

## New World

On the eve of independence, Sir William drove away from the estate in his cream-colored Morris and left his fortunes in the hands of Mr. Balakumar, the Tamil manager, who promptly brought his milch cows to Sir William's private garden to feed on the roses. We had the day off, but still we woke early and stood at the edge of the tea field, watching through the morning fog. For days, weeks, when we tried to remember Sir William's face, his light-blue eyes, we could picture only his car winding down the hillside of Nuwara Eliya and vanishing like a cloud.

Above the tea fields, rows of houses stretched across the horizon like a string of baby teeth, small and overcrowded. Our great grandparents had lived in these houses, one-room caves with tin roofs, and if they were alive, they would still recognize their homes, everything as they left it, only the coat of whitewash brighter. They didn't own these houses, and our inheritance was what they could fit inside: a wooden chair, a tea kettle, maybe a chess board. "We live as we die, owning nothing," our parents had been told, and they reminded us of it each day until even our own shit was more of an offering than a possession.

Our great grandparents had crossed the waters between India and Ceylon, and our parents spoke to us about death simply as both a certainty and a choice. Either stay and die of hunger, drown in the dark waters, or languish in an unknown land. Following each possibility to the end, we let ourselves turn into dried carcasses, our hair shed, blood soured, and then in the open sea, bodies bloated into plump blue women until we reached the final death up here in the pungent, cool hillside that still awaited us.

Standing idle in the field, we pictured Sir William sailing off from our warm island to a colder one, men and women with buttery faces greeting him on his arrival. Unrecognizable perhaps after all these years, crushing cardamom and ginger in his tea, rinsing his mouth with sesame oil for salubrity, he'd return home and wake to the smell of wet wood and lichen, pink-scaled fish with horns for breakfast, giant eels sliding through the sky in his morning stroll as he searched for the hillside, the wisp of paradise. All week, a voice on the radio assured us everything would be reborn in the coming day. Even the trees would look different, because they would be *our* trees. Each breath you took would be *your* breath. As if all these years, we had been borrowing our lives.

We collected newspapers with pictures of the new Prime Minister. He was broad-shouldered and wore trousers, dress shirts, and jackets in the fashion of Sir William and Mr. Balakumar. When he first spoke on the radio, he talked in English and we didn't understand a word of what he said. Then he switched to Sinhala, and we still didn't understand. We only caught the word *Ceylon* and it felt foreign, faraway. Another country.

For the celebration, the men cooked goat, a gift from Mr. Balakumar, and the children danced around the slaughtering as we rested for once in the field, surrounded by freshly picked bushes. Under a gray sky fattening with rainclouds, we unfolded our arms and legs, sank into the dry stretch of our bodies. Head to toe and weightless as lilies, we must have looked like a single being from the height of the houses. We played color games, sang girlhood rhymes to distract us from our misgivings hiding in the bushes as everything and nothing changed.

We didn't see Selvakumar's arrival but when we heard his voice, we instinctively smiled and thought of early mornings between dreams and waking when we could simply linger, empty-handed, in the sound of an owl or fox. He wore an oversized yellow shirt, and had not grown

more than a fingernail in the past two years, and we didn't know if he ever would. We believed Selvakumar would always look this way: a child, who salvaged odd, broken things like a bronze figurine of a horse missing a leg, an ivory comb with gap teeth, a sparrow with one wing. As he worked alongside us picking tea leaves, performing ladies' work in place of his sick mother, we let him into our jokes, showed the calluses scarring our feet, and told him about the bleeding that left us lightheaded and slow. He was twelve, but we treated him as if he were older, a long lost son who had returned to us. There was a story of a young man who ejaculated into a river and whose seed was swallowed by a fish, which became a human baby. Sometimes we imagined Selvakumar was that boy, still smelling of river water and damp mud. He had grown, it seemed, outside our wombs.

On rainy days when the chill kept us cursing, we shortened Selvakumar's name into a girl's, Selvi, and he would stick out his tongue at us, call us mad women, which warmed our spirits. We were his nuisance, his heartache, all the mothers he never truly had. The month before, Mr. Balakumar had beaten the boy for ruining a bush with his carelessness. "The bud and two leaves, not too old, not too young," he repeated as he whipped him with sugar cane, until all the sweetness left Selvakumar smelling of burnt molasses, his skin the sticky color of a beet. Throughout the night, we sat by his side, held his hand, and took turns tending to him. He didn't sleep, but kept quiet, staring at the gold-filled tooth he had found by Sir William's house with Vani on her birthday. She was twenty-eight that day, and when he gave it to her as a present, she asked him what was more precious, the metal or the human matter. Three weeks later she died on a sunny afternoon from exhaustion. Talkative and twig-limbed, she looked peaceful lying down, finally getting some proper rest.

