes. He blessed the house, yes. But can you see results? Egging is still going on, noh*?* That horrible smell. I tell you! I complained to the council also.’

‘What can the council do?’

‘Oh, I don’t know ... give the Brohiers a warning? Here, don’t repeat what I say, okay? Don’t want Tania to misunderstand me. We are all friends after all, noh. Anyways, did you hear? Christine was singled out. Got bombarded with eggs at the gate. I heard!’

‘Oh really? Sin, noh. Poor child.’

‘Poor child my foot! She had it coming. Shameless girl, I tell you. Appalling!’

‘Why? What has she gone and done?’

‘What? None of you saw her on the internet. Really? What well do you live in?’

‘Another case of Biggest Fans?’

‘What? Biggest Fans? What on earth is that?’

‘Haven’t you heard of it? That’s a whole new thing. Girls getting naked on the computer. For money, for money. Believe me you – like prostitutes, I hear.’

‘You mean porno? Blue films?’

‘Yes, yes aanna, right. Porno. But it’s more like Uber or Doordash.’

‘Oh really? They can order naked girls like food?’

‘Ai-o pissuda. Madness. No, not like Uber, it’s like TikTok. You can watch them getting naked and doing all kinds of sexual stuff.’

‘Oh really? How do you know? You saw?’

‘Chik, don’t be silly. Deepti told me. Her friends are all doing. Suddo, aney. White girls. Don’t you know the type? They would do anything for money, noh. Apparently, I hear, it’s a high-paying job these days.’

‘That’s what I thought. It has to be whiteys. Not our kids! Christine? No way! Very unlike for a girl brought up in the estate to do that kind of thing!’

‘Not Biggest Fans, aney; that girl Christine, she does some kind of musical thing on the internet. Some new thing. Ranting, I think it’s called.’

‘You mean rapping? She is rapping without clothes?’

‘Rapping, ranting, I don’t know! Whatever. Clothes on, clothes on aney. Nothing to do with Biggest Fans. But that girl is making fun of Buddhism, left, right and centre. I would personally egg her for that. Really! I tell you, appalling.’

‘What exactly does she do that’s *so* bad for Buddhism?’

‘Listen. Here, don’t tell Tania I told, okay? Her daughter is on the internet, in a singlet top no less, singing our sacred song! Dancing like a decapitated worm. Shameful! Honestly, some children I tell you.’

‘Sacred song? Which one?’

‘Danno budun Ge. Aney. Danno budun Ge. Yes. You watch, will you? Blasphemy! Goes like Dom, du, du. Then comes – Danno budun ge, Sri darmas kan daaa. Christine and another girl

… a whitey, singing like crows. How bloody disrespectful. Doom, du, du, doom du. And then again, klesha nasna bikkshu aththeya bo seya … like that it goes, then there is some other loud beat and a man singing. Anyways, making fun of Buddhism. Ai-o! Awful to listen to. Rotten eggs? She deserves worse! People are blaggarding her, left, right and centre. Who would tolerate religion being ridiculed like that? The parents are to be blamed if you ask me. Don't tell Tania I said okay?'

'Christians, noh. Expected.'

'Just keep it to yourselves. Please. *Harida*? Okay? I mean, I am not one to criticise someone else's child, but my blood was boiling.'

'Hmmm. *Eka nemi*, not that, did you hear? Madhugayani has taken back her son. All is forgiven! *Pissu,* noh? Madness … after that boy eloped with a white woman in broad daylight; still forgave, noh! Not even an attractive girl, pale like a ghost … and with a child also!'

'Oh, a dye-vorced woman?'

'No, aney. Never married. Don't you know these white women, women's liberation and whatnot. Rubbish! Bedding before wedding! Bad influence on our kids, I am telling you. I hope it won't set a precedent here and our daughters thinking it's okay to have kids without marriage.'

'Our girls? *Apo*, I don't think so. No way. Ho. Say! Our daughters are brought up with our values, noh. I will predict, like the gecko they will all bleed on their wedding night.'

'I agree. Girls in the estate are very traditional. Observing Sil type, noh. Sunday church, daily puja and hijab, very well brought-up girls.'

Part 3

East Meets West

Chapter 13

Twice a week, they came to her, people from every corner of Little Sri Lanka, forming a line like eager customers at a bakery gone viral on TikTok. To the people of the estate, Gayatri was more than an exorcist; she was the keeper of ancient wisdom, a bridge between the seen and unseen. She read horoscopes, prescribed Ayurvedic cures, and calculated auspicious timings. But it was in matters of marriage that her influence reigned supreme. Parents entrusted her with their children's futures, believing that a match blessed by Gayatri was a bond destined for harmony.

After a short disappearance, tending to her daughter whose pregnancy had taken a complicated turn, Gayatri returned to the coffee house like she'd never left. One moment absent, the next fully installed at her usual corner. By mid-morning, she had already matched four horoscopes, prescribed a concoction for a throbbing molar, and blessed a bottle of sesame oil for an ear infection.

A group of three were next in line. A young woman flanked by a middle-aged man and a woman. It was the older woman who approached Gayatri. She unfolded a large envelope and pulled out two small booklets and handed them to Gayatri like an offering. 'For our daughter,' she said and backed away. Flipping through the pages Gayatri took in the information briefly before placing the booklets on the table, leaning in and scanning the contents.

There was an intense expression on the man looking on, the father of the bride. He was impatient. 'Moon and Venus in the right place?' he asked, tufted eyebrows raised. Gayatri drummed her fingers on the booklet closest to her but didn't speak. The mother of the bride tapped the man on his shoulder. They exchanged glances, exhaled and fell quiet.

Gayatri worked head bent. She wrote on a sheet of paper. There was a rhythm to her movements. The young bride-to-be watched, head tilted. All around them the coffee house was alive, its patrons going on about their day.

'Hmm, eighteen.' Gayatri's eyes flitted upwards finally, and a small smile tugged at her lip. 'A match of eighteen. That's very good.' She counted on the joints of her fingers. 'Ghana, isthri yoni, a very good match indeed.'

The mother of the bride exhaled deeply like she hadn't breathed for a long time. The father puffed out his chest. He glanced around. The onlookers were now invested in the news. They were leaning in, no longer interested in their ginger tea or black coffee.

‘Such excellent news!’ It was the mother who spoke. Her mood had turned from solemn to jubilant. ‘Oh! We were hoping you’d say the horoscopes match, Gayatri akka,’ she said, a wide smile spitting her face. ‘Good match after all, noh. The boy, you know, is a verata ... rarian. Verata,’

‘Vegetarian?’

‘No, aney, vetra-rain-ian.’

‘Veterinarian, Amma,’ the bride-to-be intervened. She looked through her long lashes and smiled at the aunties invested in her future.

‘Sha, sha, wedding bells soon, noh?’ one aunty chuckled, winking at the young girl. A clap rang through the space.

The celebrations came to an end with Gayatri’s ‘ahem’. The young bride-to-be and the parents left. Their jolly laughter trailed behind them like a kite soaring through the sky. Once the noise ebbed, Gayatri leaned back in her seat and exhaled a deep, satisfied sigh. She hadn’t felt this happy with her life during her early years in Sydney. She had spent endless hours sitting in the balcony of their Parramatta apartment, eyes wandering across the tiled rooftops and cement structures that caged her in. Her longing for the open spaces of her village, the smell of paddy and the sound of birds in the morning swelled like a deep-fried puri. Then came the move to Little Sri Lanka. It was little Sri Lanka that allowed her to breathe easy. New routines replaced old habits. Visits to Ruhunu Siri Kade, the coffee house, became a fixture, a routine that permitted her to practise her craft.

The sun climbed higher in the sky, warming the earth. Having concluded her tasks for the day, Gayatri shifted from her dedicated workspace to a cozy setting with two chairs and a table overlooking the lotus pond. Settled there, she inhaled deeply, welcoming the gentle breeze. But as her lungs filled, a wave of panic filled her.

‘Do you get that?’ she asked an older woman seated close by. The woman sat alone, polishing a silver bangle with a silk cloth. Her eyes darted up, checking Gayatri’s face.

‘The smell,’ Gayatri explained. ‘Do you get it?’

‘Fried fish? Rotten banana? Leeks?’ the old woman listed.

Gayatri nodded and shifted her eyes to the distance. She inhaled again. There was the earthy aroma of damp soil, the one that comes after the monsoon has softened the thirsty earth, and then there was the sweet smell of jasmine in full bloom. Gayatri shook her head. She could not disregard the other smell, the smell of rotting flesh. The stench she was noticing for days had intensified but it wasn’t just the smell, she was hearing voices and the faint mournful cry of the devil bird. And she could not ignore the fog that was clouding the

tops of the trees. Gayatri's face was slowly coating with sweat. Picking up a menu card she fanned herself vigorously. The noise attracted attention.

The owner of the coffee house, Lucien Fernando, approached with a clay pitcher and a glass in hand. 'Are you okay, miss?' he asked. Placing the glass on the table he poured. Water glugged before running down the long clay neck.

'Oh, this heat!' Gayatri picked up the glass and took a long sip.

'A cold juice would do the trick,' the man offered.

'Tea, please. Lukewarm.' Gayatri smiled.

Left alone again, she shifted her eyes and scanned the room. An eruption of laughter from the middle-aged women seated in a circle made a couple of heads turn. There was a ruckus at a daam table, a game gone south, two men arguing. After a moment, one of them stood to leave.

Selvam was at the kottu station, ready with two machetes in hand. 'Takata taka tak ta,' the beat began as he chopped the godamba roti on a sizzling metal sheet. 'Takata takata tak, takata, tak, ta,' the metallic symphony continued. Selvam threw in a playful hip action, winking at the patrons. Lucien Fernando bustled around, weaving through, replenishing cups and cleaning tables.

Gayatri tried to remain in the present, but the stench in the air distracted her. Her father had always said that strange odours, sightings and feelings were the burden of those who delt with the occult. With no warning, Sabita's son swam into her mind. The boy had been very sick when the parents summoned her not more than a week ago. He was lying in the foetal position on a single bed, muttering, his body was covered with blisters. 'Snakes, snakes,' he whimpered, eyes to the wall. Gayatri had seen these symptoms before. She had known it was the work of the Gara yaka immediately, but with chicken pox going around schools she hadn't come to a hasty conclusion. She hadn't had time to decide. Douglas had barged in and taken over. She swept away the memory of that unpleasant encounter and looked around the space. Catching the gaze of Munaweera outside by the lotus pond, she smiled. Munaweera walked to her.

'Almost paradise. Only the monkeys are missing.' Reaching over the half wall, he handed Gayatri a lotus, still a bud. 'For evening puja.'

Gayatri received the flower and placed it on a paper serviette.

'Thank you. I'll open it up before,' she said.

Munaweera leant against the wall his eyes to the sky. 'El Nino, La Nina, who knows anymore,' he observed. Clouds had gathered like dirty sheep against the blue-grey canvas.

‘And that odour ..,’ Gayatri tried again.

‘Hmmm, Karola,’ he replied with a shrug, ‘Today’s lunch special – deep fried dry fish.’

Gayatri’s shoulders slumped slightly. She ran her finger down the long stem of the flower and fell silent.

‘That boy Praha’s situation. Did you see?’ Munaweera stirred the conversation.

‘I heard.’ Gayatri pressed a hand to her temple. ‘Haven’t had the headspace, not with Mihiri’s condition. It’s been … a lot.’

‘Oh yes, how is she? Is she better now?’ Munaweera asked.

‘Hmm, she is better now. The vomiting stopped but she is still weak. But yes! Mihiri is much better.’ She paused then strengthened her back. ‘Praha? Yoga’s boy, right? Something about carrying a bundle of clothes?’

‘No, not carrying.’ Munaweera leaned in. ‘That’s the thing. I saw, Gayatri. With these two eyes. The boy sits – poof! A cloth bundle appears right next to him. Gets up and it’s gone. Like magic. A cloth bundle … like, like the ones dobhis carried those days. Remember? Aanna, just like that. Strange. Really strange.’ Munaweera tapped on the half wall.

Lucien Fernando’s son reached the table, a teacup in one hand and a small plate in the other. ‘Thaththa left the tea to cool down. Homemade welithalapa,’ he said, sliding the plate towards the middle of the table.

‘Oh yeah?’ Munaweera was interested.

The boy was enthusiastic. ‘Have one, Uncle. Today is for taste testing,’ he said, presenting the plate to Munaweera.

Picking up a piece of the sticky sweet, Munaweera headed towards the lotus pond. Lucien Fernando’s son responded to a finger click from another customer and left.

Gayatri gulped down her tea and smacked her lips. Giving the last bit of tea a swirl around, she peered down into the bottom of the cup. The sediments had clustered, climbing the wall of the cup. Gayatri sighed and disturbed the tea leaves with her thumb. Wrapping the paper serviette around the stem of the lotus, she pushed the chair back. But before she could straighten herself fully, an engine revved and came to a halt just outside the coffee house. Many heads turned to the spectacle. Gayatri’s too.

She recognised the car immediately and, with a sigh, settled back into her seat. Half hidden by a thick wooden pillar carved with leaves and birds, Gayatri watched Douglas emerge from the driver’s seat. Gayatri’s face twisted into a frown. She looked down at the empty teacup on the table, waiting for the moment to pass. When she finally looked up, she

was surprised to see the doctor walking towards her. There were eyes following Douglas's path. Those daam players paused their game. The kottu eaters were mid-munch and the aunties of the estate had silenced their chatter. Douglas swaggered over and yanked out the chair in front of Gayatri.

'Gayatri,' he said as he sat down. Elbows resting on the table, he raked his fingers through his hair. She tried to avoid his gaze but it wasn't easy when the man was right in front of her. Leaning back in the chair she allowed his presence.

'I hope you are not in a hurry to leave,' he said, but didn't wait for Gayatri's reply. 'I knew …'

'Takata tak ta,' went the kottu beat, just then disturbing his thought. His head turned at the sound. He waited; his eyes glued to the kottu cook.

Gayatri watched his face, muscles twitching in his jaw. As usual, he was very well groomed. He was clean shaven. His hair neatly cut, a mop on top, near-shaved on the sides. He wore tight khaki pants and polished shoes. His shirt sleeves were rolled up.

From the corner of her eyes, she saw several faces, mouths agape watching Douglas. The patrons of the coffeehouse seemed as puzzled as she was in the presence of the doctor in their watering hole. A place he never visited. Douglas was the type to frequent coffee shops outside the gates, sipping piccolos from small cups and enjoying flaky Danish pastries with cutlery.

Once the machetes stopped their dance on the metal kottu plate, Douglas shifted in his seat and flicked his fingers.

'What can I get you, doctor?' a young server appeared.

'A glass of cold water … cold,' Douglas drawled, emphasising the last word.

He managed a weak smile at Gayatri and waited till the young man left their side before speaking.

'The past couple of days have been a rollercoaster ... weeks, actually. People showing up with the oddest ailments. Very odd,' he said, shaking his head.

'Anything else sir?' The young server was back, ice clinking against the tall water glass.

'Not yet. Will call you.'

As soon as the boy disappeared, Douglas leaned in slightly, dropping his voice a notch.

'How's your daughter? I heard she was in hospital.'

Gayatri was surprised by the shift. ‘She’s getting better, thank you,’ she replied, her tone clipped but not unfriendly.

‘How far along? Three months?’

Her brow twitched, just a flicker, but enough to show she hadn’t expected that. ‘Yes. Just past three.’

‘Ah, three months. That’s when the nausea usually starts to fade.’ He carried on, listing symptoms like he was thumbing through a medical pamphlet. Gayatri nodded, listening, though she wasn’t entirely sure why he had come all the way to the kiosk to talk about Mihiri’s pregnancy.

‘I’m glad she’s recovering,’ he said finally, cracking his neck. Then, almost to himself, he murmured, ‘Strange went to stranger.’ He wasn’t really talking to Gayatri anymore. His eyes were fixed on the lotus pond, the land, the hills beyond. ‘This boy, the other day, a young man from here …’

The voices of the children sitting just outside disturbed that thought. The young voices rose and fell like the fizz of bursting soda bubbles. They were sitting in a half circle with Munaweera at the centre, perched on a stone. He was teaching the kids to make leaf crowns.

Douglas, caught in the infectious joy of that moment, smiled. ‘That age!’ he sighed before returning to his story. ‘Doctor–patient confidentiality,’ he said, his voice low. ‘I can’t tell you everything, you know what I mean.’ He paused, then launched into a detailed account of the strange and inexplicable cases that had filled his recent days. He spoke of those strange goings-on around the estate, stories Gayatri had heard in passing but hadn’t witnessed herself, not with everything happening with Mihiri. A young man who had suddenly become paralysed, able to walk only when dressed in a sarong; of a girl who misplaced her reflection, unable to see herself in mirrors; of another patient who, without any explanation, started speaking fluent Tamil, a language she knew little of. There was also the unsettling case of a bride who began behaving erratically right after her wedding night, as if possessed by something no medical test could identify.

‘And, of course,’ he added gravely, ‘there’s Sabitha’s son’s case, his sudden obsession with snakes.’

As Douglas recounted the recent experiences with patients, Gayatri’s pulse quickened. In her mind, the puzzle pieces slid right into place – the lingering putrid smell, the sudden, eerie fog, Sabitha’s son, the white girl who was brought to her with a finger scorched by a ring. Each detail aligned disturbingly with Douglas’s accounts. A tight knot twisted in her

stomach. Deep down, she knew these weren't just random strange occurrences. This had all the unmistakable signs of devils at work. She broke into a sweat. Snatching up the cardboard menu, she fanned herself, but the air did little to cool the rising panic. Douglas's voice faded into the background. Her mind raced, analysing, concluding, preparing.

'… there was also an egging of a neighbour's house,' Douglas was speaking. 'Poltergeist eggs, they call it. You may have heard of the incident?'

The steady tap of his fingers against the table cut through the haze, yanking Gayatri back to the present.

'It's perplexing. A real enigma,' Douglas added with a weary sigh. 'The symptoms these young patients come with are so very unusual.' Lowering his voice, he scanned the room before continuing, 'I can't quite make sense of it, you know. I've never seen these kinds of ailments before.'

The world outside their conversation continued its usual chaotic rhythm.

There was the occasional bark of a stray dog and the chatter of passersby. Standing behind the counter Lucien Fernando's wife was pouring gum balls into a large glass bottle. Sheila was throwing her hands about and performing, entertaining the women in her circle. Raja, banana in hand, was deep in conversation with Lucien Fernando. Fatima hurried out of the coffee house with a brown paper bag tucked under her arm. Outside, the wind picked up, rattling the flimsy windows. A stray napkin, caught in a sudden gust, fluttered off a nearby table, briefly ruffling the Sinhala newspaper Uncle Chandrasekara held.

