1. Thursday, 7 p.m.: 1985

'Aiyoh, Durga, you went to Letchumani for fireworks?'

Ammuma glares at the bright red bag I'm lifting out of my car. The trip's only taken me an hour, but she's already moved her rattan chair to the verandah's edge to watch for me driving back into the compound yard. Her white widow's sari is immaculate and clean-starched, and her skinny thighs make a shallow, mounded lap. She spends nearly all her time on the verandah now, rocking back and forwards in the sleepy heat. That was the first shock about returning to Malaysia: somewhere in the last decade my grandmother's become old.

'Kill us all,' she adds, 'these crazy ideas of yours, getting fireworks from the washer-man.'

Or perhaps not that old. She likes proper fireworks, I remember. All noise and glare, with a spice of danger if you stick your nose in too far.

It's raining, and my sandals slip on the limestone steps as I carry the bag up to her. Sweat trickles down under my nylon shirt; I've been back two months but still can't remember to dress for the climate here.

'I was going to drive to Kuala Lipis, Ammuma,' I say, 'but Letchumani had a sign advertising fireworks and I thought . . .'

'Thought, hanh! Covered market in Lipis for good fireworks only, you should know that, Durga.

'This mathematics rubbish you study,' she mutters not quite under her breath, 'all thinking and never common-sense.'

She's fetched a plate of pandan cakes while I've been out and she pushes them across the table towards me with a not-to-be-argued frown. I left home a decade ago and Ammuma's convinced I

haven't eaten since. Granddaughters, she thinks, ought to stay where they've been put.

'Too late to change fireworks now also.' She looks up at the evening sky. 'Have to manage.' She's relishing this, like she does all small crises; running out of onions can last her all day.

'Diwali puja will do now,' she tells me briskly. 'Prayer first, then play fireworks, ah?'

'What, light the fireworks *now*? Ammuma, it's pelting down.'

I sit next to her, on a small wooden bench that she ordered Karthika to move from the front room. I drove up from Kuala Lumpur four days ago, and the house still feels familiar and strange at once. My childhood home, but I can't quite manage to be sentimental about it. It's the wrong sort of home, or perhaps I was the wrong sort of child.

Just like on the day I left, the compound yard's flooding. There are puddles under the stone walls and a few dry patches near the biggest trees. The angsanas have lost most of their blossom in the rain, and the scatter of yellow petals makes me catch my breath. Another memory, one I hadn't even realized I'd forgotten: crouching behind those trees playing five-stones with Peony after school. Her laugh, her tangled hair, her ballpoint tattoos. In Canada I pushed her out of my head, but back here in Pahang she's everywhere I look. *Friends for ever, Durga*, she whispers, and for a second I'm fifteen again and everything is about to go wrong.

I take a deep breath, clenching my fists. Of all people, I should know Peony's gone. Dead and gone; drowned in the banyan swamp fifteen years ago and nothing to be done about it. She's a null object. She's a zero module. She's the limit of an empty diagram.

I unclench my hands and look deliberately over to the angsanas again. They've grown since those days, and there's nothing behind their trunks except a sodden crate of banana leaves for the dining table tonight. I'd forgotten this about Pahang, the way the rain gets under your clothes and under your skin.

'Durga? Are you listening?' Ammuma prods. 'Of course light

the fireworks now. It's Diwali, when else is it we'll light them? Christmas? Birthdays-graduations? Next you'll be asking for eating non-veg tonight.'

'But there's only us here to see them.' I'm on edge, arguing when I know I shouldn't. 'Why bother just for us, and when it's raining, too? I never did in Canada.'

Ammuma sucks in her breath, then lets it out again in a shower of scolding words. It's a festival, she tells me, punctuating her sentences by slapping the broken wicker of her chair, how dare I suggest we ignore it? It's far more important than rain, she says, far more important than grandmothers, even, and ungrateful granddaughters who've forgotten how they were raised.

'But you don't even believe in Lakshmi, Ammuma. You never did.'