Now he looked pensive, squatting on his legs and holding his drooping head with both palms.

“What’s wrong, Mr. Prime Minister?” we asked.

He shook his head and fought back a laugh. “How can an Indian bastard be Prime Minister?”

“You shouldn’t listen to Muthu. He’s only repeating something his father said.”

Their friendship was unexpected and asymmetrical. Selvakumar two years older than Muthu but a whole head shorter. Muthu looked like his father Mr. Padmanathan, who ran the estate store and considered himself a big boss, though Sir William bought a controlling share of his property years ago. Even worse Mr. Balakumar was one of the boy’s distant relatives. In the light of their families, we knew the boys were just playing in the dark.

Selvakumar joined us lying in the field and told us how clouds were formed. He waved his right hand at the sky and we followed the motion of his fingertips.

Muthu had been teaching Selvakumar from the lessons he learned at school. Mr. Padmanathan disapproved of this practice. What use were the names of distant countries to a boy who would never leave? Still he didn’t prohibit the giving of scraps, a handful of bare-bone English sentences.

Everything Selvakumar learned, we heard, too. While picking leaves, he recited to us random bits of natural history, and we were lost in the quickness of his tongue. On the morning we discovered the sudden bloom of grasshoppers, Selvakumar told us about the explorer named Marco Polo, who travelled to China and along the Malabar Coast of India, where he first saw women smeared with oil standing outside under the high noon sun darkening their skin for beauty.

“This Marco Polo must be mad,” we told him. “Only laborers stand in the sun.”

“Everything was different then,” he said.

“You mustn’t listen to Muthu. Who knows if this Marco Polo even lived?”

But really we were warning him against his own heart, already drifting kilometers and kilometers away from the hillside.

Mr. Padmanathan’s store once served tourists interested in buying miniature models of hill station trains made out of dark chocolate and finely engraved sandalwood boxes for tea leaves, but his business did poorly, and by the third year, he began to sell belongings from his home, recycling his wife’s saris into patterned placemats and the rugs into blankets, leaving the house bare, stripped of its comforts, with only four chairs as furniture. Sir William insisted on purchasing a share of the shop after the original estate store became infested with rats and burned down. Mr. Padmanathan couldn’t afford to protest. He put away his porcelain teakettles and saffron-dyed lace and began to sell plain, everyday items.

To save money, he diluted the arrack, but sold the drink at full price to our husbands. We didn’t mind, because he saved us from some trouble. Still, we didn’t trust him. He was Tamil, too, but we didn’t call him brother, and after we paid, he whispered about us, called us Indian coolies. None of us had ever visited India, but he didn’t care about those details. Like Mr. Balakumar, he prided himself in ancestry and spoke of lineage most adamantly around his son.

Remember you’re Ceylon Tamil, he’d say, your great, great, great, great grandfather was the king’s adviser.

Selvakumar first noticed Muthu two years ago. Muthu was sitting outside the store wearing a Jesuit-school uniform, his spindly calves covered by red wool socks. Something about

the socks and the way the boy mumbled to himself made Selvakumar pause, long enough for Muthu to ask if he could whistle. Selvakumar stood silently with his lips pressed together as Muthu expelled air and pointed at the birds he was trying to call.

“I’m no good,” Muthu said. “I have a weak chest, just as my brother did. When he was a year old, his lungs flattened and nobody could fill them.”

When Selvakumar tried to whistle, he choked, the sound dry and painful. Later he would tell us how they sat and ate biscuits in the darkness of the store’s back room, where onions and potatoes were stored. He brought us back a packet and instructed us to eat with closed eyes as we sensed the pleasure of a sweet and satisfying blindness.

When we watched the pair run around the hillside, slapping lizards with twigs, we privately warned Selvakumar. “Be careful of him.”

“There, there, Amma Kuti,” he would say, and pat us on the cheek like we were children that needed to be soothed. Then he boiled us a brew of tea dust as he did for his mother.