'I'm not sure this is something modern medicine can explain,' Douglas admitted, rubbing the back of his neck. 'These symptoms, they don't follow any pattern I've seen. And no treatment seems to stick.' He hesitated, his voice dipping. 'Feels like … something beyond our field. My field.'

Gayatri wasn't listening to him anymore. Not really. Her gaze had softened, but her thoughts had gathered like a flock of restless birds. *How many devils are at play?* she wondered. *Will this call for a full shanthikarmaya? A Daha ata sanniya? Can she manage it alone? Will she able to source what's needed?* Questions clutched her ribs like a tightening sash.

Douglas cleared his throat, pulling her back. 'Is this … well, would *you* have an interpretation for this? Can you decipher what's going on?'

She cleared her throat, now fully present. This wasn't new. She had dealt with men like Douglas her entire life, those sceptics in pressed shirts who dismissed her rituals as folklore, her diagnostics as superstition. Douglas, with his Western training and science-first

confidence, had always been polite but disapproving. Ayurvedic oils? Herbal compresses? Devils and planetary positions? It had been clear to her from their first meeting that he thought it was all a bit much. But now, with spirits whispering through his clinic and patients behaving like storybook riddles, he had come seeking her out.

She remembered her first solo exorcism. It had been when she was twenty-six. The village headman's daughter had collapsed in the family cemetery, a scarlet handprint blooming across her cheek. Gayatri's father was in the hospital with pneumonia, and she had no choice but to step in and take control. The ritual had stretched into dawn, chants unravelling under moonlight. When the girl woke, dazed but unpossessed, Gayatri knew that she'd proven herself. Not to her father. Not even to the village. To the ones who doubted her.

'*Thovil,* or a *shanthikarmaya*, is the only way to cure these children. I have no doubt.' Gayatri's tone was calm, not performative. Douglas didn't respond. His fingers began tapping the edge of the table.

'You don't even know what a *thovil* actually is, do you?' Gayatri didn't wait for his answer. 'That's fine. Most people don't.' She tilted her head, voice softening, but her gaze stayed sharp. 'There are forces at work in the universe. Unseen, but very real. Would you agree?' She saw it then, a twitch at the edge of his jaw, the way he absently curled his fingers into the fabric of his shirt as if grounding himself. 'You see, Douglas, illnesses like these, sudden paralysis, unknown tongues, disappearing reflections, they don't just *happen*. These are disturbances. Echoes from the other side. You came to me because you've seen them yourself. You can't explain them. No scan, no bloodwork, no prescription makes sense.'

He still said nothing, but the tapping had stopped.

Gayatri leaned in. 'This is my field. And I can help.'

Douglas shifted in his seat. He didn't nod. Didn't speak. But he didn't walk away either. And that, for now, was enough

'You may not believe in these forces, but that doesn't mean they aren't real. Tell me, have you ever been to a thovil, Douglas? At all?' she challenged.

Douglas tilted his head. 'Well … not exactly attended. I mean … I've seen one. On TV.' A slow smile crept across his face. 'Ganga Langa Walauwa,' he tested the name on his tongue. 'Or something like that? That teledrama on Rupavahini? About that city bloke coming to the village, pat, pat, gala.' He chuckled, the sharp sound startling a calf grazing just outside.

Gayatri arched an eyebrow, the hint of a smile on her lips. 'You mean Paligu Manike?' She didn't wait for him to confirm. 'A teledrama wouldn't give you the faintest idea

of what a thovil actually is.' She chose her next words carefully. 'When devils appear where they're not welcome, it happens, you know. They cross realms. Show up when and wherever they please.' Her voice was steady. 'That's when we need to communicate with them. Make it clear they have no place here. Devils, yakku, demons … those restless spirits, they can be reasoned with. They can be persuaded. Especially when they can't be flushed out with an IV drip.' She let that hang in the air for a moment, watching him. When there was no reaction, she continued, 'Don't get me wrong. I'm not dismissing modern medicine. But these are facts. And I'll tell you this, with the certainty of a gecko's warning chirp, your patients are possessed. They are.'

Douglas's light brown eyes stayed focused on her, with steady intensity. Gayatri ran her palms down the fabric of her skirt, smoothing out imaginary wrinkles. She had chosen a long white skirt and a matching blouse that morning. Perfect for her temple visit later in the afternoon. Her hair, still drying from her morning shower, cascaded down in loose waves, framing her face like a curtain. A hint of makeup softened her features. Gold loop earrings dangled from her ears, a gift from her mother at the lavish ceremony her parents threw to celebrate her reaching puberty, and on her finger sparkled her navaratne ring, the one her late husband had slipped onto her finger the day they wed. She absently twisted the ring before clearing her throat.

'What you just described; those aren't just random ailments. They are maladies inflicted by devils. They take over the flesh, twist it, wreak havoc. Spirits, devils, those are the culprits. And they have to be purged. A shanthikarmaya or a thovil, a devil dance. That's how we communicate. How we negotiate with each yaka, each devil.'

Douglas remained silent, watching her intently. Gayatri's finger circled the ring with more fervour. 'You must be really good at poker,' she said, letting out a small chuckle. Leaning forward, she rested her elbows on the table and sighed. 'Let me explain. You said a girl suddenly started speaking Tamil, yes? I've seen that before. Many times. One suddenly speaking Tamil, another gibberish, another completely mute. One girl sounded like she was speaking Russian. And you know what? I've cured them. Exorcised the devil out of them. These speech issues? That's Demala sanni yaka's doing. It's part of his game, his signature move. His way of asserting dominance.'

Douglas inhaled and exhaled. His cheeks puffing up first before a silent whoosh expelled the breath out. Gayatri leaned back slightly and lifted her elbows off the table. 'And that boy with the walking issue?' She paused for a breath before continuing. 'I've dealt with that too. A young man. He couldn't walk in any direction but the west. Believe it, Douglas.

Only to the west! That's typical of Kora sanni yaka. "Kora" as you know, means "lame" in Sinhala. Lameness, or the inability to walk, if there's no medical cause, boils down to him. He's the devil that cripples the legs. That boy you spoke of. He'll walk again. Once the devil is driven out.'

Her words came easier now, flowing with the certainty of experience. 'And the erratic behaviour after the wedding? I've seen that too. Another young girl, from a neighbouring village back home. Good thing she was brought to me first. Your lot would've sent her straight to an institution. Am I wrong?' She let the challenge sit between them, a slow smirk forming. 'Anyway, I exorcised that devil, and she was perfectly fine after that. That was Butha sanni yaka's doing. His signature move, temporary madness. Temporary … but fierce.' She let the last word roll off her tongue, savouring its weight. '*Fierce.* And that girl who lost her reflection?' She exhaled, shaking her head. 'That's Kana sanni yaka. The devil that steals sight. Every single one of these cases, Douglas…' Her gaze bore into his. 'is rooted in forces you *can't* see.'

With that she let the silence settle, her eyes drifting toward the pond. The bustle there had quietened. By the water's edge, Munaweera moved, his hands carefully tending to the blooming lotuses. Though his focus remained on the flowers, his eyes flickered toward Gayatri now and then. She met his glance with a small nod before turning back to the conversation.

'The egg throwing, that's a puzzle.' She rubbed her fingers together absently, sifting through possibilities. 'That … could be the work of Kapala or maybe Pissu sanni yaka. Again, this is temporary, of course.' She lifted a brow. Her fingers stilled. 'But you see, Douglas, there are eighteen of them. Eighteen devils. Each with its own mark, its own signature.'

Douglas's eyes remained fixed on Gayatri. She could tell he still had questions.

As the lunch hour approached, the coffee house filled with new patrons. The air buzzed with the hum of conversation, the clinking of cutlery, and the occasional burst of laughter. Gayatri and Douglas exchanged polite nods and fleeting smiles with the newcomers.

'Well, anyway, there you go!' Gayatri clapped her hands together. Her voice was lighter now. 'That's my take on the whole situation. Take it or leave it.' Leaning back, she let her shoulders relax. 'These are not new phenomena, not by a long shot. We've known about these things for ages, and we've cast devils away for just as long. The evidence is clear. Many of the devils are here.' Her words lined up heavy like stones on a temple wall. She gestured with her hands. 'Here in the estate.' Her eyes darted around with a predatory focus suited to

her craft. '*Kora, Kana, Butha* … maybe all eighteen. It isn't going to be easy Douglas. Purging such a lot of devils. Hmm, I am telling you now, I know it is not going to be a walk in the park.' She felt a sharp burn in her mouth as though she had bitten into a fiery kochchi chilli. She took a sip of water, the coolness of it a fleeting comfort. Her fingers curled tight around the fabric of her skirt, the knuckles turning Himalayan salt pink. 'I am certain many devils have pierced through to the human realm.'

Exhaling, she blocked any more words from falling out. The warmth of the room seemed to retreat with every word she added. A chill wrapped itself around her shoulders, creeping in like the fog that rolled in over the hills. She shivered and hugged herself.

Douglas let out a slow breath like a punctured tyre. 'Gayatri,' he said, three perfect horizontal lines debossed on his forehead. 'You do realise none of this has a scientifically sound explanation, right?'

Gayatri leaned back, rubbing her arms, warming herself. 'Western medicine has its place, yes. But it's not the only answer.' Douglas raised an eyebrow. 'There are different ways of knowing, Douglas. Different ways of healing,' she said. 'We must be open to them. To the possibility that there are forces at work in this world we can't see.'

Douglas's fingertips tapped against the wood of the table. The sound was soft, almost absentminded, a gentle thap-thap-thap like raindrops on a thatched roof. But the finger dance didn't continue. 'Look, I understand cultural beliefs and all that. I do. But …'

'But you still think science is the only valid path,' Gayatri interrupted, shaking her head. 'That's the problem, you know? People love drawing these thick, aggressive lines between science and spirituality, but there's more overlap than they admit. Someone once said, "Science makes us do things better. Spirituality makes us do better things".' She paused, drumming her temple. 'Can't remember who, but it's true.'

'I appreciate the philosophy, but …'

'And just so you know. I'm no stranger to science.' Gayatri cut him off again. A grin as sly as a woman bargaining at the village market fashioned her lips. 'Maybe you aren't aware, but I'm a science graduate. Batch of '93, Peradeniya University.'

If the doctor was surprised, he didn't show it. He didn't even blink. Lucien Fernando's son was snaking through the tables, collecting plates and cups. Gayatri raised her hand and waved. 'I am having a ginger tea. Do you want one?' she asked Douglas.

'Ginger beer,' he said, immediately adding, 'It's too hot for tea.'

Order placed, silence followed, both wrapped in their own thoughts. Gayatri watched Douglas in silence, noting the faraway look in his eyes. He seemed completely absorbed,

sunken into thought. The glances of admiration from the young mothers nearby and the occasional suspicious stare from Munaweera at the pond went completely unnoticed.

'Douglas,' Gayatri drew him back to the moment. 'Maladies are connected to the sensory organs. Eye, ear, nose, tongue, skin …' She counted them off on her fingers, one by one. 'S*anni*, Douglas, are illnesses. The ones you diagnose with scans and tests. Illnesses in Western medicine are not so different from what we've known for centuries.'

A gust of oily air drifted in from the kitchen. Something golden and crisp was being fried, the rich scent curling into the space between them. Gayatri realised, with a small jolt, that she was hungry. She had been running on sweet tea all morning. But Douglas was listening, really listening, and for now her 'tea-filled, empty-of-solids' stomach could wait. This was an opportunity she didn't want to miss. She was surprised at how easy it was to speak to the doctor. It felt as though the walls between them were lowering.

'Blindness of the mind. Excess greed, attachments. Clinging to things we should let go of, that's the cause of these illnesses.' Her words flowed now like kithul treacle from a spoon.

'So, desire makes people sick. Is that what you are saying?' Douglas asked.

'Emotions. Desire. Grief. Envy. Anger. They all fester, Douglas. They corrupt the mind, weaken it. A weakened mind is vulnerable.' Gayatri's lips parted as if to say more, but she stopped. Her eyes darkened, the pupils shrinking. 'That's when they slip in. The devils. The sanni bringers. Those carriers of illnesses. The ones you think don't exist.'

The noise of the coffee house hummed around them. A spoon clinked against a ceramic cup. The young server was back. The aroma of ginger sweet around him. He placed the two drinks in front of his patrons and moved away. Gayatri studied Douglas as he poured the copper liquid into a tall glass. Bubbles lined the brim. He took a long swig, his Adam's apple bopping. Gayatri took a sip of her own ginger liquid and wiped her mouth.

'I know it sounds like I'm preaching, but I want you to understand. These ailments? They're temporary. Illness begins and ends with the mind. You've heard of the *Asathamantha Jataka*, haven't you? Buddhism teaches us how worldly desires can corrupt the mind. You know this, right? Asathamantha Jataka. Remember?'

'Hmm … the tale of the old mother.'

'Exactly.' Gayatri felt herself spiralling into a ramble, her own voice echoing distantly in her ears. 'Do you remember how it went? What she did? That is sensory madness. Carnal insanity. Lusting after a man, attempting to kill her own son. See how desires take over the mind and make it vulnerable. I mean, the moral of the story is not to trust women,' she

chuckled, ‘but you see what I mean about the mental illness.’ She grasped the sides of her chair and stared into his light brown eyes. ‘Surely, you have a diagnosis for that? Female hysteria, perhaps?’

‘So, a *thovil?* All those pyrotechnics and magic? That’ll help?’

Gayatri groaned, surprising herself with the rawness of it. ‘Not magic,’ she muttered, locking eyes with his. ‘Pyrotechnics? *Yes*. A sanni yakuma, or a thovil, isn’t magic. It’s a dance drama. There’s chanting, drumming. It brings mindfulness. It’s a conscious experience.’ Her hands moved instinctively, gesturing as she spoke. ‘The pyrotechnics, the comedy, the shock, it resets the mind. It’s like the electroconvulsive therapy that *you* do. The shock, the terror. Western doctors use those too. Those are essential parts for a thovil as well. It’s just … we deliver it in a different way to you. You use machines, we use dancing and drama among other things. There you go, that’s the only way I can explain a thovil to you.’

As she spoke, she became aware of the fog that crept in at the edges of her vision. It blurred the world around her. She blinked hard and swallowed. The putrid smell of rotting flesh and the metallic feel of fresh blood coated her throat. She coughed. Her mind racing to Mihiri, the unborn child and her teenage granddaughter. An intense need to shelter them flooded her veins.

‘Something is happening here, Douglas, in Little Sri Lanka.’ The volume of her voice lowered. It became as soft as a monk’s steps on sacred ground. ‘I can feel it in the air, the smell, the fog. I feel it, Douglas.’ Her eyes flitted around, scanning the children sitting outside, the women gossiping inside, men at their daam game and Lucien Fernando’s son humming a tune at the window. ‘*Everyone is in danger.* There are dark forces at play,’ she said and closed her eyes for just a moment, trying to steady herself.

Douglas watched her, his expression unreadable. Then, after a pause, his voice sliced through, clear and firm. ‘So, Gayatri, let me understand this. You mean to say you can perform it? This sanniya here in Sydney? These kids can be cured by that?’

Gayatri’s heart pounded. She had been part of this particular ritual countless times, assisting her father, chanting the invocations, steadying the dancers, preparing the offerings. But leading it? That was different. That was monumental. She was aware that the ceremony she was suggesting was no mean task. It was an ancient, powerful ceremony, intricate and exacting. For a fleeting moment, doubt crept in: did she truly have the knowledge? The strength? The spirit to conduct it herself? But then, she looked up and met Douglas’s gaze. The sharp scepticism that usually lurked in his eyes was gone. Instead, there was something else. A quiet understanding. A softness she hadn’t expected. Her pulse quickened, pride

swelling within her. It was the same pride she felt after a successful exorcism, a deep, instinctual satisfaction. She swallowed hard, forcing down the hesitation threatening to surface. Not to him. Not now. She exhaled before speaking, her voice steadier.

'Yes,' she said; then, softer, almost to herself, 'But …'

Chapter 14

It was a strange kind of day. The sky couldn't make up its mind. Thunder groaned from a distance, low and restless. Lightning clawed at the clouds, flashing silver for a moment before vanishing into the grey. But no rain came.

Douglas spent the morning with Madhugayani, who came once a month to have her blood pressure checked. It gave her a chance to reminisce about the past, the days spent in Cinnamon Gardens. 'I miss all that class, remember the dances and tea parties?' she would say. 'Nowadays, hard to find the cultured people in Sri Lanka. Like us, everyone left. Gone abroad.' She was just shuffling out of the clinic, all satin and slow-moving dignity, when Dougla's domestic help Daya stumbled in, tripping over his sarong.

'Gayatri nona … Gayatri no …' He never finished.

She had already arrived, sweeping into the room with the scent of jasmine. Douglas caught it first, the sharp, white sweetness, before he caught the panic in her eyes. Her hands, usually so deliberate, fluttered.

'It's the podi sadu,' Gayatri said, the words tumbling over each other. 'The small monk … I can't drive. There's such a thick fog…can… could…' She broke off.

And suddenly, the home surgery became a stage. Madhugayani abandoned all pretence of leaving and collapsed into the nearest chair, her curiosity outweighing her sciatica. 'Who in the temple?' she demanded, peering at Gayatri over her spectacles. 'The little one? The new one, right? I knew something was off with him.'

Daya, eager to be useful, darted about. 'Good Ambepussa tea, not the tea bags,' he offered, despite no one asking.

Thunder groaned again. A creature, perched on the high beam above, let out a rapid volley of chirps. Douglas exhaled, long and slow, then took hold of the moment as if gripping the reins of a wild horse.

'Daya, give Madhugayani madam a strong cup of tea.'

'Madhugayani, have a cup of tea and please stay here till the fog is cleared.'

Then, turning to Gayatri, his voice even, measured, he said:

'I'll drive.'

The drive to the temple was anything but smooth. It was morning, but the sun was still fighting to break through the dense clouds. The thickening fog swallowed the landscape. Douglas kept the car on high beam, squinting, his knuckles tight on the wheel. The road

ahead blurred, barely visible beyond the headlights. What was visible, however, was Gayatri. Sitting beside him in the front seat, her presence an undeniable force in the dim, intimate space of his car. It hadn't escaped him. That they were alone. That this moment, however inconvenient, was theirs. He drove slowly, carefully, his body leaning forward. Gayatri launched into the drama at the temple, her voice urgent, tumbling over itself in explanation.

'He didn't give much information. Suddenly …'

Douglas listened, or at least he meant to. But, at the same time, he inhaled, deep, slow, taking in the jasmine that lingered in the air between them. It mingled with the faint scent of old upholstery and the sharp tang of the damp earth outside. For the umpteenth time he thought what a fool he had been to resent a woman like Gayatri. The pair had met many times since that meeting at the coffee house. Douglas found himself staring at her, noticing details of her afresh each time. They piled up: the sharpness of her features, the way her almond-shaped eyes glistened when she delivered a subtle joke, the delicate curve of her neck as she stretched to reach for something. Her Amal Clooney–like figure, long and slender, with clothes that hugged her in all the right places. Douglas wasn't surprised that a fine woman like her constantly occupied his thoughts. What he was surprised at was how he was behaving; like a schoolboy with a crush, he found ways of spending time with her. Twice a week he took the dog for a walk exactly at the time Gayatri walked past his house. He scheduled meetings with the chief monk to coincide with her visits to the temple. Forgoing cafes outside, he frequented the estate's coffee house.

