

Mary Rokonadravu

Famished Eels

I

After one hundred years, this is what I have: a daguerreotype of her in bridal finery; a few stories told and retold in plantations, kitchens, hospitals, airport lounges. Scattered recollections argued over expensive telephone conversations across centuries and continents by half-asleep men and women in pyjamas. Arguments over mango pickle recipes on email and private messages on Facebook. A copper cooking pot at the Fiji Museum. Immigration passes at the National Archives of Fiji. It is 2011.

Fiji, with Guyana, Suriname and Trinidad and Tobago, had just registered the 'Records of the Indian Indentured Labourers' into the UNESCO Memory of the World Register, when my father, the keeper and teller of stories, suffered a stroke. Fate rendered his tongue silent. He cannot read or write – he first set foot in a classroom at fifteen, and was told by a nun he was too old. He ignores my journalist and doctor siblings to select me, the marine biologist, to finish his task. I am off the coast of Lifou in New Caledonia counting sea urchins when the call is relayed.

He hates me for not becoming a journalist, I say to myself. I will be on the Thursday flight, I tell my older sister. She meets me at the airport and drives me down to Suva. It is past midnight. We pass eleven trucks overloaded with mahogany logs between Nadi and Sigatoka. A DHL courier truck. A quiet ambulance. She smokes at the wheel, flicking ash into the cold highway wind. We pass a dim lamp-lit wooden shack before Navua. Someone is frying fish. We both know it is fresh cod. We remain silent as we are flung into the kitchen of our childhood at Brown Street in Toorak. We stop to sip sweet black tea from enamel pialas in Navua.

Come on tell me, she blurts. Who you seeing now? Is it a dark-skinned Kanak? Is that what's keeping you in Lifou? Do you speak French now?

Screw you, I say from the back seat.

He wants you to do this because you won't lie to him, she says. The rest of us may. Just to make him happy. Just give him what he wants to hear. But you won't. You will find out and you will tell him.

Screw you, I say again, more to myself than her.

All his life, my father has sought one thing only – to know the woman in the photograph. To know the name of her city or town in India. To know that at some juncture in history, there was a piece of earth he could call his own. All he had had was a lifetime of being told he was boci. Baku. Taga vesu. Uncircumcised.

A hundred years was not enough. Another five hundred would not be either. In a land where its first peoples arrived a couple of thousand years before the first white man, the descendants of indenture would forever remain weeds on a forsaken landscape. A blight.

He had stubbornly remained in Fiji through three military coups and one civilian takeover. Everyone had left. He remained the one who rented out flats until his brothers' houses were sold. He supervised brush-cutting boys on hot Saturday mornings. He was the one to call the plumber to change faucets in grimy, unscrubbed shower recesses. He was the one who kept receipts for oil-based butternut paint, bolts and drill bits; photocopied them faithfully at the municipal library and mailed them to Australia, Canada or New Zealand. Each envelope had a paper-clipped note: OK. It was the only word he learned to write. I received Christmas cards from him saying the same thing: OK. The handwriting on the envelope changed depending on who the postmaster was at the time. His younger brothers send out family newsletters on email. There is only one photograph of my father they use, a blurred profile of him holding a beer. They use the same caption – 'Still refuses to use email.' I wish to click Reply All and say 'fuck you' but there is a distant niece in

Saskatchewan on the list – she writes me regularly for shark postcards and she knows the scientific names of eleven types of nudibranch. She recorded herself reciting it like bad poetry and put it on YouTube. I am the only one who knows this. She insists I use real handwriting, real stamps. She hates pancakes, frogs, flatlands. Her handwriting yearns for water. Salt water. Sea. In her milk tooth grin I see the next storyteller – the one to replace the man who has gone silent. She is ten and wants three pet octopi.

I was born to be a bridge. All I see are connections. I bridge between time, people and places. I study migratory species. Tuna fish stocks. Whales. Sea urchins in between. Cephalopods. I was nine when I picked up my first cuttlefish bones on a tidal flat in Pacific Harbour. For years I thought it was a whistle. I wrote out the names of the world's oceans, seas, currents and fish in longhand, unaware the lead scrawlings were placing miles between my father and me. He watched me from across the kitchen table. My mother had died bringing me into the world. He washed okra with patient fingers. Boiled rice. Warned me he was going to slice red onions.

Make sure you buy land, he whispers. When you grow up, buy a small piece of land. Build a house just for you. Promise me.

Promise. But my eyes were already on the Kuroshio Current. I was already reading the voyage of Captain James Cook and the transit of the planet Venus. Hearing the howl of winds at Tierra del Fuego. No one told me that as recently as one hundred years before, ships had cut through the rough straits with people carrying the makings of my teeth in their genes. They almost never happened. Almost.