Diwali's for Lakshmi, a goddess who's supposed to visit the brightest and cleanest houses every year. Ammuma doesn't hold with her and never has: some goddess, she says, to go poking her nose into other people's housekeeping.

'Story is important only,' she insists. 'Doesn't matter if it's true.'

'But you –'

'And fireworks are important too, for driving away evil spirits. Cannot tell, Durga, when a spirit is walking –'

She stops. There's a loud clang from the compound gate, then another. Someone's knocking. I can just make out a figure through the ironwork, then an arm snakes down to open the catch.

'Who's visiting today?' Ammuma mutters to herself, and then the gate opens. A white man walks through, carrying a striped bag. He has a cap of combed brown hair that looks oddly familiar and he's wearing a neatly tailored suit.

'Mary-Auntie!'

He ignores the mud and walks jauntily towards us, then sees me sitting next to Ammuma. He stops, squinting against the evening light. His smile falters and loses its way.

'Durga?'

I start to shake. I know who he is, this man with his John

Lennon hair. Peony's voice is in my head again – *friends for ever* – and this man is bad news, he's worst news. He's fifteen years old news, fresh as yesterday's eggs.

★

'Durga,' Tom says for the third time. 'I can't believe you're back in Pahang.'

We've rearranged the verandah table for him, an extra chair and all of us tight-tucked as chickens. His well-stitched leather shoes are paired neatly on the steps, edging mine off into a puddle. Ammuma's made him a cup of tea in a mug I've never seen before. It has 'Tom' written on it in curly green letters and she must have bought it at the tourist market in Lipis. She always refused to let me spend my pocket money at the stalls there when I was small, or to buy me anything either. Too expensive, she said; too dirty. I wonder which of those doesn't matter when it comes to Tom.

I can't take my eyes off him. I haven't seen him since the inquest fifteen years ago, when both of us were sitting on a polished wooden bench at the Kuala Lipis government house. I remember the smell of his sweat as they pronounced the verdict: an accident. Nobody's fault. And I remember how Ammuma gave me a single fierce hug and how that evening she threw out everything I'd worn that day, from underwear to shoes. Love was one thing, but forgiveness was a whole new bag of thorns. Accidents have causes, she told me. Cause and effect, I think, theorem and proof; Durga and Peony. We always were inseparable.

'I'm not back in Pahang,' I say, too loudly. 'I live in KL now; I'm just visiting for Diwali. When did *you* come back?'

Ammuma clicks her tongue. That's a Canadian question, too straightforward for her tastes. I've lost the rhythm of how I'm supposed to speak in Malaysia, how I'm supposed to imply and hint and keep my meaning for the spaces between words.

'Five years ago.'

Tom's voice is exactly how I remember: far too good for the rest

of him. Like sugar-syrup, I once told Peony, and I didn't even care that she laughed. I sit there and look at him and my face feels scholarly and short-sighted. It's a good face, usually, good enough for proofs and theorems, but not the right face for meeting Tom again. Too old, or perhaps too young. Too lived-in, as though I could have helped it. A sudden gust of wind whistles through the bow-legged palms in the compound yard.

'Tom trained in Liverpool and now he's top doctor in Lipis hospital,' Ammuma says.

'But very good job Durga also has,' she adds with a greedy rush. 'Ten years in Canada, but two months ago she gets this lecturing job in KL. Maths professor, wah, so good.'

Tom and I look at each other awkwardly over the litter of cups and plates. I wonder what he'd think if he knew about Deepak, Deepak and his fourth-generation Ontario wife with her shoulder-pads and terrifying vulnerability. What would he – and Ammuma – say if I blurted out I only took this job because Deepak went back to her? Perhaps nothing at all; perhaps it's what they'd have expected from me all along – second best, second helpings, second hand.

'Well done, Durga,' Tom says, stiff as his own shirt collar. It makes me unreasonably cross, how he's shrugged Pahang back on like an old coat. He's strolled into the space I left and he's managed it all much better – top doctor and still apparently finding time to chat with his dear old Mary-Auntie every week. It would be delightful, if only it weren't.