He spent his days as restless as a surfer waiting for that perfect wave, pacing the veranda to have a glimpse of her tending plants in the garden or sitting at her breakfast table. Daya noticed his change. 'You know, sir,' he said once, watching Douglas gripping the edge of the balcony and craning his neck, 'Brahamaya made the male peacock beautiful for a reason.' Douglas had laughed but hadn't considered asking the old man what he meant. Sitting beside Gayatri, Douglas wondered again what truth was hidden in his words.

When he finally turned the car into the temple grounds, there was a hubbub like a busy market day. Children ran and chased a bush turkey. Barefoot and untamed, they zigzagged through the clearing fog, their shrieks rising like startled mynahs. A group of men stood beside the dragon-arch entrance talking in grave tones. Their heads bobbed as they agreed and disagreed. Monks flitted past in hurried bursts of saffron, their robes catching the wind, their bare feet moving swiftly over the stone floor. Peacocks wandered brazenly through the crowd while cats and dogs slept in the shade. The flames from a hundred clay lamps shifted in the breeze, dim through the fog like fireflies at dusk.

Douglas and Gayatri stepped out of the car, the dull crunch of gravel beneath their feet barely audible over the noise. Munaweera was the first to reach them.

'Gayatri,' he called as they walked pass the dragon arch. 'Oh doctor, you are also here!' His eyes went dark like kaduru seeds.

'Erm, a…'He stammered, 'Podi Sadu fainted at Bana.' Then, as if remembering himself, he pressed his lips together in a tight, bankerly manner and gestured for them to follow.

The scent of jasmine garlands, crushed temple flowers, and curling incense smoke clung to the thick air. But beneath the fragrance lingered a sharp tension, stretched taut like a temple drum. Whispers flitted around the pair as they marched on. Douglas felt their eyes. He tried to keep his face neutral, but the absurdity of the situation made it hard to hold back a smile.

'Looks like they have ammunition to gossip for days. About you and I!' he leaned in and whispered.

Gayatri nodded with a smile. The alms hall was crowded when they approached. A table was laid for breakfast. The monks' food bowls neatly placed in a row were empty. Clearly the breakfast feast hadn't been offered. Loku Sadu stood in the centre, like a giant ebony caught in the wind, throwing hands in the air and shouting commands.

'Move away!'

'Come closer!'

'Fan the child!'

'Bring water!'

There were instant movements. Men lifting their sarongs and hurrying towards the kitchen. Women standing in a circle fanning with their garments. Douglas saw the small monk right away. He was sprawled on the floor like a moving rag doll. His eyes were opened to the ceiling. His saffron robe around him in disarray.

'Aha! Gayatri nona!' Loku Sadu exclaimed. He greeted her with warmth. 'Doctor too!' he added like an afterthought.

That was when it clicked for Douglas. The chief monk had called Gayatri, not him. Even though, by all appearances, this was a medical crisis. He had been included only because Gayatri had wanted him there. A previous version of himself, a different man, might have bristled at that. Might have fought for his place, his title, the weight of his Western training. But strangely, there was no anger. No impulse to assert, to correct. Instead, he stepped back, hands sliding into his pockets, watching.

Great heaving sobs rose from the child monk when Gayatri knelt beside him. ‘Wah, wah…wah, hik.’ They stumbled out of his throat like pebbles caught in a waterfall.

‘Shoo, shoo,’ Gayatri tapped on the monk’s shoulder, the one that was covered by the robe.

‘Couldn’t even serve heel daane. One moment he was seated, the next he was on the floor,’ Sheila volunteered.

‘Probably a panic attack.’ Deepti wrinkled her forehead. She stepped forward, her white dress moving softly, her braided hair framing her face. ‘I’m sure it’s a panic attack. Right, Uncle Douglas?’

‘What panic attack?’ a male voice sneered. ‘We don’t get panic attacks. Isn’t that a white people thing? Panic attacks, anxiety attacks, stress attacks, every attack except the ones that matter?’

Muffled laughter ran through. Heads turned; shoulders shook. The crowd launched into a heated debate of modern ailments, the sobbing child momentarily forgotten.

‘We lived through a war! If we all panicked at attacks, phew.’

‘We would have all died of panic attacks!’

Gayatri, Douglas, and Munaweera didn’t lose their focus. Gayatri leaned in, her voice calm, over the hiccups.

‘Tell me what happened, Podi Sadu.’

Beads blossomed in the corners of the child monk’s eyes and his hiccups turned to sobs again. Douglas crouched beside Gayatri, his presence less of an intervention, more of a quiet reinforcement. Munaweera hovered close. It was he who saw the strange markings on the child’s skin first. ‘Oh,’ he squinted his eyes and leaned forward. His pointed finger hovered over the child monk’s exposed shoulder like a reluctant creature.

‘What is that?’ he asked.

Douglas leaned in, his gaze following Munaweera’s pointed finger.

‘Says Arnott’s? A stamp?’

Munaweera slowly repeated the word. ‘A-r-n-o-t-t-s. Yes!’ They looked at each other. Sheila’s curiosity piqued, she moved away from the debate and peered in.

‘A temporary tattoo?’ she queried. Her voice carried. The debate halted and all eyes turned to the sobbing boy again.

‘What’s happening to his forehead?’

A faint stamp appeared on the boy’s forehead and became clearer by the second.

‘Arno ... what sorcery is this?’

Gayatri's hand traced the mark now visible. She read it out. There was a loud 'Whaaat?' from a woman in the crowd. Then, 'A trick of the light, surely,' a man responded.

'Maybe Podi Sadu fell asleep on a biscuit wrapper?'

'There! Look, another one is appearing. On his cheek!'

'Argh!'

'Ohhh, another one!'

'On his hand.'

'Yawsar!'

The boy jolted and sat upright. Between sobs he inspected his body. His eyes flitting over every inch exposed. There were markings everywhere now. They all said the same. His sobs intensified, then he wiped his eyes with the hem of his robe and looked up at Gayatri.

'Arnott's.' The word curled unnaturally around his tongue. Then, more urgently, more insistently, 'Arnott's. Arnott's.'

The temple bells gave a sudden, hollow clang – kids at play with its rope. Thunder rumbled, and a flash of lightning split the sky. The child let out a choked cry, clawing at his skin, . 'Wha, ha, whaaa, ha,' he whimpered.

'Ananda! What have you done?' Loku Sadu's voice thundered through the alms hall, over the bubbling chatter. 'What have you done?'

The child's cries got louder. He flopped belly down on the floor and reached for Loku Sadu's feet. 'I am a sinner, Loku Sadu. Thanha, Rathi, Ranga … I am a sinner.' He looked up at the giant Sadu, came to a lotus position and struck his palm on his forehead, once, twice and thrice. 'I will burn in hell! Ai-o, Loku Sadu.'

The crowd looked at each other and frowned.

'What did you *do,* Podi Sadu.' Sheila's curiosity knew no bounds.

The child's eyes darted to Sheila. 'I ate Arnott's chocolate biscuits. A whole packet of them, Sheila nona. A whole packet!'

Loku Sadu bent down then, a smile cracking his face.

'Podi Nama,' his voice was deep and gentle, 'which bana potha says eating biscuits is a sin, aha?'

The child fell on the floor again, clutching at the chief monk's feet. His voice was hidden under his face when he cried, 'I took it … Loku Sadu.' The boy's confession tumbled out in rapid fits. 'I had to steal it, didn't I? I stole it sir, from from a bag just outside the Sunday school … and I ate it. The whole packet … after sunset. I ate after … after sunset, ai-o. After sunset. Ai-o! Ai-o! Ar. Not.' His tiny hands clutched the edge of his saffron robe,

lifting it to expose his legs, now marked. ‘See!’ he cried. He slapped his legs. ‘I will burn in hell, wah, wah, hik.’

The children, no older than the young monk, couldn’t hold back their laughter. Giggles burst out behind cupped hands, with little snorts like distant fireworks. Even the serious adults couldn’t stop their lips from twitching, the corners of their eyes creased.

‘Karana kalata paw mihiriya mee say, Windinakalata duk dadi wei gini se …,’ Loku Sadu sang, his words lingering in the air, heavy with meaning. ‘The weight of one’s crimes dawns only later, like a fire slowly spreading, and then they feel the heat ... the burn.’

As the monk’s words settled in, laughter was replaced by a quiet stillness. The child’s sobs quietened, his breathing gentler. Gayatri patted his shoulder before standing up. Douglas followed, brushing the dust off his trousers. Munaweera stayed by the boy, speaking calmly. ‘It’s no great sin,’ he reassured him. ‘Tomorrow is a new day. A new day for new resolutions.’

Gayatri treated Munaweera to a smile and looked up at Douglas. She leaned in. ‘Can you explain these spontaneous tattoos scientifically?’ Douglas blinked, but before he could respond, Gayatri’s face darkened. ‘This, Douglas,’ she said firmly, ‘this is the work of Gedi Sanni Yaka. The devil of boils. He causes boils, tumours, and markings like these.’

Douglas nodded slowly, his attention now on the boy still sitting on the floor, Arnott’s stamped all over his skin.

Chapter 15

Gossip Aunties

‘Here, mey, not that, aney, you wouldn’t believe who I saw sneaking in through the back gate. Parinda. Parinda.’

‘Who?’

‘That boy, aney. The engineer. Kumari’s son.’

‘What harm in coming through the back gate ithin? Gates are to enter, noh, back or front.’

‘Gate’s not the problem, aney, it’s who he was with. A whitey! Arm around the shoulder, hugging and all. Can you believe it? Well-brought-up boy, noh? He was once interested in my Ratna, too.’

‘Oh really? A whitey, ehe?’ A girl? a boy?’

A girl, aney, a white girl. Suddiyak.’

‘Good looking?’

‘I have two words, pale as a ghost and thin as a stick. Thambapu issek wage, aney, like a boiled shrimp.’

‘Maybe the face is pretty?’

‘How to see? They walked fast like in a hurry, noh.’

‘Must be a friend, aney. You never know, boys and girls these days – just friends. No big deal! My Tamara’s best friend is a boy, a gay one. But still a boy. My mother would have flipped if I had a “boy best friend” at sixteen! Muwa ha ha.’

‘Don’t be silly. Pissu, madness. Sri Lanka is different, we went to all girls’ schools and all boys’ schools, noh. No co-ed like here. Anyways, don’t I know best friend from girlfriend? Arm around shoulders like that. Piff! What best friend. Girlfriend, girlfriend. I am telling you! Lovey-dovey. Hugging and all.’

‘Hari, hari, okay, okay. Let’s say girlfriend … But why sneaking from the back gate though?’

‘You think Kumari’s husband will approve of a white girl? Kandyan, noh, no compromise. Boruda? Am I wrong? Kandyans, I tell you, a different kind of kettle fish! Anyhow, the pair went to Gayatri’s house. I saw with my own eyes.’

‘Can’t be anything serious.’

‘Who knows. I won’t be surprised if it’s a pregnancy! Boys these days are reckless, ne … and those white girls, ever so willing to spread their legs. Not like our girls.’

‘True, true! This is why I always say, parents should get their kids married at the right time. Now see mine. We found Ratna a good match straight away. Girls, boys kiyala nhe, these days. Children need to be settled at the right time.’

‘I agree. Our boys, all doctors, lawyers, and engineers, noh. Whiteys know the value of trapping one. Parading in their skimpy tops and short skirts, hi-o! They know how to charm the pants off our boys.’

‘True! Our boys are so very innocent. Those white girls out there, they do all kinds of skulduggery to get their attention, and boom! A pregnancy and our boys are locked in for life. I am telling you, that is what’s happening now-a-days.’

‘We will never know why they came to see Gayatri. That woman never gives out any details about anyone’s illnesses.’

‘Doctor–patient confidentiality, noh.’

‘What nonsense! What harm in letting neighbours know? What if it’s something we have to be mindful of? What if we can catch it, huh? Prevention is better than cure, am I wrong!’

‘Can’t catch pregnancy, noh! Not at our age. Muwa, ha ha.’

‘Not pregnancy, aney, some other illness I mean.’

‘Speaking of illnesses … Did you know what happened to that new Podi Sadu? That Ananda. Some mysterious illness. Patches. All over his body.’

‘Sure, Covid. This Covid curse is never-ending, noh. So unpredictable. I heard someone got paralysed also. Just like that, one day walking. The next can’t.’

‘Okay, okay, so tell will you. What happened to the child monk?’

‘Something like chicken pox, ane. Not blisters but his skin got covered with printing, like tattooing. Letters appearing all over. Just like that, out of nowhere. No warning. On his face also. Sin, noh?’

‘Hell of a how do you do that is!’

‘Yes. I am telling you. I was there when it happened. Poor child!’

‘Ordaining such young! Tsk, tsk, tsk. So now what?’

‘We took heel dana to the temple. Early in the morning ... Had to get up at four to cook, you know. Took kiribath, roti and string hoppers. Couldn’t serve the monks their breakfast even … Podi Sadu went dadas on the floor. I thought “Sure, dead.” Then only it started. Ink splotches popping up all over him. He was howling like a mad dog, saying he stole chocolate biscuits and ate them or something like that.’

‘Ai-o, Sheila, aparade your kiribath. Utter waste!’

‘Yes. All that effort for nothing.’

‘So what’s with Podi Sadu now? I hope he is okay. Sin, noh? The poor kid. Village kids are so very innocent. Can’t cope with foreign ways. They get utterly confused when they come over, no family also here.’

‘Loku Sadu called Gayatri immediately. She took one look and said it’s the work of Gedi Sanni Yaka!’

‘Gedi Sanni Yaka? Muwaha ha. Nonsense! They should have taken the little monk to Doctor Douglas, aanna, he is the man. He will know what to do.’

‘Isn’t that always our problem? Who to go to – Gayatri or Doctor Douglas. Pills or Devil dancing!’

‘Why can’t we do both, eh? Wouldn’t it give better results? I mean, we will get the best of both worlds then. East meets West.’

‘Shaa, see, I told you! You are one philosopher! Muwa ha ha. See both Gayatri and the Doctor! Pfft. Nonsense. If only!’

‘You never know! Doctor and Gayatri came together to the temple. In his Benz. They were like a couple.’

‘Aney, here, don’t make up stories. Couple! How can those two be a couple? Always at each other’s throats!’

‘Not stories, I am telling you. True. I was there, noh. The pair came together to the temple. No fighting. Nothing. Went home together also.’

‘Planning the ritual these days, noh. That may be why.’

‘Ritual my foot! Who can resist that man’s charm, huh? Handsome man, like Amitabh Bachchan. Tall and deep voice.’

Chapter 16

Douglas leant back on his chair and breathed heavily. He could see down below Daya carefully plucking frangipani blooms and gathering them in a palmyrah basket. The day had been a tiring one for the doctor–exorcist duo. A whirlwind of stops through Toongabbie and Wentworthville, all to procure what was needed for the upcoming ritual. The museum officials had delivered the eighteen masks required that afternoon. Gayatri and Douglas had received them at the community centre and transported them to Douglas's house for safe-keeping. The house buzzed for hours.

The evening was settling over the estate when the pair finally got to tear themselves from the preparations to sit in the quiet of Douglas's veranda. With the ritual nearing, Gayatri and Douglas had found themselves meeting more often. Most days there was a crowd, dancers, drummers and the elders of the estate, but not always. Evenings had become their time. Douglas's veranda their place. Their talks had a soft tone now. No one attempting to be victorious over the other. Leaving their differences aside they indulged in conversation, often venturing beyond the topic of the ritual.

It was summer and the air was aflame with the sound of cicadas and frogs. Citronella candles were set afloat in a clay bowl of water. A distinct smell, something like the smell of bruised leaves after a monsoon rain, filled the air around them. The pair watched Daya pacing between the frangipani trees, a small stool in one hand and the basket of flowers in the other.

'Daya thinks frangipani brings good luck.' Douglas sighed when the old man placed the stool under a thick frangipani tree and balanced on it. Gayatri held her breath. With one swift movement Daya reached a branch above his head, almost toppling over.

Douglas jostled up, his back straight. 'Honestly, I don't know about good luck …,' but before he could finish his thought Daya jumped off the stool and placed the flower he plucked in the basket.

'Phew!' Gayatri wiped her brow. 'Old men and their antics,' she laughed.

Douglas didn't join in. With a lined forehead he watched Daya intently.

'Oh, Douglas, don't worry. He is happy doing what he is doing.' Leaning over, Gayatri touched Douglas's shoulder. Douglas said nothing. Taking a long sip of the milky tea Gayatri had served earlier, he let his mind wander to a similar scene in his past, from his childhood, a veranda with ornate wooden chairs, a teapoy, a pot of hot tea, and his parents enjoying each other's company overlooking a garden filled with blooming frangipani in their

home in the hills of Sri Lanka. This memory tugged at his heart. Supressing a sigh, he tore his eyes away from Daya and looked longingly at Gayatri.

A pink hue spread across Gayatri's cheek as she let go of Douglas's eyes and looked down. When a silence between them bloomed and stretched, Gayatri reached for one of the large masks, picked it and inspected it closely.

'Didn't the people who dropped off these masks say that the museum had acquired them in 1911? When we were still under the British?' she asked, letting a finger trace the shape of the snake carved into the wood.

'Hmm. Yes. In 1911.'

'I wonder how they *acquired* these,' Gayatri smirked. 'The Australian Museum, I mean.' She paused, before adding with a gentle chuckle, 'Probably the same way the British *acquired* King Rajasinghe's throne and crown, I assume.'

Douglas huffed a small laugh. 'Yes. There's a record of that "acquisition" in *The Trophies of British Heroes*.' He scratched his chin. 'Appachchi had a copy of that book. I wonder what happened to it … the book, I mean. Not the throne.'

Gayatri smiled but kept her eyes fixed on the mask. 'The British did return the crown and throne eventually. No fight,' she said, letting out a soft laugh. 'Funny, isn't it? The Australian Museum still lays claim to these artifacts, like they're guarding an old family heirloom. How difficult was it to borrow it for the ritual!' She held the mask up and rotated it for Douglas to get a clearer view. 'We can't find craftsmanship like this nowadays you know,' she observed. '*These* masks were made specifically for rituals. Now they just make them for tourists. Minimum spend for maximum profit.'

Douglas nodded, his gaze drifting across the veranda, now a chaotic sprawl of artificial flowers, bamboo poles, red and white fabrics, drums, and other ritual instruments. It looked like the backstage of an unfinished play.

