

***Promised Land***  
*By Anoosha Delpechitra*

When your amma boarded the flight that carried her from the motherland to here, your infant brother had just soiled his nappy. He was four months old, your amma twenty-nine. The smell seeped from his nappy as your amma handed the boarding pass to the flight attendant, a woman with red lips and smooth hair tied into a stern bun that reminded amma of the schoolteachers that whipped her with a palm cane when she forgot to bring the correct books to class. The flight attendant flares her nostrils and looks your amma up and down, before looking at the boarding pass and back at her again. Your brother begins to cry. Amma's face burns but brown skin betrays no embarrassment. She adjusts her saree and shifts your brother from her left hip to her right. Behind her, your thatha carries all three bags. Amma worries about the smell, the crying, about making a bad impression. She wants to attend to her child quickly, before anyone becomes angry at her. She wonders where on the plane she can change him, and if she will lose her seat if she takes too long. The flight attendant purses her lips into a smile and waves your amma and wailing brother down the aisle.

She does not want to leave. The island is all she has known. The smells and sounds are embedded in her neural pathways, the faces of everyone she loves plastered like posters on the inside of her eyelids. To leave is to feel a fist tightening around the heart, an ache in every muscle of her body. But last week, she watched a man dragged from a shop and thrown onto a mountain of flaming tyres just because he had the wrong surname. To leave is to survive and die at once.

The pilot makes an announcement she can't understand. Your amma pulls on the strap of her fastened seatbelt until the edge of it cuts into her abdomen. Her left hand holds her sleeping son to her chest, her right hand grips her husband's. The speed of the plane down the tarmac makes her feel like she's going into orbit, and when the wheels lift off the ground, she watches as the giant palms of her homeland become like the tiny weeds she once pulled from her achchi's garden. Next to her, your thatha sits, silent, and this is how you will know him forevermore. As the island slips behind the clouds like a dream, Amma wishes for night to fall.

The cold is the first thing they notice. The air, the colours, and sometimes the people. They are looked at but not smiled at. People appear in the windows of homes, then disappear just as quickly. Nobody comes outside. The streets are clean and silent. Everybody follows the road markings and traffic lights. No one uses their car's horn. Your amma wonders whether she's awake, whether any of it is real.

The one-bedroom house has stained carpet and rat shit in the cupboards. The agent handed your thatha the keys and said "*Welcome home*", and your amma is ashamed because his words made her want to slap him. He leaves them a bottle of celebratory wine that never gets opened because they cannot bring themselves to celebrate. On the morning of their first day, your amma carries your brother in her arms as they walk to a shop and buy cleaning products; from the shop next-door, secondhand winter clothes. At the house, your amma changes out of

her saree and into a fleece tracksuit. She folds her saree into her empty suitcase and never takes it out again.

After they clean the stovetop, your amma and thatha boil the milk in a saucepan they find in the cupboard, and this time it is less a tradition than it is a wish. *Bless this place, and it let become our home.* When the milk cools, your amma feeds it to your infant brother because they can't afford to waste a drop. Even so, she wonders whether it will undo the blessing.

The jet lag offers them brief windows of escape, and your amma accepts them desperately. When she falls asleep in the afternoon, she dreams of heat and noise. Of malu paan fresh from the oven and hot tea with a piece of milk toffee. When she wakes, the room is cold and night has fallen, and there is no one else here but the three of them. When they lie awake long into the night, your thatha asks if it was a mistake and your amma replies that it can't be. But neither of them are convinced and neither of them will say so, and so this is how they will agree to go on.

On the first day of the second week, your thatha goes to find work and your amma uses his absence to weep, fully and unselfconsciously. The feeling is like emptying a heavy bucket that has hung in her chest and slowly filled every day since they first submitted their forms. Your thatha goes to the town hall and tries to make sense of a cork board full of flyers searching for employees and lost cats. Before he left, he managed a team of seven waitstaff in a restaurant on the main street that was frequented by foreigners and government officials. He was charismatic and confident among his peers, treated warmly and sometimes tipped generously by the guests. There are thirteen job vacancies on the town hall's bulletin board and your thatha writes down the phone numbers for each one. Nine are cleaning jobs and four are for dish washers. On the way home, he keeps his head down and tries to convince himself it was not better to stay. At the payphone outside the house, your thatha dials the first number with sweating hands. He stands straight and clears his throat, and when the call is answered, he tries to enunciate and emphasise the correct syllables like your amma has reminded him countless times. Even so, the first call ends before he can finish his name, and it is only when he sees your amma in the window of the house, holding your infant brother and waving his chubby fist, that he believes he can try again. On the eighth call, he is offered an interview for the following Monday.