'Too Canadian, she is, though, now,' Ammuma grumbles to nobody in particular. 'Like some tourist playing at Malaysia only. Ammuma, let's help the servant-girl wash up, she's saying. Ammuma, here's some Diwali fireworks from Letchumani. Tchee, fireworks from the washer-man! Whoever heard of this thing?'

'Oh, fireworks! That reminds me,' Tom interrupts her, leaning down to where his striped carrier bag nestles against the table. 'I picked up a few for you, Mary-Auntie, just some Diwali gifts. They're from the covered markets.'

Of course they are. Good-quality best-quality, and a permit too, no doubt. I'd forgotten I'd need one and Letchumani – used to foreigners and tourists – hadn't bothered to tell me. Tom's competent parcels make me feel even more out of place than Ammuma's complaints. It used to be Tom who was foreign, once.

Ammuma beams. He's good, she says, to remember an old woman like herself – Ammuma is only ever old when it suits her – and would he believe her own granddaughter's refusing, actually refusing, to play fireworks for Diwali because of the rain. 'What's a little bit of rain?' she says. 'You children used to run out in it every day.'

Tom gives me a sympathetic look. He's about to say something but a sudden beeping chimes out, silencing us. It's a pager clipped to his smart leather belt.

'It's the hospital,' he says. 'They'll be busy down there, with Diwali tonight.'

Ammuma gives me a triumphant look. 'See, Durga? So dangerous, these rockets Letchumani makes. Better instead to use Tom's fireworks.'

Better to use Tom's fireworks. Better to work in Tom's job and wear clothes like Tom's and be as patient as Tom. Easy enough for him; she's not his grandmother.

He glances down at the pager, pushing his chair back.

'Will you come and help me put the fireworks in the kitchen?' I say quickly. 'It'll only take a minute.'

'Of course.' Tom starts to rise politely, but Ammuma's already glaring at me.

'Wanting to wander off alone in the corridors with a boy? Aiyoh, Durga,' she says, sucking disapproval through her teeth. 'This is your home, this is a respectable house. Not so-so like these student accommodations in Canada.'

She leans over to confide in Tom, her voice loud enough for me to hear. 'Boys and girls all together. Mixed up like slum-puppies.'

I sink back into my chair. I'd forgotten how fragile girls are in Pahang, how easily soiled. A fingerprint is enough to put anyone off.

'Sorry, Mary-Auntie. I'm sure she didn't mean it. And – I hate to go so soon – but I can't stay anyway. I need to drop in on the wards.'

He takes his time putting his shoes on and tying his shoelaces, looking up at me with queer little ducking movements of his head. Any moment now, I think, he'll slip me a letter, a flower – a peony – that'll mean nothing except to the two of us. He wouldn't just walk away, not after coming halfway across the world.

But he does. He tugs his smart suit jacket straight and waves as he crosses the compound yard. There's a backward glance as he reaches the gate, but that's all. He mouths something to me – or perhaps he doesn't – and then the gate closes. He's gone, and there's nothing here but the rain and a half-eaten pandan cake.

'So, Durga.' Ammuma's brisk. 'You light these.'

She pushes his bag over to me. 'I'll go upstairs, wash hands, then come back for Diwali puja.'

She tips herself upright, scraping her rattan chair over the concrete. 'Use Tom's fireworks,' she calls back as she hobbles out of the room. 'Not this Letchumani nonsense.'

I sit there in the fading light and stare at a line of ants nudging across the floor. *How dare he?* I think. How dare he saunter in here with top-class fireworks and without having changed in the slightest? He should have had some wrinkles, or an apologetic thirty-something paunch. He should have had capped teeth and a worried smile. He should have been ashamed of himself.

I shove his bag away. He doesn't know better than me, despite all his meaningful glances and his market shopping and his so-important pager. I grab Letchumani's bright red bag instead, and tuck it under my arm.