'Rather a mess, isn't it?' Gayatri followed his eyes. 'I can have these moved to my place.'

'Oh, no. No need. Truly,' Douglas replied, quickly.

His life had changed, gradually at first, then all at once, since that first meeting with Gayatri at the coffee house. The steady rhythm of his days, morning patients, afternoon golf, evening drinks with friends, had been disrupted, yet he found himself welcoming the shift. Now, his once-sterile kitchen carried the warm scent of unfamiliar spices, his record player crooned old Sinhala songs, and the crisp fragrance of Dusk candles had given way to the rich, smoky tendrils of sambrani curling through his home. Gayatri had woven herself into his

space, into his routines, into the very air he breathed. And Douglas, to his own surprise, loved every bit of it.

'Leave them. There's plenty of space here. Besides, we don't want Mihiri to be disturbed with all this activity,' he said, jerking his head toward the veranda.

Gayatri nodded, her smile lingering. The soft song of the vinyl spinning gently on the record player sank into their space. The male voice lamented about a torn coat and the loneliness he felt in his old age. Douglas's chest tightened. He peered inside the house. His father was sprawled on an easy chair, legs resting on the long armrest. He was snoring. With a quiet sigh Douglas brought his thoughts back to the veranda and Gayatri.

Looking at the mask, Gayatri was smiling. Holding it against her face she turned to Douglas and laughed from behind the mask. When the mask fell back onto her lap, the pair locked eyes. In that moment, something unspoken passed between them, charged with a subtle energy neither could deny.

'You look good in it,' Douglas teased. 'Maybe a new career calling? Full-time mask dancer?'

'Careful, *doctor sir*,' Gayatri said as she waggled the mask at him, 'I just might wear this and haunt you in your dreams.' She laughed, pulling him along with her.

'You already haunt me in my dreams, Gayatri.' The thought slipped from Douglas's lips before he could reel it back in.

Gayatri's eyes widened. Warmth crept up her neck and painted her cheeks a soft pink. Her laughter died down to a smile, a shy pursed-lip smile that made her eyes glint.

There was much to be said. Much to be shared. They both knew that in their hearts. The teasing, the jokes, they were all there, but beneath them they both knew there was something more. Love, longing, and all the feelings that young lovers have. Despite the time they had lost and the lives they had lived, they were not immune to those wonderful feelings.

'Oh well ... there is a cure for that, you know.' Gayatri's eyes softened as they held Douglas's gaze. A giggle escaped her lips, bubbling up despite the heat rising in her cheeks.

'Hmm, let me assure you, Gayatri, you are most welcome to haunt me in my dreams!' Douglas replied, his hand making its own move, slowly reaching for the softness of her skin. When his palm found its place on her arm, Gayatri remained still, a quiet acknowledgment. Holding his gaze Douglas cleared his throat to speak, only to be rudely interrupted by a commotion below. Cheers rose up as a yellow tennis ball soared over the parapet wall, landing at Daya's feet. As Gayatri's and Douglas's eyes shifted to the scene, Daya bent down and with surprising agility scooped up the ball. With the ease of a seasoned fast bowler, he

then hurled back the ball over the wall. The ball soared through the air, and on the other side the kids erupted into raucous cheers, as if they had just witnessed the final over of the World Cup, their voices rising like a chorus of jubilant songbirds.

'Daya, you absolute star!' Gayatri cheered.

Douglas turned. His smile spread wider. 'I didn't know Daya had such a killer arm.'

The pair watched as Daya, satisfied with his heroic throw, dusted off his hands and shuffled towards the edge of the garden. Gayatri looked at her cup of tea, blew into it and took a small, thoughtful sip. When she spoke again, her voice had changed.

'You know, in Sri Lanka, the daha ata sanniya is rarely performed now. It's a costly affair. No one has the money for that anymore.' She dabbed her lip with a paper napkin.

The moon was emerging in the blue, a shape of a cantaloupe wedge, despite the summer's evening light. Gayatri's gaze remained in the distance. Douglas studied her, noting the change of mood.

'When Gamini passed, I nearly gave up on my craft,' she exhaled. 'People blamed me for his death, you know. They said it's not a woman's place to dabble in the other realm, with devils and demons. They said by engaging in the craft of men I had conjured ill luck and that is the reason why my husband died so young, so suddenly.' She let out a small, bitter laugh, shaking her head. 'I believed them … Like a fool I believed them.'

A sombre pause settled between them, broken only by the rhythmic chanting of Daya. Seated lotus-style in front of the altar, his voice was steady, filling the air with something ancient, something unshakable. Douglas swallowed, his throat dry. He searched for the right words, something that would ease her pain, but nothing felt adequate. He reached out. But only for his hand to hover above hers and retreat to his lap. Gayatri reached down and drummed the wooden ear of the mask on her lap, exhaled and continued.

'*You* might find this strange, but I met Gamini only once before our wedding. It was a proposal. He was a good husband … a good father.' She sighed. 'Gamini was a banker.'

Douglas listened, picturing the man, a small-town banker, content in his world of familiar faces and predictable rhythms. And then the transfer, the forced uprooting.

'The city sucked his life out,' Gayatri continued.

Douglas could see it: the dizzying crowds of Pettah, the relentless press of bodies, the unceasing flow of time that swallowed people whole. Gayatri turned to him then, her dark eyes searching his face, her voice laced with something raw. 'He died at the Pettah train station ... of a massive heart attack. On the platform. Just collapsed. Instant death they said. What a beautiful way to go. What actually did I attract? Ill luck? Or good luck? It was a quick

death, minimal suffering. No rotting flesh and all that comes with old age and illness!' she sighed and let her eyes roam far.

Outside, Little Sri Lanka pulsed with life. The hum of cars, the playful shrieks of children, the rhythmic splash of garden hoses, it was a world that moved forward, oblivious to the ghosts that clung to Gayatri's voice. Douglas let out a slow breath. He had no easy answer, no convenient platitude. And he knew, instinctively, that she wouldn't want one. Finally, when he met her gaze again, his voice was quiet but steady. 'I doubt it was your luck or unluck.' He let the words settle, let them be enough for now.

Gayatri swirled the tea in her cup. 'Not letting other people's opinions cloud my mind,' she said, her voice firm, 'has been the best decision I've ever made.'

There was a beat of silence. Douglas took in the warm hue of her skin, rich like the condensed milk tea he was sipping on, the striking grey streak in her otherwise black hair was bold, natural, and unapologetic. There were no artificial pouts or false lashes. Gayatri moved with the ease of a woman who had long made peace with herself. She favoured printed dresses that hugged her in just the right places or loose linen trousers paired with flowing shirts. She often called herself a village girl, but Douglas knew better. Beneath that label, there were traces of city life, of late-night debates in university halls, of afternoons spent flipping through yellowed books in the Peradeniya library. There was a sharpness to her, a refinement that hadn't dulled with time.

Douglas had sensed that fire in her from the very first civil encounter they had at the coffee house. But it wasn't just her intellect that drew him in. It was the way she spoke, the way her words felt layered, rich, like the perfect blend of spices in a well-made curry. She didn't pretend, didn't soften her thoughts to make them more palatable. And in her presence, Douglas felt something he hadn't in years – a quiet, unspoken ease. It was the kind of comfort that came with simple pleasures: the warmth of sun-baked sand underfoot, the joy of mixing rice and curry with his fingers.

The pair sat in a silence that wasn't empty, in the kind of stillness that didn't need breaking. Then, suddenly, a violent fit of coughing shattered the tranquil moment. The sound ripped through the house, raw and urgent.

Douglas and Gayatri were on their feet in an instant, shoulder to shoulder, rushing inside. Under the slow, hypnotic whir of the ceiling fan, Douglas's father was bent over, his hands grasping the armrest of the chair tight, his body shaking. He was gasping and spitting out a dry cough. Gayatri was the one to reach for the tumbler. Placing a gentle hand on the old man's back she fed him water. The old man drank deeply like he had been in a drought.

When his cough settled, he leant back on the chair. He breathed out in relief and held one hand out. Gayatri took it like receiving a prayer book.

'Thank you, Duwa,' the old man murmured.

Douglas stood watching. He blinked to ward off the moisture gathering on his eyes.

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Long after Gayatri left, Douglas sat next to his father reading. The room had settled into a quiet hum, the ceiling fan whirring above, a soft blanket now draped over Douglas's appachchi's lap. His head lolled slightly to the side, his breathing deep and even.

When the light outside dimmed, Daya entered the room with a mug of spiced broth. Sensing the shift in presence, the old man flicked his eyes open. He turned his head slightly, meeting Douglas's gaze, and for a moment, the years fell away. The hard edges of his expression gave way to something gentler, something knowing.

'Finally, Putha,' he said and combed a hand through his silver hair. 'Finally you married the right woman!'

'Eh?' said Daya, looking at Douglas. Douglas saw his own surprise in the curve of Daya's pupils.

He looked at his father.

'Your wife. Where is she?' the father asked.

'Ermm,' Douglas stuttered. He hesitated before asking, 'The one who fed you water, Appachchi?'

The old man's response came with a slow, deliberate nod. 'Fine woman, that one,' he said, his tone carrying an unexpected warmth. For a fleeting moment, Douglas glimpsed the man his father used to be, strong, assured, alive in ways that time had since dulled. Douglas leaned in, unwilling to let the moment slip away.

'Do you think I should ask her to marry me?' he murmured, his voice barely above a whisper.

The father let out a quiet chuckle, his eyes twinkling with mischief. 'Aren't you already married to her?' he mused before holding out his hand and receiving the steaming mug.

'Loku sir, it is hot,' Daya said squatting beside the chair.

Douglas sat still, absorbing the words as the room settled into familiar sounds. The rhythmic hum of the ceiling fan, the gentle rise and fall of his father's chest, his cautious sips,

Daya's hushed tone, it all formed a symphony of fleeting time. Douglas's medical instincts told him what he didn't want to acknowledge. Though his appachchi still had his good days, they would soon be rare, like rain in the dry season.

Since Amma's passing, Appachchi had spent almost two decades alone. Douglas tried to map out the contours of that solitude, to grasp what it meant to wake up every day without the woman who had once anchored his world. The weight of his father's loneliness pressed against his own chest, an inheritance he hadn't anticipated.

Seeking solace, Douglas sifted through his memories of Gayatri, her laughter, the way she swirled tea in her cup, the unguarded honesty in her eyes. Holding onto that warmth, he reached out, gently patting Appachchi's hand before rising. He made his way to the surgery at the front of the house, its familiar sterility offering little comfort. Taking a steadying breath, he picked up his mobile and dialled Desmond Jayasekara's number.

***

When Desmond arrived the following morning, Douglas was already at the surgery, browsing through a stack of patient files. Desmond Jayasekara entered like a man stepping onto a grand stage. He was dressed in full matchmaker regalia: a pristine white sarong, a neatly pressed shirt, and a black coat that flared ever so slightly as he moved. In his right hand, the pièce de resistance, an impeccably polished black umbrella, wielded like a sceptre of authority.

Douglas looked up from his desk, momentarily taken aback. 'Good Lord, Desmond, are you officiating a wedding or arranging one?' he quipped.

Desmond chuckled and settled into the chair opposite the doctor. 'Such good weather we've had, noh, doctor?' he declared, launching into his signature opening. 'The very best weather for a paddy harvest. If this holds till the daha ata sanniya, we're all winners!'

Douglas pinched the bridge of his nose. Desmond was, without question, a character, larger than life, brimming with boundless energy and an unmatched flair for conversation. He treated matchmaking with the solemnity of a national duty.

'Let's hope the weather holds, ehe Desmond,' Douglas said, then steered the conversation to its purpose. 'Desmond, I appreciate you coming on such short notice.'

Daya stood by, hands clasped, shifting on his heel.

'Some coffee would be nice, Daya,' Douglas flashed the old servant a warm smile. 'Or tea, perhaps?' He turned to his guest.

‘Tea, sir. Coffee wreaks havoc on my insides. Old age, noh? One day I’m running to the toilet like a man possessed, the next I’m clogged up like my gut is full of cement.’

As soon as Daya was out of earshot, Desmond placed his satchel on his lap, unbuckled it with practiced ease, and pulled out a neat stack of papers. He laid them on the table.

‘Tell me, doctor,’ he said, dividing the stack into two, ‘are we looking for a bride or a groom? And who is it for?’

Desmond had built a reputation for meticulousness in his craft. On the estate, he was more than just a matchmaker. He was a weaver of stories, spinning narratives that transformed the business of marriage into something almost poetic.

Douglas cleared his throat, shifting slightly in his chair. There was something about the entire business of matchmaking, one of those customs carried across the ocean, that had always felt outdated to him. And yet, here he was, grappling with the idea that perhaps there was meaning in traditions that refused to be left behind.

‘Actually, Desmond,’ he said, his voice measured. ‘This proposal is for me.’

Muscles twitched in Desmond’s jaw. ‘For you, doctor?’ he asked looking Douglas directly in the eye. Douglas offered a small nod but didn’t say anything more. Desmond recovered quickly, his face lighting up with excitement. ‘For you, sir, I have an excellent match!’ He swiftly gathered the stacks of papers he had laid on the table and tucked them back into his satchel. Then he pulled out another pile. ‘Aha!’ he exclaimed, waving a few A4 sheets triumphantly. ‘Mr Abedheera’s eldest daughter. I think you will like her. In fact, I *know* you will. Very compatible. You’re in your fourth marriage, and she’s in her second. Perfect balance. She’s exactly the age you prefer, much younger. Very well matched!’ Desmond slid the papers across the table. ‘Her biodata.’

Douglas didn’t pick them up. Instead, he rested his elbows on the antique mahogany desk and studied Desmond carefully. ‘Desmond, I don’t need *you* to find me a match. There’s already a lady I’m keen on.’

The matchmaker soothed the hair in one of his bushy eyebrows and waited.

‘I want you to set it up,’ Douglas continued. ‘I *could* ask her directly, but I feel this way is more appropriate. Naturally, I’ll pay your full fee as if you were making the match yourself.’

Desmond’s mouth opened, closed, then opened again. ‘Ai-o, sir, money matters are not the priority.’ he placed a hand over his heart. ‘I can do it for you, no problem. Is the lady from here? The estate? In Sydney or from home?’

‘Gayatri madam.’

Desmond took a second to absorb the new information. Deep lines carved across his forehead. His eyes widened. His head tilted to the side. ‘Good choice, Doctor,’ he finally declared, ‘Gayatri madam. A very good choice!’ The warmth in his tone was unmistakable, like an elder brother bestowing his blessing on a younger one.

Douglas nodded, his own smile widening. ‘I’ve already spoken to her daughter, Mihiri,’ he said, leaning forward slightly. ‘We both agree that a formal proposal through you would be the right way to go about it. Gayatri values tradition, as you know.’ He paused, mentally mapping out the steps ahead. ‘But wait until she’s finished with the daha ata sanniya. We don’t want to disrupt that. Any distractions now would not be favourable I feel.’

Chapter 17

Bringing the cup of tea to her lips, Gayatri took a long, nostalgic sip, savouring the moment. Soon she was on her tippy toes, peering outside, letting her eyes wander. If she craned her neck just right, tilting slightly to the left, she knew she could catch a glimpse of Douglas's veranda. Sometimes, when temptation overcame her, she did just that, stand on her toes in the hope of spotting him. Often, she saw him there, casually leaning against the balustrade, perhaps observing Daya at work in the garden. Gayatri chuckled inwardly at her teenage-like antics. Redirecting herself toward the pantry, she tipped the remaining tea into the sink, gave the mug a quick rinse, placed it on the rack and then made her way to the bathroom.

Turning the shower knob, she waited with closed eyes, allowing the sound of water hitting the tiles to transport her back to her childhood home, a cascade of water falling onto boulders, frothing and gushing like the train of a bride's veil. Though different, the rhythms of the water offered a comforting familiarity to her. She sighed, reluctantly pulling herself from the memories and stripping naked before the mirror.

As her eyes fell over her body, she realised it had been a while since she had taken a look at herself with interest. She scrutinised every inch of herself now. As expected, she carried the softened traces of her once-youthful features. The glowing complexion still held warmth, though there were subtle variations in tone. Her skin, though still smooth, had developed fine lines around her eyes and mouth. Her almond-shaped eyes, framed by long lashes, still retained a sparkle, though there was undoubtedly a softness in them. Her high cheekbones were now softer, and her jawline slightly less defined. There was a gentle fullness to her hips and a slight roundness to her midsection. Her long, dark hair, streaked with silver at the temples, fell in soft waves. Her breasts retained a surprising firmness for a fifty-four-year-old. Her thighs, untouched by the sun, had paled, revealing blue veins beneath the surface. Despite all the signs of ageing, Gayatri knew she was still attractive. Using her hands, she tried to smooth out the settling cellulite on her thighs. Tracing her fingers over the curve of her waist and the fullness of her hips, she wondered if Douglas would find her naked body beautiful.

The sudden shuffling outside the bathroom door snapped her out of her reverie. An embarrassment washed over her instantly. Deeply absorbed in her reflection, she had missed the sound of her daughter turning the key and entering the house. Now, her daughter was likely heading towards her room, passing the bathroom. Gayatri wondered what Mihiri would

make of her middle-aged mother, standing naked in the bathroom, lost in thoughts about a man other than her father. Shaking her head, she hurried into the warmth of the shower cubicle.

When Gayatri emerged from the bathroom, dressed and ready, Mihiri was sitting at the breakfast bar. With a banana in one hand, she was savouring a piece of the butter cake Gayatri had baked the day before. Mihiri was still in her work clothes, her above-the-shoulder hair released from the plastic clip. Her second pregnancy had been unplanned. At two months, when she was experiencing nausea and appeared thin, Gayatri was concerned. Now, after care and medical intervention, Mihiri was blossoming. Her appetite had returned, and she exuded the same vibrancy as before. As Gayatri entered her space, Mihiri acknowledged her with a nod and inquired, 'Where are you off to all dressed up?'

'Who's the mother, and who's the daughter here, huh?' Gayatri teased. 'I, uh ... have a meeting with doctor uncle ... errm, you know, we are discussing, we have to … the ritual,' she stammered, avoiding her daughter's gaze.

Mihiri drummed her fingers on the granite countertop. 'Another meeting, huh? Not like ... a date or anything, is it?' she chuckled.

Gayatri, pretending not to hear, hurried past the kitchen. She made a beeline for the altar in the living room and grabbed the white thread she had acquired at the temple that morning. 'Siddhartha came to see me today. Minoshi's husband, you know him?' she called out as she walked back toward her daughter.

'Don't know him, but I've heard *of* him. What did he want? Don't tell me, it's another case of the oddities?' Mihiri was interested.

Gayatri halted beside her and lowered her voice. 'Hum. The strangest of them all! Their house, the demountable, that's gone missing! I can't even pinpoint the devil responsible for their issue.'