In the dull glare of the afternoon, Mr. Balakumar inspected the charring goat and pronounced the men, women, and children as lucky witnesses to the independence of their nation. He touched the belly of an expectant mother and said her baby would be born free and know nothing of white men from a cold island. “Here, here!” he yelled, holding out a bottle of arrack before taking a swig. “We rejoice in the new day for us, for Ceylon.”

He took another swig, drinking with the occupational vigor of Sir William, who was once a soldier in India, though the only combat he endured was drinking gin and quinine in the fight against malaria. We all remembered Mr. Balakumar weeping as Sir William drove away, but we

could not tell if it was from sadness or joy as he hugged the blue lapels of the suit jacket Sir William left for him.

Mr. Balakumar was a heavy man with the strategic, stern face of a clerk. His wife stood quietly behind him, clutching their two-year-old son. She looked suspiciously at us, wondered if we had received gifts from her husband, if he had taken any special interest in one of us. Her gaze came to rest on Selvakumar's mother, who sat in a gray sari by the cast-iron pot of boiled rice as a rooster with striking red plumage strutted toward her, the contrast between her and the bird left her looking drained of color, weak. The skin on her arms and neck was speckled with pale dots, and clumps of her hair were missing, revealing slivers of scalp. She was once known for her beauty, and we were both envious and grateful then not to have the burden of it. Four years ago, she had a child as pale as Sir William's Morris, and before it could become her shame and pride, it died, only a week old.

We joined her by the cast-iron pot and sang harvest songs, knowing nothing else to sing for the occasion. Lakshmi had cut out pictures of the Prime Minister from newspapers and we agreed he looked handsome but prideful.

Our husbands meanwhile drank with Mr. Balakumar. We had never seen him acting so freely with them. He slapped their shoulders and they exchanged bottles, kissed the rims still wet with each other's saliva. If he weren't wearing his suit, they might have been equals, breathing and enjoying the same air. Suddenly our husbands' hopes for their own crops and livestock felt possible. Maybe they would have three Mahalakshmi cows and enough lentils for a year. The estate might stop growing tea.

Selvakumar sat next to his mother with the tail of her sari wrapped around him. They leaned on each other, heads delicately balanced. He asked if she was thirsty and she shook her head. He took his mother's hand.

He kept still when Muthu appeared at the gathering. Everyone greeted the boy politely, knowing his father from the estate store and his relation to Mr. Balakumar. Propriety kept Muthu's hands in his pockets.

"Do you know the Prime Minister says he has a third eye?" he said. "He can tell the future. He'll know what will happen in the country. That's what he says."

He spoke loudly and glanced toward Selvakumar, waiting for him to join. His belief that Selvakumar was his closest friend was something he did not question. We also remembered what it had been like to be girls to make promises that could never be kept.

Selvakumar didn't budge and Muthu left two bananas near his friend's feet.

"Om Guru Selvakumar," Muthu began, his hands folded in prayer. "Please bless these bananas as an offering for the new country."

He bowed and Selvakumar couldn't help but laugh as he touched the head of his sole devotee. Without a word, they ran into the evening and looped around the houses as if nothing had changed.

Mr. Balakumar stood before the feast and raised another bottle. "In India, they received their independence and acted like animals. Hindus killing Muslims, Muslims killing Hindus. We will be different, more civilized."

We ate quickly. When was the last time we had eaten meat? Two months ago, perhaps. Who could afford it? Someone had decorated Mr. Balakumar's cows with garlands and turmeric. Kuppuswami played the nadaswaram poorly, but once we were too full to move, he performed a

wedding rhythm, and the young ones in the group danced. We all clapped our hands, counting the beats, the minutes until the new day arrived.

Over the hillside the sun broke into a golden yolk before drifting below the mountains. Muthu and Selvakumar held out their banana peels at the edge of the cliff across from the feast.

“To Ceylon!” they yelled and dropped the peels.

They twisted and writhed in the air, a pair of falling stars.

The rain smelled of camphor and matchsticks. As the sky darkened, we could hear trembles of thunder in the distance, but it was too faint for worry. We opened our mouths to drink. The water teased us, drop by drop. Our grandparents would tell us stories of those faraway villages of Madurai, Thirunelveli, Thiruchi, where the land was dry and people died of famine. We were afraid of places we could only imagine, and felt lucky to live on land so green.