The front room's dark, with no lamps lit and a dusty bare rectangle where the wooden bench used to be. And the hallway's even darker, with a single yellowing bulb doing nothing but splash shadows around. The kitchen and dining room are at one end; great stone-flagged rooms that Karthika rules as the only servant in the house. The hall floor's slippery with the paraffin wax she

uses to polish wood, and I can smell the burn of Jeyes Fluid from the kitchen sink.

I push the back door open and the wet air hits me with a slap. My bare feet press water up through the grass as I walk slowly down to the far end of the compound. There's a strip of grass running the full length of it, nearly twenty metres straight from the house to the crumbling rear wall. The Jelai river roars from behind its banks, and the wind flecks my hair with spray as I turn to look at the house.

From here, it's ramshackle. It's three storeys high, casting a deep shadow over the side of the compound yard where the wells are. Half of the house was torn down during the war, but it is still a sprawling mass compared with Canadian condos. And it's far too close to the Jelai. Ammuma's father Stephen didn't know or care about floods, and over time the ground's been submerged so often it's taken on a slippery, aquatic tinge.

A light goes on in Ammuma's bedroom. She's watching, then, her eyes on me like always. I set my teeth and pull the first firework out of the bag. It's a night for locked doors in Pahang tonight, with all those ghosts and goddesses creeping about – and men like Tom, too, come to that. Let them in and you'll never get any of them out again.

The firework's a rocket, and for a moment I think Ammuma was right. The damp cardboard sticks to my fingers and the whole thing's lumpy and misshapen, like a tube stuffed with paper towels. There's a sulphurous whiff as I hold a match to it. I daresay the gunpowder's home-grown in Letchumani's spare washing vat: magnesium and cuttlefish bile and God knows what else. And then, just when I'm about to give up, the rocket flares into life.

It soars up and up in a glowing scatter of green and red. Sparks tumble down and the whole garden jumps into relief. All the shadows are scalpel-sharp, frozen in their places by that brief, beautiful glare. The rocket arcs over the back wall, and even after it lands in the Jelai, the compound's still lit by the last glowing pinpoints that it left behind. I turn around and see Ammuma

silhouetted at her upstairs window. Her face is in shadow, and I wave at her. At this distance, I wonder if she can see me smile.

She lifts a hand in response and I turn back to pull out the next firework. I feel lighter now, with the kind of excitement I always used to have at Diwali. I choose the biggest firework in the bag to light next, something that looks a bit like a Catherine wheel. A couple of rockets have been tied together, and nailed loosely to a small wooden post. I set the end of the post into the dirt and hold a match to the rockets, but just like before they don't burn immediately. The wooden post's swollen in the damp air and the nail holding everything together feels hot to touch. I try with another match but the rockets just hang there in a sulk of reddened smoke.

A movement at the window catches my eye. It's Ammuma, putting her hands on her hips. *Get on with it, Durga*, she's saying, *those evil spirits don't have all day*. I scrape my damp hair back and light another match. This time I shove it deep into the body of one of the rockets, and there's a little spurt of flame. The rocket moves – once, twice, and it's spinning in a shower of golden sparks. They rise this time, in a blown breath of honey-coloured light. I can hear a ripping sound, and then I see that the end of one rocket's come loose, flinging gunpowder into the air as it spins. A second later the whole rocket rips open, flaring up in a bright naphtha glare. It tumbles high as the palm trees, head over tail in a fizzle of sparks.

I take a step back, my eyes fixed on it. And then it comes apart in the air, one chunk soaring towards the house and another flying back near the Jelai. I take a few steps to the back wall, pulling myself up to lean on the chest-high stones. I can see the fragment of firework that's heading for the Jelai. It plunges down, high over my head but still spitting brave sparks. It looks like it's going to land in the jungle and I hold my breath, but instead it plummets straight into the water. As soon as it's extinguished, I can't see anything. My eyes are dazzled from the flare, and the lights from the house seem fitful and dim. Not a success, they tell me quietly.