Mihiri's mouth formed a perfect 'O'. Growing up with an exorcist for a mother had exposed her to more than most people could fathom, but these moments still took her aback. 'That's awful, Amma!' she said, elbows on the granite, chin on palms. 'You will take care of all … all this, right, Amma?'

Gayatri nodded, her voice gentle but firm. 'Right now, Duwa, I'm worried about you and the baby. It's the young ones who are being afflicted. These devils are targeting the young … around your age.' She held up the charmed white thread. 'I want you to be safe.'

Mihiri extended her left wrist. Gayatri chanted, looping the thread around her wrist twice before securing it with a knot. ‘Keep it until everything is settled.’ She tapped her daughter’s arm softly.

‘That doctor uncle, he is a handsome one, Amma!’ Mihiri attempted to lighten the mood.

‘You think so?’ Gayatri asked as she quite unintentionally twirled a strand of hair around her finger.

‘Oh, yes! I do. Don’t you? I was thinking, Amma. You should go to Sri Lanka for the honeymoon. You haven’t been back for a while, and doc…’ Gathering the last piece of the butter cake on her plate, Mihiri stuffed it into her mouth.

‘Silly girl.’ Gayatri feigned anger. Leaving Mihiri in good spirits, she gathered her stuff and headed off.

When she reached Douglas’s gate, the old manservant was standing there as if he was expecting her. Beaming, he quickly pulled the gate open and welcomed her in. ‘Nona,’ Showing his betel-stained teeth, he offered a grin. ‘Nona, good afternoon, he heh he. Look at sky.’ He rattled on, as usual stumbling in his English. ‘Moon out. Sun going. He he.’

Throwing back her head, Gayatri laughed. A bright yellow oriole flitted between the flowers of the frangipani trees and took flight. Gayatri’s eyes searched for the exquisite creature.

‘Sir is up,’ the old man announced, gesturing with his chin. Gayatri spotted Douglas up on the raised veranda. Resting his elbows on the balustrade, he was watching her. Squinting against the setting sun, Gayatri waved. She couldn’t stop the heat rising from her neck. When she took a step forward, her toe caught the hem of her skirt, and she tripped. Daya put out a hand to help. ‘Ouch!’ she said, a discomfort on the side of her toe.

Douglas materialised by her side within seconds. He was in dark denim jeans and a white open-necked shirt. The scent around him said he had just come out of the shower. Gayatri inhaled secretly. It was the scent of spices, not the kind that wafted from kitchens of the brown lot; it was exquisite, the fragrance found in pricey bottles.

‘Are you alright?’ Douglas’s concern a gentle whisper.

‘Just a silly tumble.’ Gayatri felt her cheeks burn. With a gentle hand on her shoulder Douglas guided her towards the house.

A breeze circled around when the pair reached the top of the stairs. It caught the soft georgette of Gayatri’s skirt and lifted it just enough to show a creamy white thigh. Gayatri pressed it down quickly, heat thickening in her cheeks. ‘Mihiri just got home,’ she said, the

conversation an escape from her embarrassment. ‘I fumbled telling her where I was going. Like a teenager in love.’ *Love* the word slipped out before she could apply brakes.

Douglas smiled. A wide, comforting smile. He inched forward and took her hand, gently like it was a fragile jasmine flower. ‘Gayatri …,’ he said, his voice low and hushed. His thumb traced slow circles over her skin as his dark brown eyes bored into her soul. Gayatri stayed glued to the step, forgotting to breathe. Her name was a melody in his lips. She wanted him to say it over and over again.

‘Gayatri, I love you.’ The words fell like an exhalation from his mouth. ‘Gayatri, I am in love with you.’

Gayatri caught each word like they were precious gems. She felt warmth enter her veins, running through like hot spiced tea. She exhaled, giving her heart room to expand. Douglas’s grip tightened on her hand ever so slightly. His smile stayed, hypnotising her. She stammered, ‘Douglas …’

Douglas brought a finger to her mouth. ‘Shh,’ he said. ‘I know we are just getting to know each other. You don’t need to say anything, not now. Think about it.’

Gayatri was quick to reply. ‘But I do, Douglas. I do have to say something. I love you. too.’ She saw the flicker of his eyes. She shivered, goosebumps blossoming on her arms, on her exposed skin. Something stirred in the lower part of her stomach as she lifted her hand and placed it on Douglas’s cheek. His heart pulsated under the skin. She let it beat with her own. ‘I …,’ she stammered again, ‘I love you too.’ This time the words flew, like birds let out of a cage. She was smiling.

Douglas put his arms around her and pulled her closer. Her heart was pounding. A new feeling flooding her body. They were impossibly close now. His hand moved to the back of her neck. His fingers tangling in her damp hair. She melted. She let him pull her face closer to his until their foreheads almost touched. Closing her eyes she leaned in. Their breaths mingled, lips hovering just shy of a kiss.

But before soft skin could touch soft skin, Gayatri jolted, as though she was jolted from a wonderful dream. She pulled her head back. Her body still stayed close, too stubborn to break free. Douglas lifted a brow. Gayatri gestured with her neck. ‘The neighbours,’ she said, eyes flitting away from Douglas, searching the houses behind him, the balconies and the driveways. ‘Someone might see.’

Douglas laughed. A hearty laugh. But soft. ‘Let them see,’ he murmured, pulling her back to him.

It was the sound of footsteps on gravel that stopped their first kiss from eventuating. Daya was at the gate, pushing it open. The performers of the ritual were expected to come for a dress rehearsal that evening. Daya was preparing to welcome them. Gayatri giggled softly and pulled away, skipping ahead.

Her next destination was the kitchen at the back of the house, a familiar place where she could steady her emotions. Once there, she busied herself. Filling the kettle, she switched it on. Then she carefully measured two teaspoons of *Harischandra* coffee and a teaspoon of sugar into two Noritake cups. Her hands moved almost instinctively, a routine she had perfected over the years. When the water bubbled, she poured it over the coffee, watching as the mixture dissolved. The last touch was a bit of powdered milk, just enough to give the coffee a smooth, creamy shine.

When she returned, with two steaming mugs of coffee, she found Douglas standing at the balcony with his back to her, the hills and the cascade of paddy fields stretched out before him. He inhaled deeply and turned to her. 'You should let Daya do the hosting,' he said.

Gayatri hadn't realised how much she missed the seemingly unimportant, mundane tasks a wife performed for her husband, bringing him coffee, ironing his shirts, serving him curries, until she took over the tea- and coffee-making duties from Daya. Initially, it was the desire for Douglas to taste her kitchen wizardry that drove her to his kitchen to make iced coffee the proper Sri Lankan way, with a bit of spice and a drop of brandy. Douglas's delightful comments after tasting had kept her going, and now, whenever she visited, Daya made it a point to be absent so Gayatri could have full reign over the kitchen. Gayatri felt these wifely sorts of duties allowed her to breathe anew, to feel a sense of purpose and connection even if she wasn't Douglas's wife. There was a special place in her heart for her late husband, but she knew she had begun to live again, truly for herself.

She smiled at Douglas. Venturing close she handed him a cup.

'Are you saying my coffee isn't good?' She pinched him in the arm and smirked, 'Not as good as old Daya's!'

Douglas laughed. 'Well, it's not the coffee. It's the company.' His intense gaze rested on Gayatri. Swirling the liquid in the cup, he took a satisfying sip. Gayatri rested her hip on the ornate balustrade. Daya, in the garden below, looked up and smiled. It was again time for the ritualistic plucking of the flowers.

'Ever since I met you, I wanted to do this with you; sit here, on this veranda,' Douglas continued quite dreamily, 'watching the hills while drinking coffee. Cheesy, right?' Sliding into a chair, he flashed a smile.

‘Romantic!’ Gayatri smiled. ‘Ever since you met me, eh?’ she teased. ‘That’s not what I remember. You took a bit to warm up to me, remember?’

‘I had no problems with you. It is the craft you practise I was suspicious of!’ Douglas was defensive. ‘I apologised. Many times, if I recall right.’

Gayatri laughed. They fell into a comfortable silence, sipping coffee and watching the hills. When the last drop of coffee was consumed, as if on cue the first of the dancers entered.

Gayatri sprang from her seat with purpose and made her way to the wooden bench where the devil masks were lined up. The vibrant, painted faces stared back at her, some snarling, others grinning wickedly. A few dancers joined her at the bench, their eyes widening as they neared the masks. Their fingers stretched out hesitantly at first, hovering over the carved features as though afraid to disturb something sacred. A young man leaned closer. ‘It’s okay to touch them, right?’ he asked.

‘They’re sturdy,’ Gayatri treated him with a reassuring smile. ‘You’ll be wearing them soon enough. They’re made for dancing.’

The young man lifted a mask and held it to his face, his eyes staring out from the large slits. The others, emboldened, reached for their own masks, each choosing their devil with whispered excitement. The leader of the group stepped forward, pulling a folded piece of paper from his trouser pocket. Unfolding it with a quick flick, he glanced down at the names and began calling them out, assigning each mask with precision. The dancers, now with their devilish visages, shifted and soon preparations for the rehearsal began. Bare feet shuffled on the cool floor. Anklets jingled softly. Dancers tied and adjusted their masks and headdresses.

Douglas hovered at Gayatri’s side, his fingers brushing his chin as his eyes darted toward the lineup of dancers in devil masks. His gaze lingered on them. ‘Do we really need all eighteen?’ His voice held a lilt of hesitation. ‘I mean, we have, what, nine ailments?’

Gayatri smiled; she was always eager to share her knowledge. ‘That we *know* of. Yes, nine ailments. But there could be others we don’t know about yet. Some people might be too embarrassed to admit their issues. It’s better to be ready. The daha ata sanniya is about exorcising eighteen demons, whether they’re obvious or not.’

She gestured towards a nearby dancer, his mask painted a deep brown. The large red mouth gaped open, a stark white tongue protruding unnaturally. ‘That one, Vatha Yaka,’ she said. ‘He represents diseases caused by gas in the stomach. And let’s be honest, gas isn’t exactly an ailment people talk about freely. Can you imagine a woman coming up to us,

openly admitting she has … gaseous issues?' She was thoughtful. 'Who knows how many suffer in silence, possessed by Vatha without even realising it?'

She turned to another masked dancer, nodding towards the vivid yellow face. 'And that one. Pith Sanni Yaka. Bile-related ailments. But really, who can say what exactly that devil brings? Stomach pains? Unexplained fevers? Anger, maybe?' She exhaled. 'Performing the daha ata sanniya, attempting to chase away all eighteen devils, isn't a simple matter. But in this case, it's absolutely necessary. Otherwise, it'd be a job half done.' She paused, her gaze distant. 'When I watched my father perform …' Her voice trailed off, the memory pulling her inward.

The steady pulse of a drumbeat drifted in, soft yet insistent. 'Lala, lai, lalala, lalali …' – a chant curled through the air, winding its way like a breeze stirring fallen leaves. All heads turned instinctively toward the courtyard. Gayatri stepped forward, and others followed, moving toward the heart of the house.

Daya sat cross-legged on the cool cement floor, swaying gently to the beat. The soft glow of twilight cast long shadows across the courtyard, flickering as the dancers emerged, one by one, their bare feet brushing against the earth. Douglas's father, now seated in his wheelchair, watched silently.

The masked dancers began to fall into rhythm, their feet tapping. Each step, each sway, was purposeful. The courtyard filled with the sound of bodies in motion, the quiet thud of feet, the hiss of fabric, the building tension of the drumbeat.

Gayatri stood at the edge, eyes now glittering with a mixture of pride and anticipation, her breath catching as the rehearsal transformed the space into a theatre of rhythm and ritual.

Part 4

The Mistress of the Devil Dance

Chapter 18

‘It’s a great responsibility,’ Gayatri murmured, the weight of the words pressing down on her chest. Mihiri’s silence gave way to the rhythmic hiss of the rice boiling, its soft bubbles a steady reminder of the ticking clock, but Gayatri’s mind was elsewhere, back in the thick of the rituals she had performed so many times, and yet, now, they seemed impossibly distant. The scent of boiling rice wafted through the kitchen, filling her with a bittersweet nostalgia. She closed her eyes, recalling the last exorcism she had performed in her village, the chants, the heat, the energy. She remembered how the ritual had once flowed through her veins with certainty. Now, in the stillness of her Sydney home, that energy felt like it was slipping through her fingers.

Her daughter’s voice pierced through the haze of doubt. ‘You’ve never let them down,’ Mihiri reassured her. Gayatri’s heart remained in a tight knot. Was she ready? Would the spirits respond as they once had, here in this foreign land? A trembling sigh escaped her lips as she shared her fears.

‘It feels different this time.’ Had her father’s guidance, so firm and unwavering in her youth, truly prepared her for something as monumental as this? What if, in the heat of the moment, something went wrong? Something essential forgotten? Despite the rehearsed prayers, the ancient chants, the familiar beads around her neck, Gayatri couldn’t quiet the rising panic within.

It was the evening call for prayer from the mosque below the valley that prompted her to leave. She said her goodbyes and stepped out, only to return again.

‘Amma?’ you forgot something?’ Mihiri asked.

‘No, but …’ Gayatri’s eyes wandered over the wooden ceiling rafters, then swept down the walls.

‘What are you looking for, Acha?’

The granddaughter marched out of her room and halted at Gayatri’s side, her eyes following the invisible something Gayatri was staring at.

‘I thought I heard a gecko.’ Three pairs of eyes darted to all corners of the roof, expecting the small, elusive creature to materialise.

‘Wait!’ Mihiri laughed, ‘What geckos in Sydney, Amma? Maybe a cricket?’ She placed a gentle hand on her mother’s shoulder. ‘Are you sure you don’t want me to come?’

‘Silliness on my part, Duwa. Don’t worry,’ Gayatri insisted. Forcing her eyes to stop roaming, she took a step forward. This time she made certain it was the right foot, the auspicious one, she took first. As she walked away, she looked over her shoulder, just in time to notice the tail of a yellow gecko disappearing through the roof tile, with a soft sound of chap chap chap.

She hurried down the lanes that were slowly filling with moonlight. It had been two days since poya and the harvest moon was still illuminating the earth. She was nearing the arena when she broke her stride and flinched. A sleek, shadowy figure darted across her path. A black cat, one she’d never seen before in the neighbourhood. She stopped. *What’s going on?* she thought, her eyes on the feline, which jumped up and stretched itself against the nearest parapet. Gayatri watched it walking away.

She reminded herself of the preparations she had made for the ritual. Nothing was amiss: she had calculated and chosen an auspicious day and taken every precaution, refraining from indulgences, and even distancing herself from the one who stirred her heart. She was certain things were in place, exactly how they should be. Yet here she was, wavering at the first signs of misfortune: the gecko’s echo, the black cat on her path. *Did I miss something?*

‘Do not let the devils smell your fear.’ Her father’s voice offered a warning. Gayatri straightened, blinked, and started reciting a mantra in an ancient language, evoking calm. ‘Karaniya matta kusalena, yantam santam padam …’

But no amount of chanting could have prepared her for what awaited her at the village green. From her spot at the entrance to the amphitheatre, she could see the whole lively mess down below. No one was in white. There was colour everywhere like a full-blown Holi festival. Balloons and kites in various colours floated above the sea of heads. Coir mats carpeted the ground where men and women lounged carelessly, greasy fingers grabbing at chicken legs and beef ribs, mouths open and laughing. The whole estate in attendance.

It was not the consecrated space she required.

Gayatri wasn’t pleased but she knew little Sri Lankans to be just that, party-goers, making even the smallest of celebrations into a mega one, focusing on providing a premium experience. They had done that before, filling community halls for puberty celebrations, the village green for the Independence Day. Gayatri shook her head. What was she expecting? Maybe a little sombre festivity. A couple of foldable *Bunnings* tables with tea, coffee and butter cake, some picnic rugs, some plastic chairs? But this was something else entirely, a

hive of activity, bustling and loud, more reminiscent of a Saturday evening at Galle Face Green than the sacred ritual space she needed.

If she had to, she could filter the scent of kottu, vadai and kadala frying on fiery hearths. She noticed the dance of the man behind the isso vadai cart, ambidextrous, machine-like, picking prawn-pasted lentil patties from a heap, frying and bagging, handing over and doing it all over again. He shouted something the wind swallowed. The saruwath stall was crowded. Tall glasses of the vibrant liquid passing hands.

Kids half naked shot from one end of the green to the other, unsupervised. Young men clustered under tall Na trees. Shirt sleeves rolled up, a hand in pocket, they were multitasking – chatting, vaping, and bopping their heads to whatever that was playing in their ear. Young girls licked on popsicles, turning their tongue and lips blood red. They hovered close to the multitasking boys, giggling. A group of women cooled under an awning, cackling periodically. The cows, usually roaming the marketplace two blocks away, had made their way to the green, contentedly munching on discarded scraps and the lush, fresh grass.

The heat of the afternoon wet Gayatri's cheeks and forehead with beads of sweat. She shook her head and walked down the steps towards the stomped earth stage. No doubt she was unsettled by the sights and smells around her, but it was the sounds that truly concerned her. They weren't the innocent giggles of middle-aged women, the haggling of street food vendors, the drummers testing their skins, or the night call of the cicadas. She heard the cry of the devil bird, the growling from deep within the earth, the howling of a million dogs, the distant rumble of thunder.

Gayatri scanned the crowd, watching them carry on with their laughter and chatter, blissfully oblivious to the demonic sounds swirling around them. Either they couldn't hear it, or they simply didn't care, she thought, inching forward. As she reached the stage, a large fire blazed before her, its embers rising like fireflies in the night. The air was thick with sandalwood and camphor. Familiar scents.

'Everything set?' Gayatri paused and asked a performer.

'Almost,' he replied, tying a white cloth around his head, then motioned for her to follow as he led the way to the hut where the other dancers were preparing. As they walked, Gayatri scanned the crowd, her eyes landing on Douglas. Her shoulders relaxed at the sight of him. Even from across the bustling crowd, she could pick him out, his eyes focused intently on her. Her daughter had once teased her, saying, 'Amma, you have a type: old and wise!' And she had laughed, knowing it was true. Gayatri's husband had been eleven years older, and now the man who persistently occupied her thoughts was the same.

As her eyes met Douglas's, a predictable calm washed over her. His gaze was steady, rekindling her sense of purpose. He had come to her for help; she couldn't let him down. Her lips curved into a gentle smile, one that softened her face. With a quiet nod, she shifted her focus to the centre of the arena. There, in the front row, sat the afflicted individuals, their faces etched with anxiety. They were dressed in solemn white, in stark contrast to the lively, bustling crowd around them. Gayatri sighed, relieved.

'Oh, how they look.' The dancer beside her followed her eyes. 'No vibrancy, eh?' he added, with a look of genuine concern.

'Those affected by devils have only us to save them.' Gayatri repeated her father's words without thought.