Mr. Balakumar washed his face with the rain, splashed liquor around his mouth, let it trickle to his neck. We enjoyed him better this way, and we wondered if his true self had yet to be revealed. As the men tried to sober up, they decided to make a wager on Mr. Balakumar’s cows. They pooled their money and he agreed on the game of his choosing: horseshoes. His wife groaned, but Mr. Balakumar insisted, and she reluctantly set up the stakes. Tending to a man as demanding and fat as Mr. Balakumar must be difficult. “Raychel,” he said, and she looked over at him. “Bring me *my* set of horseshoes.”

We only knew her as Mrs. Balakumar. Her Christian name felt oddly intimate, as if we had seen her in her nightgown, drinking a cup of tea, her hair loose.

The rain began to hit harder. The wind pushed the droplets, interlaced them momentarily into silver webbing. Paari was elected as the representative for the group. He was chosen for the

lightness and precision of his hand, the way he could prune the skinniest branch without troubling the rest. Mr. Balakumar puffed out his chest and slapped the muscle under Paari's arms. "You sure you want this bony fellow?" he asked. "If I win, no pay for three days."

Paari agreed, though we were all frowning. We would either go hungry or feast on yogurt and milk. We imagined our own children reaching their proper heights and secretly we wondered if we still had any growing left in us, if we were all just stunted giants.

Mr. Balakumar coiled back his wet hair, extended his arms, and took aim. He threw the horseshoe far but crooked.

When it was Paari's turn, the crowd chanted his name wildly, shouted out advice about his stance. The rain-slicked *U* flew high but stopped short of Mr. Balakumar's. It was best out of twenty, we reassured ourselves. In that curve of metal our hopes wavered, flew, and crashed to the earth. As we cheered for ourselves through Paari, any doubts we had were lost in the thrill of our voices.

The two men took their time, while above them sound and light circled each other until they met in a spectacular shrill blaze. We were winning before the downpour began. The ground softened under the thick rain as we ran to our houses.

From our one-room trenches, we peeked through bare windows to feel the wash of water over us. We swallowed mouthfuls, tasted a saltiness, and knew we must be wading through the sea. Both excitement and dread filled us as the water blew inside and combed through our lives, so much more porous than we had believed. The dye in the paper calendar bled along the wall and the single encyclopedia crumbled into soggy fragments. Outside, a sad doll floated by in a stream already jammed with baskets and shards of arrack bottles. Our winning cattle shrieked and slid through the mud. Our children huddled around us as the tin roof distorted into an

insatiable belly. Our daughter yelled, “It’s Ganesh!” We thought she was right, because only the Elephant God could turn wreckage into prosperity.

We stood by the doorway, unsure of where to risk our lives. In the end, we bet on the open skies rather than the damp walls of our small homes, already beginning to smell of black mold. As we assembled on the dirt road under the beating rain and watched our roofs collapse, we pictured our old selves dying, crushed by the weight of all our previous days. Whatever was left of our girlhood survived in modest things: the stones our daughters carried in their pockets, and the shriek of a koel bird we had dreamt of eating for its voice. For the new world, we must all transform, shed our skin and rename everything. The flowers were stripped, the trees slanted with torn limbs, and we needed to make sense of it while the water shriveled us into old women and ploughed through the land to bring new life.

Our children clung to us tighter. We own none of this, we reminded them patiently, and their wide eyes looked over the imploded houses, the silver sheen of metal, as they pointed at their buried things.

In the distant fields, we could imagine bare tea bushes underwater, the buds floating and brewing in liquid, warm with humidity. When Mr. Balakumar returned to his senses, he would count each pillaged bush, calculating his losses because he loved to accrue misfortune. But for now, Mr. Balakumar lay senseless in a wagon, slumbering while his wife struggled to push him with her son tied to her back. She cursed him in a way she normally would never have dared. Coarse Pig, Fat Donkey, Stinky Radish Face. She seemed to enjoy herself, paused to rest under an awning with her husband’s feet sticking out in the rain.

We felt almost tender toward him in his infantile state, but we knew better than to be fooled by a single day. He would make us work twice as hard to compensate for the holiday and

destruction. "Pick doubly fast," he would say, and we would curse him as we concocted plans to reincarnate into Durga with eight arms so we could pick with four times the speed.

In a dream we sometimes had, the men didn't trim the bushes and we didn't pick. Ripe koruntus went unplucked. The bushes finally grew into trees with full pink blossoms, resurrecting the ancient forest that had existed long before our great-grandparents ever left their villages and crossed the sea. As the rain blinded us, we waited for that world, our feet buried in wet dirt, soft as a womb, our heads raised.