Keep writing, he says in our old kitchen. As long as someone remembers, we live. My sister drops me off at the Colonial War Memorial Hospital.

I won't come in now, she says. I still smell of cigarettes. My father is asleep when I reach out to hold his hand.

II

For years the story in my family was that she boarded a ship in Calcutta. After all, it was the holy city of pilgrimage. It was nice to believe I descended from the loins of a young devotee travelling north to immerse in the sacred Ganges. She was then kidnapped and sent to labour in the hot sugar cane regions of Fiji. She had hair the sheen of sea-washed rocks at dusk. The story was that she met Narayana on the ship, the son of a turmeric merchant. They were to have eleven children of which only two survived, one of them my father's father, Venkat. I grew up imagining the digging of little graves at the edge of sugar cane. In rain. It was always night rain, as if miscarriages or infant deaths only occurred in rain-drenched darkness. In childhood, I added details from Bollywood films to it: night wailing, tug-of-wars over linen-swaddled baby corpses. Murder. Narayana strangles his own children. He uses an old cotton sari. There was no photograph of him so in my mind he wore the face of the Bollywood villain Amjad Khan. Rewind a few years to the port of Calcutta and the ship that crossed the kala pani, the black waters, and he is Amitabh Bachchan. He was the designated toilet-water carrier on the ship to Fiji—this much was whispered behind hushed curtains at home. At celebrations he is remembered as an astrologer, squinting his face at the heavens, reading palms on a heaving sea. He reads prosperity into suicidal hands, keeps men and women breathing until landfall. He has not created life yet. Nor ended any. There is no photograph of him. But there is the one photograph of her. She is sitting rigid under a cascade of jewellery. For years, no one asked what a virgin devotee was doing with so much gold or with a nose ring that could collar a grown cat.

Now it comes to me.

III

My father's house, the new one, is by the banks of the Rewa River, directly opposite the township of Nausori, a rice-growing region of wetland and rain. He has a concrete house on a slight knoll. A sprawling pumpkin out back. He can see the old bridge from his kitchen sink. He has seen at least six women leap to their deaths from that bridge. The last one dropped two toddlers and a baby first. The Nausori Police Station knows his telephone number. A cleaning-woman comes in twice a week. I am told all this by his neighbour, a buxom Fijian woman who leads her children in loud, charismatic prayers before dawn. She sells pineapple and custard pies outside MH Supermarket and sings soprano at the New Spring Church Choir.

I put my bags in the living room. It is full of books and newspapers. There are boxes of printed emails, audio cassette recordings, photographs and signed copies of diasporic books by names such as Brij Lal, Mohit Prasad, Sudesh Mishra and Subramani. My father has been attending numerous poetry readings and lecture series at the universities. There was an invitation to a film premiere in Ba and a wedding in Labasa. He has been listening to ghazals I bought as a Christmas gift for him on Amazon. He was chopping tomatoes when he collapsed. Jagjeet and Chithra Singh were still singing when my sister walked in with a pot of duck curry.

He is so happy you're here, she says in the hospital corridor. I told him you're going to look at his boxes of research. I know he is happy.

My sister has showered and washed out the smell of cigarettes from her mouth. She watches the rain pouring out of the hospital's clogged guttering.

Do you think you can tell him about the photograph? Let him know who we are?

IV

My earliest memory of a story is my father's about eels. He is the oldest among his brothers. The only one not in school. He loves books, particularly books without pictures. He loves the smell of wood and dried binding glue in books. He loves cloth-bound books. More than anything, he loves the swirl and fixed width of ink, of typefaces, of fonts readers decipher like enigmatic mysteries. His youngest brother, Mohandas, now a retired pot-bellied plumber in Brisbane, Australia, is seven the year my father discovers eels.

My father grows and harvests rice. He keeps ducks that feed on tadpoles, fry and elvers. My father traps eels to eat the year the rice crop is destroyed by two cyclones. He makes a deal with Mohandas. He gives his share of eel cutlets to Mohandas in exchange for books being read to him.

My father goes without meat for about a year. Then a spell of dry weather sets in. The sky is cloudless. The sun, scorching. The rice paddies dry up into little pools of muck. On a routine walk around the fields he encounters his first writhing frenzy of eels. They have congregated into diminishing pools of water. He watches the large eels kill and eat the smaller ones. He empathises with small eels. He learns to clean and roast eels on an open fire. He trusses them with a guava twig from mouth to tail. He fills his belly and takes home enough to go around twice. It turns out to be a good year.

He tells us we are like eels in a decreasing pool of rain. That we must work hard to buy land in another country. What does it matter? I remember saying. We will always be the ones who arrived later.

You will be a new, young eel, he says. You will not feel as much pain for a world you have yet to love. You will be the famished eel. Hungry until death. I pray you find a black cloud to give you rain.