When they entered, the hut was full of incense and rhythms and buzzing with activity. Dancers helped each other secure oversized masks and tie elaborate costumes around their waists. Drummers adjusted their skins, while extras swiftly wrapped reed bundles with practiced hands.

'Ayobowan, miss.' A drummer offered Gayatri a blessing. His finger-dance on the skin halted as he flashed a betel-stained-teeth smile. Gayatri stopped and touched her finger to the taut skin. She drew strength from the familiar: the smell of incense and resin, the sight of the dancers, the touch of reeds and drums. The enthusiasm of the musicians, the dancers and the drummers relaxed her. The performers in the hut with her were skilled actors and dancers, carefully chosen from the estate's rich talent pool. They were poised to bring the eighteen devils to life. She felt a surge of gratitude for their dedication, knowing they would be crucial in the battle ahead.

With a satisfied glance, Gayatri took a seat on a long wooden bench, laden with baskets of flowers and unlit torches. Pulling out a pair of well-polished gigiri from her satchel she secured them on her ankles. Stretching her legs she then inspected the anklets before standing up. The drummers were falling into formation as the masked men lined up, excited murmurs rippling through the air around her.

'All set to go?' she asked a nearby drummer, a man slightly hunched with a smile permanently etched into the crinkles of his eyes. He bowed his head and gave a single, confident beat.

'Right!' Gayatri nodded. Turning to a younger man, she added, 'Tie the mask tighter. We don't want it rolling to the ground when you start jumping around!'

The man lifted his hands and fiddled with the tie at the back of his head. Gayatri watched closely, then moved around the room, her gaze sweeping over the musicians, the

drummers, and the flickering oil lamps casting a warm glow over the space. After a final, lingering look at her troupe, she reached for the starched white cotton veil tucked into her waist tie. With practiced hands, she draped it over her hair, tying it tight. Her fingers lingered on the knot for a moment, ensuring it was secure. Then, with a decisive wave of her hand, she signalled that the moment had arrived.

The effect was instant. A deep, profound hush fell over the hut, as if the very air held its breath.

'Everyone ready?' Gayatri asked.

There were nods and murmurs. 'All set, akka,' the dancer closest to her said. He placed a betel paan in his mouth and scuffed his feet on the cement moonstone carvings, specially made for the event. Gayatri took a couple of steps forward, bells on her ankles chiming to the beat of her steps. She reached the horn blower and gently tapped his shoulder. The man as round as a dumpling strode purposefully on to the stage and stood with his feet planted wide apart. He then puffed out his chest, like a proud rooster about to crow, and unleashed a forceful blast of breath into the waiting conch shell. The deep, resonant sound rippled through the gathering, pulling everyone into the moment.

'Ho! Look, it's starting,' someone muttered, as parents hurriedly guided their children to the soft grass. Food cart patrons scrambled to finish their transactions, clutching plates as they quickly found their seats on mats, benches and plastic chairs.

'Thaanam, thaa ne, naaa,na, tham, thaa, ne, naaa,' The loudspeakers blared. A voice low and rhythmic providing a beat for the dancers to enter.

As soon as the horn blower stepped off the stage, Gayatri emerged, her steps perfectly in time with the chant. She moved like a lioness circling her domain, dancing and scattering white sand and rice across the ground.

Chapter 19

Seeing the exorcist perform, Nazreen squirmed in her seat, shifting uneasily like a reluctant patient about to get vaccinated. Simone, on the other hand, peered over Nazreen's shoulder with wide-eyed excitement, like a tourist who had stumbled onto a local festival.

'Isn't this amazing!' she exclaimed, her eyes glued to the centre stage.

'Hmm,' Nazreen responded, her voice distant, not fully immersed in Simone's excitement. Part of her wasn't even sure she wanted to be 'cured' of her current situation. It didn't seem all that bad, after all. Even if Simone was only welcomed in her parents' home as a go-between, the mere fact that she was welcomed at all, despite Umma knowing, was enough for Nazreen. That small, quiet acceptance felt like a victory in itself.

Nazreen's gaze remained locked on the stage. The chants swelled, and the drums tightened their rhythm. Her ears caught a faint sob swallowed by the noise. She glanced over her shoulder. It was Umma. Quietly crying. Nazreen hiccupped, the mother's sorrow transferring. She reached out, but before her arm could complete the motion, an egg shot toward her like a speeding baseball. Nazreen ducked. The egg hit Christine on her cheek with a 'splat, chus'. Christine jerked. 'Mummy!' she whinged as yellow sticky mess slid down her face. The row behind her erupted into muffled laughter but one look from Tania Brohier was enough for it to hush. Tania sprang into action, pulling tissue from a roll from her handbag, she began dabbing and scraping at her daughter's face.

'Good thing I packed extra rolls,' Tania whispered while discarding the soiled tissue into a Coles bag, which was quickly filling up. Once all traces of egg were wiped away, she slumped back into her chair, falling into a heavy silence.

Sitting next to Tania, Sheila was a restless ball of energy. Nazreen could feel her legs jiggling and hear the soft 'sutter sutter' of her skirt. Every few minutes, Sheila let out a deep sigh. Then, as if her grief had deepened, she muttered, 'Ai-o, typical Sri Lankans, noh. As usual, late to start.'

At that, Gayatri froze mid-sprinkle-sand-dance, like a peacock startled in the forest. From her position at the centre of the stage, she stared past Nazreen, her eyes boring into the second row, as if she had heard Sheila's words, despite the distance, the thumping drums and chanting voices. Her glare was sharp, like she was out to exorcise Sheila herself. Nazreen felt the weight of it, as though Gayatri's silent fury had reached out and wrapped itself around them all. The drums stuttered momentarily.

‘Kata, Kata, watch what you say!’ hissed Uncle Chandrasekara from two seats away, his voice dripping with the authority of someone who once led a temple committee. ‘Don’t you forget that this is a sacred space.’

Sheila withdrew into silence.

Above them, the sky seemed to be taking part in the drama as well. The moon and the clouds were locked in a fierce battle, with the moonlight desperately trying to pierce through. In the distance, dogs howled like backup singers, and estate cats added their screechy meowing to the strange symphony of the night.

As Gayatri resumed her dance, Nazreen’s gaze shifted sideways. Her mind was distracted by the activity around her. She watched the other young men and women of the estate. They sat as if corralled for a school assembly. Some leaned in close, heads tilted, whispering. Snatches of conversation drifted to Nazreen’s ears, the urgent ‘how,’ ‘when,’ and ‘what’ of ailments.

The familiar voice of Parinda Ratnayake, whose not-so-quiet whisper cut through the drumming, made Nazreen’s ears perk up. ‘A navaratne ring. Can you believe it! It just combusted,’ he was explaining. Malaka, in his infamous sarong revealing trousers beneath garb, listened intently, nodding along.

A racket behind her caught Nazreen’s attention next. It was Vaishnavi’s grandmother. The old woman was bustling. Handing over plates of food to Vaishnavi’s little brother, she swam elbow-deep in fried goodies herself. While she fed the child she explained the exorcism ceremony in detail for his benefit.

Nazreen caught Vaishnavi’s eye and nodded sympathetically. ‘It won’t be long now,’ she mouthed and smiled.

The intensity of the thovil surged in front of them. The throbbing drums and the singing voice coaxed a set of dancers to the stage, clad in white, fiery shawls tightly secured around their waists. They moved in sync, spinning flaming torches to carve glowing arcs through the sky. Fire leapt and flickered. ‘Thanam, thane, na,’ the voices of the drummers pulsed through the air as the torch bearers danced, twirling and turning till the tang of their sweat mingled with the scents of incense and burning resin. The dancers’ breath came in short, sharp gasps but they didn’t falter, pushing through the fatigue as they reached the climax of their performance. And then, just as quickly as they had appeared, the fire dancers retreated into the shadows of the hut. But there was no time for rest. Before the fire’s warmth had even dissipated, another group of dancers rushed onto the stage. They moved with the same urgency. Large shawls held high in their hands billowed out like wings. They advanced

toward the front row. The wind from their shawls whipped through the air with an almost audible hiss. Nazreen, wide-eyed, stared ahead, her heart racing as the dancers came closer. The closer they got, the stiffer her body became. The rhythm felt almost psychedelic. A wave of dizziness swept over her suddenly. She exhaled deliberately and peeled her eyes from the stage, forcing herself to focus on something, anything, else.

There was a lot happening around her: The crowd had settled in; popcorn fell into their mouths while they slurped saruwath noisily from plastic cups. Munaweera was strutting around the arena with a pompous authority. He waved, adjusted his sarong periodically, and offered unsolicited advice to anyone who'd listen. A couple of unruly children caught sight of him. They cupped their hands around their mouths and whistled. 'Oi! Oi!' they hollered, jeering. Desmond Jayasekara responded. With a sharp hiss, he lifted his black umbrella and brought it down hard against the ground, thud! sending a small puff of dust into the air. The children jumped back, momentarily silenced. The parents hurriedly tugged at their sleeves, whispering warnings to behave.

Seated next to Nazreen, Yashodara fidgeted with a small handheld mirror, her fingers tapping against its frame. She leaned over her shoulder and whispered, 'Nothing still.' Her eyes then scanned the stage. Her mother gave a reassuring nod. 'Maybe give it a little time. The dance started just now, noh.' Yashodara sighed softly. Nazreen, catching the faint tension, smiled briefly before turning her attention back to the dancing on the stage.

Chapter 20

As the shawl dance ended, Gayatri stood at the centre of the stage, commanding the space. ‘Kora, Vatha, Gulma, Demala,’ she sang, her voice a powerful call that cut through the air. Her slender body swayed, the bells on her anklets chiming with a delicate cling-ting, their sound ringing out like a summons. ‘Dom dahi gudha gudha dahi,’ the drums pounded, pushing Gayatri forward. With deliberate, methodical steps, she moved around the stage: one step forward, two to the right, one step forward, two to the left.

‘Jala! Butha! Gulma! Kora!’ Her voice grew louder, calling out to the eighteen devils that were wreaking havoc in the estate. She needed them to come. It was the only way to strip them of their power, to drag them into the open, and send them away, shamed and beaten, their tails tucked between their scaly legs, banished back to the pit where they belonged.

‘Jala, Butha,’ she chanted, her voice steady. ‘Domtha gatha ku gudha,’ the drums accompanied. One step forward, two to the right, one step forward, two to the left, her dance was precise. But she wasn’t blind to the others, the more malevolent forces lurking on the edges. The air around her wavered, like a pond disturbed, rippling and tearing.

Only she could see them. Twisted figures writhed and clawed, stretching the fragile membrane between realms. They bulged against it, grotesque shapes, like calves trapped in a caul, their mouths gaping wide. Waiting. Waiting for an invitation.

Mahasona, the demon of graveyards, loomed above, impossibly tall, his massive jaws yawning open. Riri Yaka, the blood demon, crouched beside, his monkey face contorted into a grotesque grin. A shimmer of silver, Mohini, the legendary street ghost, her glowing eyes locked onto Gayatri’s, cold and predatory. And then the shadow prince Kalu’s blackened face inches from hers, ember-red eyes burning with malice. His laughter curled around her like smoke, seeping into her ears, her mind, her bones.

The veil trembled, stretched thin, as the worst of the worst tried to push through. Gayatri bit down on her lip, forcing herself to look away, away from the writhing horrors. *Not them. Not tonight.* Her anklets rattled like a snake’s warning as she spun faster, her movements a blur, forcing the devils out of her sight, out of her mind.

‘Butha, Kora, Kana, Demala, come forth!’ Her voice rang sharp, cutting through the tension. The unholy shapes beyond the veil thrashed harder, their grotesque limbs twitching, desperate to break through. But Gayatri refused to look at them. To acknowledge them would give them power. And she would not allow that.

The drums pounded, ‘Dom dahi gudha gudha dahi domtha gatha ku gudha.’

Gayatri tightened her shoulders. ‘Butha! Kora! Kana! Demala!’

As the lesser devils lurked yet unseen, their personified counterparts burst onto the scene like mischievous children let loose at a carnival. The oversized masks bobbed with every frenzied movement; their grotesque features exaggerated under the flickering oil lamps. As the wearers twirled and stomped, the masks seemed almost alive, grinning, sneering, leering, shifting between comedy and horror with every turn of the dance. The personified lot swarmed around their exorcist, voices rising in a chaotic blend of song and chant.

‘Dom dahi gudha gudha dahi.’ The beat filled the air, loud and enchanting. The crowd shifted to the edge of their seats. Regarding the masked lot, they launched into an impromptu guessing game, matching ailments to devils.

‘That’s got to be the Kora sanni yaka!’

‘No, no, that’s the Buthaya!’

‘Kora walks crooked! That’s the mad devil.’

‘The blind one should have one eye closed.’

They argued, deduced, and declared with the zeal of participants at a trivia night.

‘That one!’ shouted Lucien Fernando. Dressed in a batik sarong and a loose shirt to fit the occasion, he was in high spirits. ‘That’s Kora! Look at that limp!’ he said. Some nodded their heads and agreed.

‘If that’s Kora, then I must be Maha Kola himself!’ Desmond Jayasekara teased.

An explosion of laughter followed. The owner of the coffee house sulked and sat himself down. Gayatri worked the stage. One step forward, two steps to the right, one step forward, two steps to the left. The masked devils danced, twirled, and laughed. The drummers battled each other in rhythm, pounding the skin with vigour. Gayatri’s lip curled, her eyes flicking from one masked figure to the next, until they locked onto one in particular. Her gaze froze, drawn to a devil in a garish orange mask with bulbous eyes and a crooked mouth suspended mid-wail.

Lunging forward, Gayatri grabbed the devil’s sleeve and yanked him toward her, letting go halfway through. The man, clearly unprepared, attempted a somersault, his hands flailing like a windmill in a storm. With a loud thud, he crashed to the ground. The crowd roared with laughter as the devil wriggled and thrashed like a fish out of water. He quickly sprung to his feet, dusted himself off and threw his arms wide, taking a deep, exaggerated bow, milking the applause of the crowd.

Gayatri crossed her arms, her bare feet kicking up little puffs of dust as she circled him slowly. She eyed him up and down like a hawker sizing up fish at the market. She shook her head in mock disappointment, clucking her tongue. ‘Really?’ she said, her voice dripping with playful disapproval.

The ‘dom dahi gudha gudha dahi’ softened to a whisper in the background.

‘In a pair of trousers, huh yako?’ Gayatri scoffed. Her voice carried, sending the audience into another round of laughter. ‘Tell me, Uncle, what’s with this hideous costume?’ Gayatri continued her tease, looming over the short man in the oversized mask. The actor pulled up the white sarong covering his ample midsection. A pair of white cotton trousers peeked from underneath.

‘This?’ he asked. ‘Ah, Nona mage sudu nona ... my dear, dearest missy, you know how it be!’ The masked man danced for the crowd.

‘Look at her!’ The man pointed at Gayatri, his finger jabbing toward her. ‘This missy here has no shame, calling me “Uncle”. Ai-o! How could I be her uncle? Look at me. Now look at her. Old and new!’ His finger swept from Gayatri to himself. ‘Old and new, old and new,’ he repeated, the words echoing through the space. Stumbling, he took some unsteady steps and wobbled away from Gayatri, then, with a burst of energy, he began to run.

Gayatri tightened her grip on the coconut husk and circled the arena, pretending to give chase with a mock seriousness, her feet kicking up dust. But even as she played along with the comedy, her eyes flicked back to the afflicted group, searching for signs, the slightest shift that might betray the arrival of the devils she had called, a grotesque form, fiery eyes, blood-stained teeth. But each time she looked, she was disappointed. The afflicted lot sat there with nothing changed. Eggs came hurtling. Ratna laughed and cried. Malaka sat glumly. The white cloth bundle still occupied the seat next to Praha.

Each time Gayatri turned her attention back to the chase, with a sigh her thoughts lingered on the absence of the devils she had summoned. Soon the chase ended, and Gayatri held the devil by his sleeve again. This time not letting him go.

‘What’s wrong yako? Tell me about this sarong?’ she asked. ‘Can’t a pair of trousers handle your bits and bobs? Balls and all?’

The audience shifted. There was a smattering of cautious chuckles. The exorcist at work was an enigma, they didn’t know how to react. The devil in the orange mask tottered toward the crowd, his oversized head wobbling as if it were about to roll clean off his squat body. He flapped his arms and thrust his hips forward.

‘This? This?’ he cried, jabbing an emphatic finger toward his groin. ‘This is what she’s on about!’

He turned to Gayatri with an inflated sigh, shaking his head. ‘Ai-o, missy, the sarong lets a cold breeze in.’ He gave the flimsy cloth tied around his waist a flutter. ‘Need to cool down my hot balls, aney! You wouldn’t understand.’ With swagger, he spun back to the crowd, his voice ringing with mockery. ‘This Madam has no balls! No balls! Muwa, ha ha!’ He cackled so loud that even the drummers faltered for a beat.

The audience too erupted in laughter. Someone in the back whistled. Another clapped. A few aunties shook their heads. Malaka sulked, annoyed at his plight being played out on stage.

The masked devil skipped and adopted a monkey’s crouched stance. His big head turned to the left and then to the right before he twirled and spun like a mischievous imp, a pair of crisp white trousers flashing beneath his sarong as he revelled in the attention he got.

‘She has no balls,’ the rest of the devils chimed in, smirking at Gayatri, who only chuckled, allowing their teasing to play out.

‘Wadimin nara lowaaaa, Wadimin nara lowaaa ...’ Gayatri began to sing, taking a step forward, then two steps to the right, a step forward and two steps to the left. She circled the stage once, then twice. The masked men danced for the crowd. Huddled centre stage, they kicked plumes of dust in the air and ridiculed each other.

‘You elephant turd.’

‘Filthy swine.’

‘Dog tick.’

Pounding of palms on drums and a low chant ran a thread through the air. Douglas sat with his eyes glued to the dancing exorcist. He was in a good mood, his fingers catching the beat on the armrest. The rowdy crowd hooted and hollered, encouraging the banter of the devils. For most, the ritual on stage was a Vaudeville sideshow, Sunday evening entertainment. But those who knew the ritual, those who had witnessed it before, the elders of the estate felt their nerves on edge.

Uncle Chandrasekara fanned his legs to a ‘sutter sutter’ rhythm. He brought his hand to his face periodically and bit his nails like he was at an Australia–Sri Lanka limited overs match. Munaweera paced anxiously around the perimeter, his eyes darting everywhere, from the gathered crowd to the swaying trees, from a stray dog to the wandering cows. Loku Sadu’s palmyrah leaf fan worked relentlessly. He fanned himself in short, anxious bursts, pausing only to dab his glistening bald head with an orange cloth.

As midnight crept closer, Gayatri sensed the shift before she could name it. A strange chill snaked through her bones, sinking deep, like frost settling over. She glanced around, expecting to see others reacting.