I prop myself up on the compound wall. The light in Ammuma's room has gone out – she's not going to watch, not after that performance – and I turn back to the compound wall. The scrubland belukar stretches for fifty metres or so on the other side, and then the jungle takes over. Peony and Tom and I used to play a game out here, I remember, after dark. We'd climb over the compound wall into that scrubland and creep slowly towards the looming darkness. The winner was the first to reach the point – the infinitesimal, knife-edge point – where the jungle suddenly became grey and green and brown instead of featureless black. Where it stopped being terror and turned back into trees.

I look back at the house, but Ammuma's light's still defiantly out. I sigh, dropping the bag. I'll take a few breaths of air before going back, I think, before swallowing my pride and sparking up Tom's fireworks. I trail my hand along the rough top of the stones, walking carefully until I reach the corner of the yard. The wall's crumbling here, and there's a pile of bricks that have worked their way loose. There could be scorpions in there, I think, there could be spiders and centipedes and who knows what else. It's a Canadian thought, well scrubbed and careful.

I look back at the house once, then step onto the tumbled bricks. They give way underneath my feet, sliding and shifting until I'm grabbing at the gritty wall. It takes the skin off my palms. As I pull myself up to sit sideways on the top I feel my nails tear, and then I'm over and in the wide spaces of Pahang.

It's the first time I've been out at night here since I came back. I never used to be scared. I'd been good at our game, sometimes making out the shapes of jungle trees while I was still in arm's reach of the compound wall. Then a second later Peony would sing out in triumph – *I see them!* – and finally Tom with his pale, poor eyes. But I'm walking steadily forward now, and I must be nearly at the end of the scrubland but I still can't see a thing. The house is round a bend and downhill, and even the lights from it are cut off. The river seethes behind its mudbanks on my left and there's a rattle of wings as a guinea fowl takes off from somewhere.

I can hear the trees – I can even feel them in the slap of cool air as the wind forces their leaves up and out. I just can't see where I'm going.

I turn and my foot slips on the mud. I stumble forward, catching myself on my hands, and a squeeze of panic grips me. It's wetter than I'd thought out here. I can feel leaf stems and rocks under my fingers, but I've lost all sense of direction. I don't know whether I'm in the jungle or still in the scrub. Worse, I don't know how close I am to the river any more. It might be metres away, or it might be tonguing at my feet with little wet laps. I feel as though I'm slipping downward, as if I'm clinging to the banks like a spider scuttled under a rock. I can't move. There's a blind terror waiting for me out here: something about the wet scent of trees and the way my skirt clings to my legs.

And then I see something. A glimmer, a sheen and lick of light all the way through the trees that I can suddenly make out, too. My eyes have adjusted, and the river's a hundred metres away and safe behind its banks. I get to my feet, pushing hair out of my eyes and patting myself down. I'm on a sloping hill that leads from the house to where the convent used to be. It reassures me, recognizing this hill. For the first time since I came back I feel *exact*, sharp and clear and fitted into a single place and time. I turn and start slowly walking back down the slope. I can't see the house from here, just a strange dullish red glow. Ammuma must have turned the hurricane lamps up and lit all the candles. She's doing her work there, keeping the spirits away while I thrash through the night.

I look over to my right, feeling my skinned palms with the tips of my fingers. I'm closer to the river now, and I can see it's risen a metre since this afternoon. It's black and muscular, littered with driftwood from upstream and matted with vines. Out here, I remember, floods happen fast as an ambush.

As I stare at it the water glints and brightens. It looks as though there's a tiny light underneath. Phosphorescence, I think, luminous fungi, but it isn't any of these. It's a hot, burning glow,

getting bigger and bigger, just round the bend where the house is. It's a reflection.

I spin round. That dull red glow over the treetops is brighter now, and I can hear a hiss. Another sound, which I recognize slowly, stupidly, from public safety videos: the crackle of flames beginning to lick their way through wood. I stare at the glow in horror, but my legs won't move. *That rocket*, notes some tiny, ice-cold part of my brain, it went towards the house. I start to run. I trip when I'm near the compound, but I'm up again with my hands bleeding and my throat thick with spit. I can see the house now. Flames are coming from one of the windows, inside a wing that Ammuma keeps sealed up. I scramble back over the wall, and now I can hear her voice over the snap and surge of the fire.