On Saturday, a woman knocks on the door with a tray of food and two full garbage bags of used clothes and toys. She tells them she lives across the road. She has thick curly hair and smiling eyes, and she remarks on your amma's skin colour as if it is that of a rare bird. *Such a beautiful, exotic brown.* To your amma, it is nothing but the highest compliment. Your parents invite her inside and while your amma makes the tea, your thatha lifts the foil from the neighbour's tray to reveal the first lasagne they have ever seen. In time, your thatha will come to master this dish, fresh pasta sheets and all. His only addition, a signature teaspoon of curry powder in the beef ragu. The woman drinks her tea and coos at your brother, who has begun trying to roll. She tells your amma she is having a dinner party at her home tomorrow night, and invites them to come and bring a plate. When she leaves, your thatha asks your amma about the plate and she says that maybe Australians don't have everything either, that we mustn't ask questions and

make them feel ashamed. The next evening, your amma and thatha put on their best clothes and walk across the street carrying your brother, a bunch of flowers, and two empty plates.

Your thatha wakes up in the dark on Monday morning. The alarm clock reads 3:51am but his mind refuses sleep. He gets up and moves quietly through the house, careful not to wake the two people for whom he will do anything. In the living room, he sits and watches through the blinds as the sky lightens, and for another day the world that comes into focus remains as alien to him as he is to it. Your thatha is thirty years old, and he wonders if it will take another thirty years to feel at home in this place.

When your amma wakes up, she finds him ironing his best white shirt. He has already quietly showered and shaved, and as she watches him carefully press the shirt's collar, she remembers for the first time in all these blurred months just how handsome he is. She remembers the day she met him, how his eyes on her made her feel shy. How charming and confident he was, and how it made everyone he ever met gravitate towards him. She would trust him with her life, and she does. When your thatha sets off on the bicycle lent to him by the neighbour's husband, your amma waves at him from the front window and thinks of what she will cook for lunch to celebrate the job she prays he will get. As she boils the rice, she hopes it will tell him what she still can't. *I'm proud of you. Thank you. I love you.*

Your thatha cycles uphill and the icy morning wind feels like repeated slaps to his face. Back home, he had a motorbike, and when he rode through the main street after work, groups of girls would turn to look. Before he met your amma, he might have winked at them. Here, the traffic is more orderly but it is faster, too, and it makes him nervous. The hill becomes steeper and your thatha's legs burn as he feels sweat dampen his forehead and back. He checks the watch on his wrist and it tells him he cannot afford to slow down so he doesn't. He is nearly at the top of the hill when suddenly he can hear them before he can see them. The music is loud and at first he doesn't know which direction it's coming from, but then they roll down their window and their faces are ones he will see for years to come. There are four of them and they shout words he hasn't heard before but one word he has, though it has never been used on him. Your thatha puts his head down and cycles past them but the blond one has already thrown the can. It hits your thatha with such force it knocks him off the bike, and when his hand touches the tomato paste on his back, for a moment he is sure it is his own blood.

When your thatha returns home later that morning, it is in a different shirt, and when he ignores the egg curry and mallung on the kitchen table, your amma understands not to ask. Instead, she packs away the food she has prepared and prays to a god that she fears has abandoned them. Even today, when your amma and thatha tell the story of their beginning, they both leave out this part.

They tell you that if they could go back in time, they would tell themselves to wait three months. Three months and then it gets better, little by little. On the second day of the third

month, your thatha finds a job. It comes via an advertisement dropped in their letterbox and the woman at the interview tells your thatha how much she loves his motherland. That she visited on her honeymoon and adores the food, the beaches, the people. When she shakes his hand and gives him his uniform, he feels the knot in his chest loosen. He will never tell her that the pants are the wrong size, and when his co-workers ask if they can call him John, he agrees and thinks nothing else of it.

On first Saturday of the third month, your amma walks with your brother to the McDonald's on the corner and is introduced to crumbed fish and cheese in a hamburger bun. Though she and your thatha will frequent this place many more times, neither will order this item again. As she feeds your brother a teaspoon of soft ice-cream, a couple enter the restaurant speaking a language she has not heard for months. She recognises the way they carry themselves, as if they are unsure of how to do it. When your amma approaches them and introduces herself in the mother tongue, relief washes over their faces and lingers as tears in their eyes. Your amma sits with them for two hours, on their insistence, and in the comfort and safety of one another, they can resurrect the old lives they had so mournfully buried. She is only forced to leave when it's time for your brother to be fed, and not without an invitation to share a meal the following day. When your thatha returns home from his job that evening, it is the most joyous he has seen her in months.

For the occasion, your amma makes wattalapam and your thatha makes devilled pork. They wrap their dishes in tea towels and carry them fifteen minutes across the suburb because they still don't have a car, but they will soon. When they arrive, the house smells of biriyani and incense and they are greeted like old friends. While the men share a bottle of arrack—your thatha keeping one eye on your brother—the women mix eggplant and green chilli for the moju that will accompany lunch. When they sit down to eat, there is no cutlery and no need to explain. They eat slowly and talk freely and this friendship will buoy them for years to come. As dusk falls and your amma helps to pack leftovers, she remarks at how funny it is. That they came all this way to still eat brinjal moju.