The world remained unchanged. The torches burned, oil dripping in slow, molten beads, copper ribbons curling into the night. The crowd sat snug in the glow, untouched by the creeping cold that clung to Gayatri. Half-naked children lay sprawled on coir mats, breathing in the steady rhythm of sleep. The afflicted ones remained motionless, their faces locked in silent misery.

Gayatri swallowed and shivered. The coconut husk slipped from her grasp, landing with a dull thud on the ground. She clenched her arms tight around her body, as if she could trap warmth against her skin. But the cold wasn't just in the air. It was inside her, threading through her veins.

A thick cloud of mist settled over the crowd all at once and a flurry of bats took flight in trees. The wind struck next, a sudden force twisting through the clearing, sending leaves and dust spiralling wildly. Panic flared in Gayatri's chest, sharp and urgent. Instinct took over. She raised her arms, motioning to her troupe. The drummers fell back, their palms softened against the taut hide of their instruments. The dancers darted for shelter in the bleachers, bright fabrics clinging to them in the rising gale. The masked men hesitated before stepping to the stage's edge.

Gayatri remained centre stage – alone. Her pulse pounded against her ribs as she forced her feet to move, to follow the rhythm she had known all her life. A step forward, two to the right, two to the left. 'Kora, Butha, Ja …' The words barely scraped past her lips. The wind stole them before they reached the air. And then:

'I am here.'

A breath. No, a voice. A reedy whisper, too close, curling into the shell of her ear.

'I ... Am. Here.'

The whisper turned to a rasp, then a shriek. Then she felt it. Cold. Wet. Oozing down her cheek. She gasped, her fingers flying to her skin. The slime slithered down her throat, thick and metallic. A tongue. A tongue dragging blood and spit. Gayatri whimpered. She knew the sensation. She knew the voice: deep and hypnotising. Maha Kola, the devil king, the leader of the eighteen had torn the veil and entered her realm.

The cold slid down her neck again. Gayatri turned as pale as dough. She felt the terror; the same terror that engulfed her each time she was reminded of how the devil king nearly ripped her life away. She had been a child, six years of age when she heard the dark

whispers and felt the tongue slithering along her neck the very first time. She was just a spectator at a thovil led by her father when the demon king hypnotised her into submission. Her father had been in the thick of it, exorcising devils when by sheer chance he had noticed the transaction, the devil slowly slithering into his child's soul. The expert exorcist had been prompt and fierce, screaming profanities, spitting incantations and blowing fire. The devil king had retreated his claws and vanished, leaving Gayatri with a fever that had taken several days to settle.

She was feeling that pull again. The whispers of the devil king intensified. The feeling of surrender crept back. Before she could protest, the madness of the devil king took over. As his taunts and blows rained down on her, Gayatri lost control of herself, sinking deep into a lake of shadows, chilling cold black water.

Maha Kola teased Gayatri, weaving his own tale into her thoughts like a scene from a horror movie: there he was, a rakshaya, a demon with a grotesque face, eyes wide and bulging, a grin splitting his face, standing over his father who he had killed with his bare hands, ravenously gorging on his flesh and drinking his blood.

Gayatri shook viciously to free herself. The violent, seething power of the devil king was too powerful. It twisted her body to his will. But she wasn't done just yet. Somewhere deep within herself she was struggling, fading but fighting.

Maha Kola yanked her backward. Gayatri thrust herself forward, one step, two steps to the right. She swayed like a reel caught in a violent storm. Maha Kola made her limbs jerk violently. Her knees buckled. She steadied herself. She fought fiercely to regain control. Every muscle strained against the possession, jerking her body and contorting in all kinds of impossible ways. In the throes of the madness, screams built deep within her, raw and visceral.

'I … am … not … yours,' she gasped, shaking her head as if to dislodge the thing clawing at her mind. Her own voice was distant, barely a whisper beneath the sneering, growing presence inside of her.

The world around her twisted. Colours bled into each other, shapes stretched and shuddered, turning into grotesque parodies of what they once were. The flickering oil lamps elongated into eerie, wavering tendrils of fire, their tongues licking the air like living things. The ground beneath her pulsed, softening into something damp and writhing, as though she was standing atop a bed of slithering serpents.

The whispers in her ears became louder and louder, like the low hum of a thousand voices speaking at once. Faces emerged from the mist, melting, eyes hollowing into black

pits. Their mouths gaped open, but instead of words, a chorus of eerie, discordant laughter poured out. They teased and tormented.

‘Gayatri … come away.’

‘Gayatri … You are mine.’

Gayatri clenched her fists, nails digging into her palms. The pain keeping her alert. But then, she stumbled back, breath ragged, beads of sweat on her skin. A sudden flicker of movement caught her eye. She turned. There, in the flames raging from oil lamps, she saw her reflection, herself in the white costume, hair bound beneath the cloth. Her eyes were wild, bulging. Her mouth frozen in a scream.

Another form close to her face like a second head. It was Maha Kola, eyes burning with red-hot intensity, he sank his jagged teeth into her flesh, tearing her and gnashing voraciously. The pain felt real, searing through her with such intensity that sparks danced before her eyes. It was as if the agony was consuming her, dragging her away from reality. She imagined liquid pouring down her cheeks, caking her neck and matting plaits of her hair; the copper tang of blood lingered. Then she heard a pig squealing like being taken to slaughter and realised it was her.

‘Amm, amm … O’ she screamed. ‘Budhu Ammo.’

She was mewling and pleading, shaking her head violently and gasping for air.

Douglas’s breath caught as he watched Gayatri. She jerked and convulsed right before his eyes. Her body twisting unnaturally under the torchlight. Her face was contorted, fierce and wild. This was not the Gayatri he knew. This wasn’t the graceful, kind, talented woman he loved. This was a dark stranger.

She staggered back, her head snapping up suddenly, her eyes locking onto his. For a brief moment, she was herself again, and she flashed him a smile. But then Maha Kola twisted her features into something else. Something monstrous.

Douglas jumped to his feet, his body shaking. Panic surged through him as he rushed toward the men in masks, his feet kicking up dust as he pushed past the onlookers, desperate to reach her. The crowd stared frozen, their faces a patchwork of awe and fear.

‘Oh, em, gee. Could a human contort like that? At her age?’ Malaka whispered in Nathan’s ear.

‘She’s been doing that for ages, so I guess it’s all that training.’ Nathan watched in uneasy fascination.

‘Shhh,’ Nazreen lifted her finger to her lip.

‘Is she alright? Is this normal?’ Douglas asked, his voice trembling as he stopped at the masked men. His eyes remained fixed on Gayatri, unable to look away for even a second. She continued to whirl and twirl. Her lips stretched into a grotesque, inhuman grin. His anxiety grew with each passing second. He waved his arms frantically. ‘Should… should she be doing that? What’s wrong?’

The masked men exchanged glances, their beady eyes peering through the wooden slits. Their bulbous heads bobbed as they stood in a line, blocking Douglas from entering the stage. As Gayatri’s screams escalated like a tidal wave, Douglas’s legs became boiled manioc. Two masked men caught him under the arms, steadying him as if he might crumble.

‘But ... is this supposed to …’ Douglas, sticky with sweat, stuttered, ‘Is she acting?’ His voice came in bursts. The wind rattled the seeds in dry pods hanging off Na trees and the wailing of a child reached them from a distance. The masked men didn’t speak. They folded their hands on their chests and watched. Douglas fell silent, torn between rushing to Gayatri’s side and trusting the unspoken warnings that held him back.

The drummers watched Gayatri carefully. Their hands suspended mid-air, some chanted prayers while others murmured darkly.

The bone-chilling cry of the devil bird carried through, piercing the night and echoing across the length and breadth of Little Sri Lanka.

Through the haze, through the madness, Gayatri found Douglas again. He was at the very edge of the stage. His usual composure gone, replaced by something raw and exposed. His face was now twisted in fear. His lips moved, though no sound reached her ears. With two masked men supporting him on either side, he looked smaller, more fragile than she had ever seen him. In that moment, she saw him not as the doctor, the rational one, but as a man lost in a chaos he couldn’t control, helpless against the forces swirling around them both.

Seeing him like that, something inside her lurched. The devil’s claws were deep but Douglas’s presence was a lighthouse cutting through the storm. With eyes on him she grunted and pulled air into her lungs. She felt the sharp scent of burning resin awaken her senses. She balled her fists and pressed them to her eyes, her mind racing to focus, and for a moment she visualised a golden thread connecting her to the earth, a lifeline that tethered her to the real world.

Then a surge of adrenaline shot through her veins like warm spiced tea. Overpowering Maha Kola, Gayatri began to move of her own free will. One step forward, two steps to the right, one step forward, two steps to the left. Her dark hair, freed from its restraint, whipped around her like a halo of liquid silk. Her throat opened like a bud at the touch of dew. She

began to sing, a mantra so powerful the leaves on trees and the flames of torches danced without a breeze.

Seeing Gayatri's transformation Douglas sighed deeply. The crowd whooped and settled back in their seats. The full moon swelled to full size; clouds parted. The arena became alight. There was much jeering as Gayatri took the stance of Mahakali, the warrior goddess herself, dancing like a dervish. She whirled so hard she became one with air, a blur, a tornado and then all of a sudden she stopped and surveyed her surroundings. Eyes wide with determination, a bead of spittle on one corner of her mouth, she darted to the edge of the stage and pulled out a torch planted on the ground. She then thrust it high above her head with the vigour of an Olympic torchbearer. Flames erupted like on cue, wild shades of blue, red, and yellow, licking at the sky.

There were movements on the sidelines. Munaweera nudged a young boy squatting on the ground. The boy, a stagehand, darted across like a line-boy at a tennis match, and returned at the same speed, falling to the ground with the intensity of a ripe jackfruit off a tree.

Gayatri uncorked the bottle the boy had handed over and breathed in the sickening scent that rose from its neck. With a swift motion of her arm, she spilled some of the blue liquid into her mouth and expelled a gush of it across the torch she held. Fire and fumes erupted into a sprawling cloud. Gayatri twirled around the stage, sipping and expelling, until the air was full of the acrid smell of kerosene.

When the empty bottle fell to the ground her steps began to falter again. The stagehand lifted his bum, his hand on another bottle of blue liquid. Munaweera stopped him, with a gentle shoulder pat. Despite her bones becoming ice blocks and the demon's voice slithering into her ear yet again, Gayatri twirled, attempting to continue her dance.

'I … am … not afraid!' she moaned as the devil king rebooted inside her. Maha Kola took over the slender body again and soon he was making her dance to his will. She danced with the dying torch in hand, erratic and wild. Her eyes blazed as though lemon had been dripped in them. She let out a scream, a guttural cry that seemed to tear the very air. It was heard in Sinhala, the melodious language of the Sinhalese. In Tamil, the world's oldest living language. And in the language of the Veddas, those wild men who lived in deep jungles of Sri Lanka.

'Palayang!' she screamed. 'Poda! Mangachchan!'

The torch hissed and sputtered, dripping oil. Gayatri felt her senses slipping away. Her voice grew hoarse, each cry weaker than the last. Her whole being weaker than the moment

before. In desperation she summoned her father's strength, attempting to tap into the power that once coursed through him. 'Thaththa, oh! Thaththa,' she cried. But there was nothing. No surge of power. No sudden awakening. Only silence. Only weakness. Only the feel of emptying veins. Gayatri was not her father, the legendary exorcist whose battles against the darkest forces had become lore. She was not an equal by any means. Not even a minion. She was weak. She was a woman. Her legs were shaking now, beads of sweat trickling down her spine like a centipede. 'Tindui nivaranai,' she gasped through clenched teeth. 'It is finished.' Her father's final words after every victory, now spoken not by her, but by Maha Kola, the victorious devil inside of her.

Arms outstretched in a final act of surrender, Gayatri tilted her head upward, searching the night sky. The torch slipped from her hand, falling with a soft thud. There was an audible gasp from Douglas as the last breath escaped Gayatri; 'Ittt isss finished,' she repeated, and collapsed.

Douglas felt weak, a wave of helplessness crashing over him. He steadied himself and lunged forward. The personified devils were quick. They stood over him like bouncers at a nightclub, blocking his path. 'Gaayaa. Oh, Gayaa!' His chest heaved. Peering between the masked men, his blurring eyes struggled for a glimpse of her. His voice echoed like from a hollow well. His lips moved around a thousand words, but nothing dislodged as words.

'What the …' Nazreen shot up from her seat.

'Huh?' Many brows knitted.

Then a certain kind of expected silence passed over the crowd. Douglas attempted to shout again but instead he gargled like a man drowning. He fought with his hands and legs, but the dancers were united and stronger. Instinctively, he reached for his phone to dial the police, the ambulance, the fire brigade, anyone with authority, but halted with just one digit punched. 'Whatever happens, do not interfere. I mean it, Douglas. If you want me to be safe, please my darling, please do not interfere.' Gayatri's words were a deep gong in his head that stilled his hand.

Douglas hissed; a flame blown out. He rested his weakened body against the steel partition. As he did, he saw from the corner of his eye, perched up on a low branch, a small bird, black and white with a tail that refused to stay still. 'One for sorrow,' Douglas's inner voice chanted. 'Argh!' his outer voice reacted, his eyes searching for the little bird's companion to conjure luck for that dire moment.

As his eyes darted from branch to branch, he was tormented by his own senses. His skin tingled with the memory of Gayatri's soft touch. His ears strained to hear the

tintinnabulation of her laughter. His eyes continued to remind him of her beauty. But she stayed still, a rag doll in the middle of the stage.

Their frightened faces hidden behind large masks, the men who held Douglas captive, shifted on their heels. Gayatri lay lifeless. No one dared approach her. No one was allowed. The audience gripped their phones, too fearful to record. Sweat beaded on their faces as water pooled in their eyes. The devil bird went ominously silent. The relentless scream of the cicadas was abruptly cut off. The tiki torches hissed and sputtered, their flames dwindling to nothing. Clouds swiftly gathered, blotting out the full moon and shrouding the scene in darkness.

'What? Thindui Nivaranai?' Munaweera crept forward and peered into Uncle Chandrasekara's face. 'It's finished?'

Time stretched and then Douglas heard the sound, very faint in his ear, the song of the magpie robin. 'Trill tweet trill tweet,' it went, 'tweet trill trill,' the lovers whistling to each other. The drummers tested their fingers on the drum skins. Data datta doom doom, the beat of the drums awakened, throbbing through the earth. The men and women seated on the ground felt it. Their muscles twitched, their fingers tapped against their limbs.

Out of thin air a figure appeared, slender and tall. With a gourd flute under his arm, he walked towards the woman on the ground. The dim light of the moon behind a veil of a cloud provided a feeble backdrop to the unfolding scene, a darkened painting of an ancient mural wall. The man stood above the woman, watching. Then he lowered himself and sat cross-legged. His fingers danced on the instrument as it produced a haunting melody that wove like a beguiling serpent. The masked men relaxed and sighed, their tense postures softening with each note blown.

In her darkened state, Gayatri heard the melody faintly first, then louder. Sinews and muscles, warm liquid in veins, glands and the bones, all surrendered as the rhythm filled Gayatri as if it were a gentle lover. The flautist swayed, a snake charmer coaxing his pet to perform to the crowd. Gayatri's body obeyed and unwound like a cobra. The music and the movements breathed life into the exorcist. Gradually, she regained her composure, stretching her limbs and standing. With each motion, she reclaimed her presence, until she finally stopped, flourished her hand above her head and took a dancer's pose.

The torches combusted spontaneously. The crowd whooped. Praha jumped to his feet and clapped his hands above his head. The man with the flute stood and made his way towards the dancers' hut. No eyes followed him, all staying glued to the woman in the dancer's pose.

‘Phew,’ Munaweera exclaimed, eyes on Gayatri. ‘I thought when she said thindui nivaranai, it was all over.’

Uncle Chandasekara chuckled, ‘It’s not over till it’s over! I am certain the demon who entered her thought the same. It’s an exorcist’s trick, letting the demon feel triumph.’

When Gayatri started dancing again, one step forward, two steps to the right, one step forward, two steps to the left, overcome with relief, Douglas sagged his shoulders and wept like a child. The masked men parted, and Douglas’s faithful servant made his way through.

‘Come, sir. Sit. Sit.’ Daya led his master to the nearest empty seat. The old man squatted against a half wall. ‘The worst over, sir,’ he assured, his eyes fixed on the exorcist. Douglas looked down at the old man and nodded with a smile before letting his gaze follow Gayatri as she danced.

The performers, men in masks, men with drums, men in shawls and men with fans all reached forward and took their place beside the mistress of the devil dance. No one matched her stride; falling back they followed. The drums went datta datta doom doom datta datta doom doom as the dancers and the exorcist strode around the stage. Gayatri was singing, ‘Sanda savi, Denna Weeri, Yuda bannda …’

It was the kind of music that was too joyful to bear. Parinda’s father jumped up from his seat and broke into a dance. He swayed and twisted completely out of sync with the drums. He was like a drunk uncle at a Sri Lankan baila party, performing a dance complete with pelvic thrusts and hip gyrations. The crowd cheered, a hearty cheer from the belly of the audience.

‘What the devil?’ Parinda exclaimed, rising from his seat.

Katie behind him stood up. ‘What’s going on?’ she asked.

‘That’s my father! The dude dancing.’ Parinda pointed and chuckled uneasily. The rest of the youngsters in the front row turned their heads, smiles pulling at their cheeks.

‘I’ve never seen him dance! Honestly, I didn’t know he could. Certainly not like that!’

Then, a minute or so into his dance, another elder stood up. It was Vaishnavi’s grandmother. She stumbled down the steps. Parents of the afflicted joined her, one after the other. Down the steps and through the crowd into the stage. The ammas, appachchis, thaththas, daddies, mummies, appas, and ummas of the estate dancing, prancing, and stumbling. Knees wide, feet turned out, spine poised like a temple pillar, Ammachchi danced the Bharata natyam, her feet striking the ground with force. Her daughter Radhika joined in, hands swaying to a rhythm in her head. Raja was by Radhika’s side. Eyes on his feet, he attempted a style of his own.

Fathima was gentle on her body. Swaying her hips a little, she took short strides to keep up with the others. Hassan Ali mirrored his wife's movements, a reluctant dancer forced to be one. Wickrama Madagamage Asiri Sena Wickramasinghe and his wife Surangani were more enthusiastic. Their hands clasped tightly they twirled across the stage. Wickramasinghe didn't have the moves, but he tried to catch the beat, stomping like a buffalo in mud. Surangani freed herself from the inbuilt shyness and performed body rolls, giggling like a schoolgirl. The Brohiers spun around. Seasoned dancers, Tania and Tyrell effortlessly switched between the rumba and the mambo like they would at a Sri Lankan dinner dance. Sheila launched into a dance routine together with some of the aunties. A flash mob doing the lungi dance, kicking their feet and waving their skirts.

