

A SHORE DISTANT

Yasmin Tambiah

Late-afternoon sun. Tree shadows crisscross like coconut thatch. Clear-whistling magpies interrupt screeching sulphur-crested. A ball thuds on asphalt in the park. Autumn's last roses careen in the wind.

A woman sits in a wheelchair, dozing; kaftan flowing over swollen feet. March day, still warm – her shawl lies folded on a stool.

A car revs somewhere. Her father's t-model ford bringing her mother and sisters home. Scent of jasmine along the path. Wisps of cool damp and mildew. Rushing footsteps on gravel. A dog's welcoming bark. Brisk orders to the houseboy to unload the car. The woman calls out to greet her mother, certain she's just beyond the courtyard's wall.

'Hello, Padmini. Here's your tea.'

Pad-mini. *Pad* – pronounced as in protection for shins from hard hits by a cricket ball. Not as it should be, like the soft middle of a pud(h)dle, rainwater with centrifugal ripples carrying fallen frangipani to its edge. *Tea* as in early dinner, not fragrant black beverage kept company with savoury short-eats and cake.

Her fingers unsteady peel the gladwrap, indifferently spoon food bland in its taste. Afterwards, redemption with a chocolate from a hidden box.

Her son visits after work. All's well, she says. Her complaints about monotony stopped months ago. Between her past and her children's present, friends 'back home' and the burden of care, beloved community and neighbours' whisperings, familiarity and fear – she had to choose.

The sneaking chill; ungentle hands; some nurses the only others with dark skin.

She squirrels away pills, intent on a winter of her own making.

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