'Durga! Get away!'

She's above me at her bedroom window, fumbling at the shutters. A piece of wood drops on my shoulder, flaming, and flies off in a burst of pain. I hesitate at the kitchen door – Is it hot? Is there anything left inside except Ammuma, unbelievably in the heart of the fire? – but the door's cool and solid. The kitchen and dining room are clear, without even any smoke, and I run through into the hall. Out here I can smell burning paraffin wax, as the fire gallops along Karthika's polished, deadly floors. There's a crash and scream from Ammuma's room and smoke blurs my eyes as I race upstairs.

I tug the door to Ammuma's room open. There's a screen of smoke in here, with a red, snarling core at the side where the wall's been broken through. My eyes are stinging and my throat's raw and I'm pushing through the blackness, just like out in the jungle. I'm blundering forward, with my breath screaming and my eyes wide open, trying frantically to reach somewhere – some infinitesimal, knife-edge *somewhere* – where I'll finally find Ammuma behind the smoke.

2. Once Upon a Time: 1922

'Mary-Miss! You have to be *nice*.'

Mary looks up from the full stretch of her six-year-old height to consider this. She's not so different even now from the grandmother she'll grow up to be. She's snappish, small, with fierce knees and uncompromising elbows; a little bit more trouble than anyone wants to take on.

'No,' she says, having given her amah's plea all the consideration she thinks it deserves. Her hair is in two satiny plaits, her fists are on her hips and she's standing over her new baby brother.

'It's *my* house,' she tells Anil, stamping a tiny foot. 'You don't even live here. You don't even have a bedroom. It's just the old rattan-patch.'

'Mary-Miss!' Ah Sim, her amah, gasps. Technically Mary's right. Her father, Stephen, flung some floorboards on the termite nests when he found his wife was pregnant again, nailed up a wall or two, slapped a roof on the whole thing and called it a day and a nursery. But it's the way Mary says it that sticks in Ah Sim's throat. Ah Sim's a black-and-white amah – white blouse, black trousers, that's all she ever wears – from mainland China. She's left her own baby brothers behind and she misses her family dreadfully. She's used to sons being treated like little gods, and Mary's cavalier attitude shocks her.

'The jungle spirits brought him, Mary-Miss,' she says. Fairy tales like this are supposed to be appropriate for girls of Mary's age. Truth without the bones in, as the bomohs say.

'Well, I don't want him. And if he doesn't stop crying, I'll – I'll drown him in the banyan swamp.' Mary glares at baby Anil, who screws his face up in a terrified howl.

'Mary-Miss!' Ah Sim's hand flies to her mouth and she glances around, worried that Mary will bring vengeful spirits flying in

through the windows. Stephen's built this house like an Indian bungalow to make his wife feel at home, and all the doors and windows lie in straight lines. Once a spirit gets into a house like this, Ah Sim knows it's going to be hard to get it out.

'The jungle spirits won't like that,' Ah Sim tries to reason with Mary. 'They'll cry too.'

'Well then, I'll drown the bloody spirits,' Mary snaps, and her mother, Radhika, walks in just in time to hear her.

If Radhika had taken more time to reflect, she probably wouldn't have boxed Ah Sim's ears for encouraging that sort of language. And if she hadn't slapped Ah Sim then the amah might have stayed and taught young Mary a thing or two. She might even have spotted what was wrong with Anil before it was all too late. But Radhika's not a woman who thinks ahead, and so she slaps Ah Sim – and Mary, for good measure – packs one off to the servant's room and the other off to bed, then sits down to cry. The sound of his mother's sobs gives baby Anil the fright of his life. Shock fills his gummy mouth and he gasps. Gulps. Swallows his own howl once and for all. For good, as it turns out.

★

When Radhika unlocks the door an hour later, Mary hurtles out with her mouth set to quarrel. She's bursting to tell her mother what's what, to insist it's all *her* fault. It's always Radhika's fault, according to Mary.