The dancing, the drumming and the scene unfolding was so infectious it got the audience on their feet. Katie's eyes took it all in. Her mouth curled up. 'Sri Lankans party hard!' she observed. Catching the beat, Parinda nodded his head. The afflicted were on their feet yet they weren't dancing. They watched, brows knitted, and mouths opened.

'What the F?' Malaka asked, making his way through the first-row occupants. His sarong dislodged and fell on the ground. Walking in his trousers, sans sarong, Malaka didn't stumble, or trip. He walked like he had never gone through the redda asse mahattaya episode and halted at the railing separating the stage from the audience.

Parinda with Katie in tow followed Malaka. Vaishnavi strutted beside Katie talking animatedly in proper King's English. Nazreen and Simone weren't too far from them. They walked shameless in their closeness. An emotionally stable Ratna held tight to her husband and hurried behind the mob of the estate's young. They halted like a firing line and watched.

Gayatri and her troupes ended their circuit and watched the parents dance in the centre of the stage. The drummers raged on the skins while the masked men shook their bulbous heads to the rhythm. The crowd roared, jeering, cheering, voices rising in a feverish pitch, until a ripple swept through, sudden and unnatural, like an unseen hand stirring a pond. A cold mist surged from the ground, curling into the night air. The noise cut off as if someone had snatched away the breath of the gathered mass.

Everything and everyone, human and otherwise, froze.

The gossiping aunties, caught mid-sentence, hung in eerie silence, mouths ajar, hands mid-air, their laughter choked off. Munaweera, stepping forward, stood, sarong caught in the wind, his body unmoving. Douglas and Daya, master and servant, stood locked in place, their eyes fixed on the exorcist, breath caged in their chests. Bats remained suspended in the sky, wings outstretched. Dogs, heads thrown back in silent howls, stood like statues beneath the

moon. The dancing parents, once twirling with abandon, were caught mid-motion, frozen like figures in a game of musical statues. Only two groups defied the stillness: the afflicted youth and the performers centre stage.

'What the heck is going on?' Vaishnavi asked.

Malaka turned his gaze to Parinda, who looked at Katie in confusion. But no one dared to move beyond the line separating them from the performing troupe.

'Datta datta doom doom,' the drum beat continued.

Gayatri started chanting as a thick mist came down off the hills and settled over the parents. It swivelled and thickened to a ghostly shroud, lifting the stilled forms off the ground. Higher and higher the parents went, ascending towards the heavens. And suddenly they became alive again. They danced, swaying their hips and twisting their limbs. The scene looked breathtaking, a shadow puppet show against the night sky, illuminated by a great big stage light. The drums continued. The masked men swayed to the rhythm. Spitting incantations, Gayatri watched the sky-dance.

Ratna whispered, hot tears popping into her eyes. 'Should we do something?'

Christine shook her head. When she spoke, she was nasal, 'It's working. See, no eggs!'

Nazreen felt nauseous, faint. 'Ummah. Appa,' she exhaled and burst into tears.

The child monk extended his arm for Siddhartha to see. 'Oh!' exclaimed Siddhartha, 'No more Arnott's! How bloody amazing!'

Gayatri moved. A step forward, hands held high. She paused and then took a step back. But her gaze never left the suspended bodies above.

A torrential downpour was suddenly unleashed, drenching the parents. The rain targeted them, and them only. Thunder roared and lightning streaked across the sky, illuminating the scene with a stark, ethereal light. Then, as abruptly as it had begun, the rain ceased, and the clouds parted, letting in the moon's glow. The parents, now saturated and cleansed, began their descent. No longer were there gyrating hips or swaying pelvises. They were locked in a hypnotic trance.

Gayatri took a step forward and raised her hands high above her head. 'Roga, dosha, tindui, nivaranai,' she proclaimed, her voice steady and commanding. 'All ailments and ill luck have been cured.' She stood, legs apart, arms above her head like she was ready to catch the parents, now on their slow descent back to earth.

The oppressive smells that had lingered for weeks on end vanished, in their place the sweet smell of the Queen of the Night, their delicate blooms unfolding in tandem with the

waxing moon. The eerie cry of the devil bird faded into nothingness, replaced by the gentle rustle of wind weaving through fields of freshly harvested paddy.

Above, the moon hung low and luminous, casting its radiant light over the clearing like a celestial carpet. Gayatri took in the transformed scene with a slow, triumphant smile. The glint of victory sparkled in her eyes as she saw the formerly afflicted individuals, deep in conversation with each other, their ailments seemingly vanished. There was no more stumbling or confusion, no more eggs crashing on heads. The crowd had come back to life. They resembled concertgoers after a remarkable performance, delighted, relieved, and satisfied.

The parents, now back on the ground, seemed liberated from whatever had once held them captive. They gathered in small clusters, chatting softly, exchanging smiles as if nothing unusual had happened. Towels, cloths, anything they could find, were passed around to blot the water dripping from their bodies.

‘How come only we’re wet?’ Tania Brohier asked. But no one else seemed bothered.

Douglas sprinted to Gayatri with Daya keeping speed. Seeing them approach, Gayatri’s face softened. She treated Douglas with that smile she wore just for him. With that, she lowered herself gently to the ground, exhaustion in her every movement. Douglas could see the toll the ritual had taken on her. She looked drained, her skin was pale, her shoulders slumped, and there was a weariness in her eyes that he had never seen before. Just as Douglas moved to help, she raised a hand, her fingers trembling slightly, signalling for him to stop. Daya gently nudged his master to one side. Douglas’s hands squeezed themselves into fists as he stepped back.

Settling into a lotus position, Gayatri closed her eyes, and in a low, rhythmic voice, began to recite the Ratana Sutra.

Chapter 21

Douglas didn't bother trying to rationalise what had happened. It had been bizarre, undeniably so, but it had worked. The strange happenings had ceased, and the young ones of the estate returned to their routines, no longer haunted by the oddities that once plagued them. But his concern remained fixed, not on the estate, but on the woman he loved. Gayatri had been utterly exhausted for days. He visited her daily, offering tonics, remedies, and any suggestion to help restore her strength. His words were always the same: 'Rest, Gayatri. You need rest.'

As Gayatri regained her strength, his worry faded, but something else grew inside him. It was an ache that deepened with each visit. His longing for her, to have her by his side, swelled until it felt like it would burst. He needed her now, more than ever. He didn't want to wait for the matchmaker to do his magic.

Not long after the ritual, on an Autumn afternoon, on her balcony, with the line of blue mountains as the backdrop, he proposed.

'Gayatri, my love. Will you be my wife?'

'Finally!' Gayatri teased. 'Yes! Yes, a thousand times yes.'

Still on his knees he pushed his mother's wedding ring on her finger, brought her hand to his lips and kissed her fingers, one by one. The smell of frangipani, jasmine and the hint of turmeric on her skin made him happy. He smiled. Without thought, Gayatri dropped down to his level, leaned in and placed a warm kiss right on his lips and pulled away. Douglas's breath hitched, he traced his lip with his finger, his eyes dancing. Gayatri's cheeks went a rosy red. He laughed. 'Neighbours?' he teased. Pulling her to him he kissed her like a thirsty man drinking.

He now sat beside Gayatri, who was wrapped in a sari the colour of rain-washed brick. She had looped a garland of jasmine around her hair and wore a thin gold chain. A gold pendant of two intertwined swans rested on her bosom. This was the second time he was seeing her in a sari. First had been at their wedding, the small ceremony only the closest and dearest attended. And now she looked as beautiful as that day. She blended right in with the festivities around her. The wedding held outdoors rivalled the Ambhani's affair in Jam Nagar. Douglas was not surprised at the length the parents of both brides had gone to celebrate the occasion; after all, they both had only one child each to give away.

A shimmering marquee was set up right in the middle of Simone's grandfather's sprawling estate. The guests arrived decked out, each trying to outshine all others. There were gowns, saris, salwars, gagra cholis and anarkalis in all the colours under the sun. They were accompanied by shiny sharwanis and expensive suits, making the marquee look like a high-end Bollywood–Hollywood fusion fashion show. Thousands of fresh flowers transformed the venue into a magical wonderland. The air was filled with the sweet scent of roses, frangipani, and the exotic Sal imported with special permission. There was food to feed a small battalion; the charcuterie board was a masterpiece, with cheeses that had more syllables in their names than most people could pronounce without tripping over their tongues.

Saruwath and sherbet poured in abundance while bar carts churned mocktails to satisfy every palate. As if there wasn't enough sweetness to indulge in, a dedicated station was erected to serve watalappan, the creamy cardamom-spiced coconut custard, sweetened with jaggery specially imported from Kothmale.

The two mothers of the brides made a grand entrance, carried in palanquins no less. One emerged peacock-like in a vibrant blue-green salwar with a silk hijab fastened by a sparkling blue brooch. The other, the mother of the white bride, arrived draped in a peach ethnic ensemble, confidently strutting in sky-high heels. As each emerged, there was hollering and clapping.

'Like in one of your movies!' Douglas nudged Gayatri playfully.

'Oh!' Gayatri lifted a brow. 'So you do watch Hindi movies, huh?'

'Phew! Me? No way,' Douglas chuckled.

'Ha ha, you little liar!' Gayatri pinched his elbow.

Douglas laughed. He wasn't a fan of movies. Not Hollywood and certainly not Bollywood, but he enjoyed blending into the background when Gayatri and her girls watched them. Daya sat on the floor and joined them while his father dozed off in an easy chair. That was Douglas's ideal day, spending time with his family, old and new. Though without intent he has followed the plot of many a movie and seen women covered in gold singing in the rain. The memory of it all brought a smile to his face.

Gayatri quietly moved her hand and placed it on top of his. The couple locked eyes, their moment quickly broken by a deep 'ahem'. Gayatri retreated her hand and straightened her back, momentarily feeling like a teenager caught flirting. But then she realised, the 'ahem' wasn't meant for her.

Across the table, Vaishnavi's mother and grandmother were sharing secrets with their eyes. One looked intently, the other gestured with her neck. Slowly the centrepiece, the

elaborate arrangement of flowers and fruit, started moving. Gayatri immediately recognised the manoeuvre. She stifled a laugh as a vivid memory of her own grandmother came to mind, hoarding centrepieces at weddings as if they were trophies. It was like an Olympic sport among Sri Lankan women, the unspoken competition to claim the table decor at an event before anyone else could. And Radhika and her mother were reaching for glory.

'That girl has good hips for the sari,' the old woman observed, her hand still stealthily inching toward the flower arrangement while her eyes remained glued to the podium, where the two brides, Simone and Nazreen, sat side by side separated by a flimsy curtain. 'That sari and that blouse, shaa!' she remarked, her voice carrying across to the other guests at their table.

Heads turned, and all eyes followed her gaze to Simone, who looked beautiful in her sparkling white sari with glittering silver specks and handcrafted sequins, scattered like broken pieces of gems. Her blouse was short, showing off her pale midriff.

'Benaris silk,' sheila admired.

'Kanjivaram,' Ammachchi corrected.

The sari was a showstopper, and Simone wore it like she was born for it.

Radhika agreed. 'Yes, Kanjivaram. It's good they decided that way, noh, Simone in a sari and Nazreen in a gown. Better matched.'

'White girls do look beautiful in ethnic wear, don't they?' Surangani chimed in, gesturing toward the saruwath station. Katie stood there, resplendent in a salmon pink sari, draped in the Kandyan style. The garment cascaded elegantly to the floor, with intricate embroidery and delicate beadwork adding a modern twist to the traditional attire. She sipped her brightly coloured drink from a tall glass. Parinda and his mother stood nearby, casually chatting.

'Definitely the work of *Gather and Stitch*,' Vaishnavi commented, eyes on Katie. 'Helani knows how to stitch. Supposed to be the best in Sydney for this kind of thing. Remember Ratna's wedding blouse? Stunning! It fit her like a glove.'

Aunty Mary Martha leaned back against her seat, folding her hands over her belly. 'In the eighties when we migrated, there were no gathers or stitches to do our saris and blouses. I got mine stitched whenever I visited home. There was a good tailor in Wellawatta. Ram tailors – that's the one. Girls today are so lucky! So many stitching traditional garments here in Sydney nowadays, noh. Even men. That tailor in Pendle Hill, his work is excellent!'

'Yes, yes, the Pendle Hill tailor is one of a kind,' Radhika agreed, nodding emphatically as she inched the centrepiece ever so closer to her mother with a delicate,

practised movement. Gayatri smiled. *Good strategy*, she thought, amused by the subtle power play unfolding before her.

When the arrangement, a masterpiece of native flowers, miniature oranges, and tiny bee-like ornaments, slowly started making its way toward her and Douglas, Gayatri finally grasped the intention behind the women's actions. Subtle gestures like this had become a regular occurrence after the success of the thovil ceremony. The community had found countless ways to show their appreciation for her and Douglas, showering them with gifts as tokens of gratitude. Surangani sent them generous portions of her best curries, and there was always a steady supply of Tania Brohier's legendary 'Love Cake' in their kitchen. Simone frequently arrived at their doorstep with jars of honey from her grandfather's private hives. The chief monk summoned them for dharma discussions on more occasions than they could count. Fatima made sure they never ran out of wattalappan. Sheila's ambulthiyal was a constant at their breakfast table. Their laundry was handled by the young entrepreneur Praha, who had made their washing service free for life. And at Ruhunu Siri coffee house, coffee was perpetually on the house.

As the centrepiece came to rest near her, Gayatri glanced at the older woman, nodding and mouthing a gentle 'You take it.'

Before they could respond, Christine Brohier took the stage, or, rather, made an entrance of sorts. Standing at her table, she was sporting what could only be described as a poncho fashioned from a mosquito net. Without hesitation, she started pushing buttons and pulling cords and commanding her DJ booth. Christine sang, a one-woman fusion band, seamlessly blending Eastern rhythms with Western melodies, eastern instruments with Western ones. The crowd tapped their toes.

'From the day we arrive on the planet … Singha bah, Singha baah, dom dom dum
Gallana bindala len dora arala, domi kita domikita ta.'

'That girl is talented,' Surangani's husband shared. Douglas, his palm clapping on his knee, nodded. Gayatri scanned her surrounds, her eyes resting on known faces, treating them with smiles. The chaos of the past few months had become a distant memory. The youth of the estate had transformed back into themselves, laughter and warmth returning to their faces. Minoshi was radiant, her pearly whites on full display as she smiled, clad in a blue sari draped in the Kandyan style and adorned from head to toe in her finest jewellery. Siddhartha, sat beside her, deep in conversation with Ratna and Lalith Bandara. Gayatri felt a warm glow as she observed these newly formed friendships.

All around them, the sights and sounds of the celebration wove a vibrant tapestry of culture and community. The rhythmic beats of the estate's DJ merged with the hum of conversations and bursts of laughter. Fatima stood in the centre of a group of guests. Her hands flying in the air, her well-manicured eyebrows moving expressively, she was telling a story.

'After all that hullabaloo, Fatima looks happy, noh?' Radhika remarked, catching the eye of the short, portly woman dressed in a striking peacock-blue ensemble. They exchanged smiles, nodding in mutual acknowledgment.

'The happiest day for a mother is her daughter's wedding day, noh,' Ammachchi mused, casting a knowing glance toward her own daughter. Gayatri listened, sensing that the inevitable conversation about marriage was about to begin. She watched as Vaishnavi crumpled her napkin and set it on the table, taking a deep breath. Radhika leaned over, adjusting the delicate gold chain around Vaishnavi's neck and smoothing the dupatta on her shoulder.

'Yes,' Radhika responded after finishing her adjustments. 'True, a daughter's wedding is the happiest day of a mother's life.' She paused before adding, 'But, more than that, it has to be the happiest day of the daughter's life!' Her kajal-lined eyes softened as she looked at Vaishnavi with affection.

Vaishnavi's father chimed in with a nod, agreeing. 'Hmm, not to say we're disregarding traditions, but our kids are mature enough to know what's best for them. Right?' he asked, turning to Vaishnavi for confirmation. As if on cue, Nathan appeared, rushing around a corner and coming to an abrupt halt at their table. Vaishnavi's breath caught. The scent of his perfume hugged her as he stood inches from her. He greeted the elders at the table and turned to speak to Vaishnavi, only to be cut off by Christine's voice over the microphone.

'It's time folks!' she shouted.

All heads turned to the podium.

'May the couple be blessed with happiness,' Father Francis droned. 'May the support of friends and family continue.' He passed the microphone to the Imam next. Chanting of a prayer hymn wrapped around the guests like a sweet smell before the two to be wed recited their vows.

'Qubool,' Nazreen uttered three times, her voice barely rising above a whisper.

'I do, I do, I most certainly do!' Simone shouted with excitement. Nazreen's father pulled down the curtain that kept the couple separated.

‘Oh!’ Looking at Nazreen, Simone gasped. Nazreen was stunning, radiant, every detail of her presence striking and flawless. Her skin, glowing with a soft golden hue, seemed to catch the light and reflect it back tenfold. The fabric of her dress shimmered like liquid silver, soft as moonlight, with intricate beadwork scattered across the bodice in delicate patterns.

‘Oh,’ Simone repeated. ‘You are so beautiful!’

The crowd erupted into a joyous cacophony of cheers, applause, and table drumming. The families of the two brides flocked around them.

Once the formalities were done, the guests were served a feast in buffet style. Uncle Chandasekara heaped his plate with lamb kottu, lobster mornay, pilau, beef wellington and an array of curries. Aunty Sheila was more conservative, sticking to one cuisine, she endlessly promoted the biriyani.

‘Fatima made it herself. Her biriyani is top quality,’ she said dishing several spoons onto her plate.

As plates emptied, trouser buttons came undone and sari pleats loosened. At one point Nazreen and Simone floated towards Gayatri’s table.

‘Thank you, Aunty Gayatri,’ Nazreen said hugging Gayatri tight.

‘A day of such joy, child!’ Gayatri said and patted Nazreen’s back gently.

The night breeze brought a respite from the intensity of the earlier heat. Christine spun a fast-paced number, drowning the chattering of knives and clinking of glass. Disco lights dropped colourful beams all around. The young of the estate hit the dance floor all at once, rocking their bodies from side to side and crossing their arms in front of their chests. Malaka scooped with his hips and thrust out. Deepti caught the heat with her sultry Bust Down moves, while Kithsiri held Yashodara by her ample hips, spinning her around in a lively mix of the rumba and cha-cha.

But the floor got crowded only when Christine blasted ABBA’s ‘Dancing Queen’ through the speakers. The estate’s elders, fifty- and sixty-somethings, flooded the floor, clapping and singing on the top of their voices. It was a delightful chaos, buffalo stomps, body rolls, rumbas, mambos, and even the lungi dance on show.

‘I think you two deserve to shake it off!’ Mihiri winked at Gayatri.

Douglas reached out and took Gayatri’s hand in his.