After the weather quieted, we fell asleep by the ruins of our homes and woke to our independence. We were sick, feverish in our mops of clothing, and though surrounded by puddles of water, thirst claimed us. We greeted the sight of our new nation with delirium.

Together, we assessed the damage. To varying degrees, the houses were dented, lopsided, fully collapsed. Because they formed a line connected side by side, the overall structure had the appearance of a flattened snake, unevenly crushed. The houses had been built in a matter of days, and we were certain they would rise up in less. Inevitably the damage was compared, and those who fared better gloated about an unhinged door still standing. Children's injuries were measured by the severity of pain. A twisted ankle was not as notable as a numb, blue arm.

Selvakumar's mother, bleached of all color, limped along the roadside and called out for her son. We tried to think of when we had last seen him, but all we could picture was his face from weeks ago, when he chewed betel nuts with Muthu, grinning at us with his cherry-red teeth.

We searched through the field, and parted the bushes for the boy we prayed was still alive. We hoped the boy had not rushed ahead of her in fear of witnessing her death. "I'll be alone," he said the morning she hacked up blood, and we shook our heads.

A tattered pink sari clung to the branch of a tree and we paused in silence as if staring at a bright, defeated flag. Along the tea field, battles had been fought, the winners unknown. If Sir William returned, he would stand on the tallest hill and say, “My, my, they sure did make a mess of it.”

Tea leaves dotted the earth in the shape of baby footprints. Young shrubs were upturned by their roots. The storm exposed what was concealed under the ground. Rich red soil, dense with iron, appeared in clumps the size of anthills, and children molded it like precious clay, straight from the center of the earth. Sparrows were more fearless after having lost their nests; they strutted beside us, claiming material to rebuild.

The sun spread over us, reflecting all the trapped water. By the time we discovered the yellow-tipped butterfly on the fat corpse, Muthu’s father had rounded the hillside, towing his son by the ear with one hand and consoling the wailing Mrs. Balakumar with the other.

Before any talk of death, Mr. Padmanathan first dealt with the living, his son who didn’t have the sense to know he was being robbed when he had handed over everything in the cashbox to his friend.

“We were going to Independence Day ceremonies in the capital,” the boy repeated over and over again, unable to comprehend anything, his brain still sopping wet from the storm.

Love might have disarmed him of caution, but buried within it was raw dust, gun powder. We could hear a trigger: *Indian coolie*.

We looked toward the bend of the hillside and waited for the rattling of the old train grinding methodically. Before Selvakumar ran off, did he gaze over the hillside, wishing he could both stand there forever and never return?

Mr. Balakumar possessed an even smile, with his teeth peeking over his bottom lip as if he found death unremarkable, worthy of only three-teeth derision. On the curve of his neck was a puncture wound. He might have drowned in a puddle and been pierced by a sharp object. Or a bird might have pecked through his jugular. Or he decided to perform a last-minute sacrifice for the new nation. But all anyone could see was Selvakumar's absence and an empty cashbox. No sane person, they agreed, would choose to leave verdant hillside for the crowded filth of cities.

Mrs. Balakumar declared that if the boy returned, he would have equal punishment. She sliced the air near her throat with one hand, and Selvakumar's mother wept quietly, and we knew she wouldn't make it through the week without her son. In our heartbroken delirium, we could have suffocated him in our embrace. Alone in an unknown city, a child who collected fragments of objects: how would he survive?

Mr. Padmanathan folded his son's ear into a throbbing knot. The boy's face broke apart like a teacup. "We will be compensated," Mr. Padmanathan promised, and he and Mrs. Balakumar talked of police and justice.

We felt Mr. Balakumar turning his wet, dead face toward us. *In India, they act like animals, killing each other.*

What would become of us? Secretly, we knew we would be the ones to pay, though we had done nothing wrong.

This was our new beginning, we chanted to ourselves. In the shape of the pink sari trembling in the wind, we saw a shadow of a man made from no more than fallen branches and dark leaves. Just for a moment, we were possessed with the Prime Minister's power and we could see all our desires for Selvakumar's future. He is an actor in a film with M. G. Ramachandran, then he's a clerk, a doctor, a train conductor. He has a pretty, dainty-necked wife

who simply lounges about, and three or four children running around, grabbing at his limbs as he tells them stories of the hillside where the women curse and laugh, standing under the beating sun and becoming more beautiful.