That's a horrible story, I say.

His laughter fills the orange-lit afternoon.

Yet now, here he lies silent. I place my fingers on his wrist. I feel my father's floating and hollow pulse, what the Chinese call the scallion stalk pulse. It is said to grace the wrists of those who have suffered massive bleeding. My father has bled all his life. I know the scallion stalk pulse has been a long time coming.

I do what I have not done in years. I talk to God.

V

I knew years ago that my father knew I knew out about the woman in the photograph, our elusive ancestor. He knows I am the researcher he taught me to be. He knows the path of relentless questions he first placed me upon. He knew this from the days of vegetable cleaning and fish chopping in the little kitchen in Toorak. He knew I knew when I stopped coming home. As a fellow traveller, he respected my path and my stance. I followed whale pods across the Tonga Trench the first Christmas away.

You will grow into your road, he tells me when I am a child. And I have.

The archives tell me she arrived in Fiji on the SS Jumna at thirteen. Her name is Vellamma. She is treated for a sexually transmitted infection off the coast of Africa. She is the cause of four brawls on board the SS Jumna, during one of which three coolies fall overboard, unable to be rescued. Coolies – that's what the records called them.

She has liaisons with more than ten men before she is put into the lines at Rarawai. She kills the first eight of her children. There are inconclusive police and court records. She keeps a daughter alive. The one daughter is taken in by the Methodist Church in Toorak the year Vellamma is imprisoned for the brutal murder of a Muslim man by the name of Talat Mahmoud.

By the time I have uncovered this story, I have sat through hours adding up to days and nights, weeks and months, at the National Archives, hunched over both public and private records. I make copies of numerous photographs of her. I make copies of the only photograph of her daughter, at about eleven years old, acting Mother of Jesus at the Dudley Orphanage Christmas play. She has my father's eyes. She will bear him more than a decade down the line. She will fall in love with a Madrasi pot-seller who will drown on a clear blue day in a clear blue lagoon. For now, she looks alarmed at the camera.

VI

I am five the year my father tells me how to tell a story.

Always make room for uncertainty, he says. Don't say someone said this or said that. Don't ever be sure. Just walking from this kitchen to the backyard you will lose what I have just told you. Make room for that.

My father teaches me the accountability of self-questioning reported speech. I have always made room. We all make room in different ways. My father edits his stories according to who is listening.

I leave for fear of telling the truth. I leave for fear of telling untruths. I leave for fear of not providing enough room in the parentheses I place at the juncture of words and stories. My story is not mine alone. It is the story of multitudes and it will become a thread in the stories of multitudes to come.

If according to my father I can lose truth between the kitchen and the backyard, imagine the chasms of separation demarcated by clocks and geographies, between oceans and sleeps. Between lives eating grilled okra at one table. A cat laying his fur on a warm stone. My sister calling him for a fish-head treat. My playing this very scene in my head eighteen years later on a reef in New Caledonia when I receive the news that my father wishes to see me.

VII

My sister fights the afternoon traffic to pick me up from my father's house in Nausori. I have a folder of papers and photographs in a satchel. I will tell my father about Vellamma and Naranya. I have reprints of photographs of

Madras under the British Raj. I have photographs of the SS Jumna. I have reprints of immigration passes. I have death certificates. I have the photograph of a copper cooking pot.

But more importantly, I have three handwritten letters from the distant niece growing among the wheat fields of Saskatchewan. Today, I wish him to meet her. A new storyteller who is yet to grow into her road, which will bring her to the edge of British Columbia, to the Pacific coast of Canada. Today, I watched her recite nudibranch names on YouTube. I closed my eyes on the fifth rerun. This girl is coming home.

I listen to her growing hunger. This eel will find the great expanse of Saskatchewan too small for her. Her hunger will bring her home to the sea. The Pacific will be her black cloud.

At the roundabout in Nakasi my sister stops to refuel. I walk into the Hot Bread Kitchen to buy two cream buns. My sister and I will eat these as we head into Laucala Beach Estate, before the turn-off into Vatuwaqa and Flagstaff. I realise I have missed family. My sister licks her thumb and asks for a tissue. She has sugar grains on her nose.

At the hospital, my father is behind pea-green hospital curtains. The nurses have covered him. His body is growing cold. My sister has held him tightly to herself for me. She has not wept. She has not called his brothers. She has made me pack my stories into a satchel just as when we were children. She will hold my hand as we walk outside.

You do realise, she will say, it is you who keep these stories after Daddy?

She eases the car into the hospital parking lot. I see the sun caught in a wisp of her hair. We are two eels. Famished. Our black cloud awaits.

I have yet to find out as I hand her the tissue for the sugar on her nose.

Winner of the Commonwealth Short Story Prize, Pacific region in 2015

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