'You scared Anil! Look at his little face! Ah Sim-amah doesn't teach me bad language, I just *know* it. All by myself.'

'Mary. Go back into your room.'

Mary stares her down, three feet of defiance. An hour ago she'd have slapped Anil herself, but she won't stand for her mother feeling the same way.

'You don't like either of us! You hate us!'

It's a lucky guess, and Mary doesn't realize how right she is. Radhika's life hasn't turned out quite as she imagined. She met

Stephen in her hometown in Kerala, married him and sailed out to Malaya with hopes so high she can barely remember them. Like any good Kerala girl she'd have liked a fine, manly boy-child to light her funeral pyre; she'd have liked a sweet, pretty girl-child to carry on the family name. Come to that, she'd have liked love, too, a comfortable house in town, a husband who didn't mumble as though he were speaking a foreign language. Radhika – who *is* speaking a foreign language, who will eventually lose her mother tongue and die out here with a hundred forgotten words in her mouth – can't quite bring herself to comfort Mary. She does her best though, holds out her hands and lifts her daughter to perch on the windowsill.

'I daresay it'll all get better,' Radhika says doubtfully, somewhere over Mary's head. She takes a package of betel nut from her pocket and starts to wad it against her gums.

Mary wriggles down and stands on one leg, irresolute. The crickets are screeching outside, Ah Sim's sobbing in the servant's room and a tok-tok bird is sounding its mechanical call. There's something ominous in all this din, some note that's missing. She looks at her baby brother, lying here in the nursery and pawing at his mouth. Amongst all this noise, this chewing and birdsong and sobbing, she realizes – he hasn't made another sound.

★

'Cook's excelled himself tonight. Soup looks almost good enough to eat.'

Mary's father, Stephen, makes this joke nearly every evening. They're gathered in the dining room, under a buckling roof held together with nails and spit. The family still dress for dinner: Radhika in her saris of glittering thread, Stephen in his rapidly rotting dinner jacket and Mary buttoned into smocked gingham and good behaviour. Candles are set out on the table and the soup is tinned mulligatawny, with a dash of evaporated milk from another tin. Stephen's determined not to go native – bad show, he

mutters over his solitary evening whisky – just because he's alone in a Malayan swamp with a couple of civet-cats fighting somewhere in the roof. It's seven miles to the next kampong, and half of Pahang lies between him and the nearest Englishman. It's all right for his wife and daughter, he thinks. Radhika's Indian; she's used to privation. And as for Mary – well, Mary's a little hooligan.

Stephen keeps his spirits up, though. He likes to take stock at dinner; he likes to make little jokes and tease his wife over laxities in the housekeeping. He's earned it, after all. He's extricated Radhika from the jungle and established her at the head of a table glittering with silverware. She can stand a little teasing.

'But Daddy, we *are* eating the soup.' Mary isn't usually this demure. On bad days she refuses to speak English, insisting on using bazaar Malay and overturning her water glass. Not today though. Today she's nervous. Anil still hasn't uttered a single cry since the afternoon. He looks puzzled and miserable, doubling his fists and smacking the side of his head. Mary can hear trouble in the air, like a finger sliding over wet glass.

'Hush, Mary. Children should be seen and not heard.'

Mary scowls, pushes her hands into her lap and kicks at the leg of her chair. She isn't hungry, having already gorged herself on ais kacang and kueh lapis in the kitchen with Maniam-cook. Maniam-cook is Mary's best friend. She sneaks him cigarettes from Stephen's private stash, gobbles palm-sugar lumps from his cupboard and brings him whatever gossip she's heard behind the door at Radhika's coffee mornings.

'Mary!' Her father snaps. 'Stop kicking your chair and eat. If you can't behave yourself, I'll have you sent to school.'

It's Stephen's favourite threat. His own school was a chilly Manchester institution, full of vicious masters and thuggish boys. He believes it was the making of him. It probably was, one way or another.

'I *won't* go to school,' she insists. 'I won't! You can't make me.'

Radhika nods vaguely, reaching out to stroke her daughter's