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Written

by

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Poongothai

Poongothai gripped the crayon in her hand like her brother had gripped the

hand grenade two days ago. She wasn’t quite sure what she was meant to

draw on that white piece of paper, but she felt secure holding the crayon in her

hand, tight, in a breathless sort of way.

“This is war,” her father had said, loud enough for his words to stick to their

bodies long after he had stormed out after an argument with her mother, never

to return. No lifeless body came back either, like her best friend Selvi’s

father’s. Selvi had then left with her family on a night boat to Madras, leaving

behind the life she had known like spent bullets on the ground.

After Poongothai’s father had abandoned them, her mother stuffed some

jewellery and cash down her blouse, packed a small bundle of their clothes,

and, together with her brother, they left the house they had grown up in to

move to a safe bunker further afield. When they stepped out into the night,

merging into the long line of fragile human bodies moving north, Poongothai

would feel something catch in her throat. Many years later, sitting with a warm

cup of tea in Gynani’s house with the strange wooden floors and wide

windows opening out into a quiet garden not pockmarked with bullet marks,

Poongothai would recognise that feeling in the night as grief. A grief so vast

and deep that it carried the memories of all the dead like sand in too-tight fists,

trickling through the cracks, endlessly, like a sick man’s dribble.

A week later, that bunker would be attacked. A hand grenade that had

somehow refused to detonate would stop next to her brother’s feet. He would

prise out Poongothai’s hands from his and pick it up, and then tell her urgently

that he would come back. He would go up the ladder to where the bunker

opened out, and Poongothai assumed he probably met their mother outside,

who had left them to collect the ration of rice and salt, and that they had

probably examined this hand grenade that had then, like an unpredictable

tantrum-throwing child, blown up on their faces.

Poongothai was eight years old that night. Her brother 10. Long after she had

crawled out of the bunker when the silence of the night resumed, following

another family to another safe house, and then another, and another, where

someone gave her a crayon and a piece of paper, Poongothai would wish she

had known how old her mother had been.

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The first time Poongothai saw Gynani, she felt a tightness in her chest. It was

as if her breath was trapped in rubble and if she did not rescue herself soon

enough, she would perish. She breathed out. A low, long deliberate breath,

like she was an athlete preparing for the match of her life. She knew all too

well that the game she had been playing with death since that night at the

bunker was as real as the tingle she felt in her flesh at that instant. It shot

through her body like a trailblazing comet leaving behind a line of fire that

would seethe and burn under her skin.

Gynani was a journalist. Poongothai had learnt that word – journalist – and it

always sounded incongruous in her head. What kind of list would a journalist

make? She would laugh at her own cleverness and wonder if Gynani would

ever find her clever.

But first, she would remind herself, he had to look in her direction.

He belonged to a group of people with good intentions. They came, always in

their too-clean clothes smelling of soap and soft white sheets in big taut

mattresses that held their bodies and dreams together in a state of suspended

reality that people like Poongothai, living in the dreary in-betweens of stale

nothingness and festering fullness of refugee camps, could never touch. Her

initial curiosity about the do-gooders in her younger days, egged on by

unexpected rewards of chocolates or colourful clips and scrunchies, were

slowly replaced with an ache gone numb, of words that couldn’t bring her

family back nor make her adopted family – now comprising an ailing father

(typhoid) and a bitter mother undone by the debilitating endlessness of life –

any real than they were. It was as if the barbed wire segregating the four

refugee camps in the area were not so much keeping them in as it was

keeping the world outside from getting in.

That is until she saw Gynani get off his bus on that very hot summer day, his

green cotton kurta sticking to his back, patches of sweat like shadow moons in

his armpits, his hair tied up in a ponytail, his thick beard flecked with grey, his

sunglasses hooked on to the front of his kurta, and his smile slipping off his

face with such ease. It was as if with Gynani’s arrival, the world came crashing

in like an eager waterfall, and it flowed and seeped and settled into the corners

of Poongothai’s heart.

In a way, the world did come into their refugee camp. Gynani belonged to a

famous channel, they were told – BBC – from London. Poongothai knew

London. She knew the Queen lived there, that the cat had gone to visit the

Queen and had frightened a little mouse under the chair. She knew London.

What she did not know was the equipment Gynani came with, the cameras

and the microphones; that Gynani would stay at one of the officials’ quarters

for a week, and that she would fall in love with him.

The first two days, Gynani went around the camp visiting many families,

patiently listening to their stories, and he was fluent in their language – Tamil.

The words fell out of him like pearls – they could recognise it, but the shine

and its smooth contours just wouldn’t sit in their rough palms. “Are you Sri

Lankan?” someone asked him, and he would smile and say, “No, I am from

India.” And then, “Oh, Madras?” and he would say, “No, Hyderabad, Telugu.

Amma speaks Tamil.” Poongothai was thankful for him that he wasn’t from

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Madras, because then they would have boxed him into some prejudice or the

other and she desperately wanted everyone to like him. It was as if the

refugee camp was the night sky that kept them hidden in the darkness

between the stars, and Gynani was the moon, momentarily dispelling the

gloom.

On the third day, he arrived at their little enclosure covered with a tarpaulin

sheet hooked on to four wooden sticks. The sides had been covered with

Poongothai’s mother’s saris. This mother’s saris, not the bunker-night mother.

It was thin but it kept the sun out during those relentless summer days.

Poongothai was sitting outside, watching him approach, the flutter in her heart

urgent like a siren.

“Hi,” he said and sat on the ground in front of her. He wiped the sweat off his

forehead and said, “Hot day, isn’t it?” His hair, thick and black, was plastered

to his head like someone had ironed it flat.

Poongothai stared – she stared at his eyes, deep brown like her skin. He was

not as fair-skinned as she had thought him to be from afar, but he had a

lightness around him, as if she could drown in it and still not die.

“Can you give me a glass of water... I don’t know your name,” he said and

from this close, the smile wrapped itself around Poongothai and she found she

got up in a rush, like the ground beneath her feet was suddenly very hot, and

went into the tent and brought a glass of water for him. When she handed it to

him – a steel tumbler – she noticed the rim still had remnants of the coffee she

had made for her mother that morning and she flushed.

He drank the water in one single gulp, his Adam’s apple asking to be touched,

but Poongothai stood there, rooted to the spot, wondering if he felt repulsed

looking at her dirty bare feet, or her old skirt and blouse. When he handed her

the tumbler, she breathed out her name like a deflated balloon – Poongothai –

and let it fall down limply as she went back inside. When she came out again,

her parents had returned from the monthly visit to the doctor and the

conversation quickly ran into the many details of typhoid and sickness and

Poongothai watched Gynani’s face move from concern to distress to anguish

to helplessness and she wished she could just gather him into a hug right

then.

But now they were talking about her. The tragic night at the bunker and how

they had adopted her and she saw Gynani look at her with such deep pity that

she felt like someone had removed the blood and bones from inside her body

and replaced it with bricks and cement, so she froze and tuned out and did not

even register the gentle way in which he touched her arm to say he was sorry

and left.

A little later, one of the members from his team, a woman with cropped hair,

dressed in jeans and a shirt with a dolphin tattooed on her arm came to see

Poongothai. Her Tamil was inadequate, but Poongothai understood Gynani

wanted to interview her for his story. It would mean she would be on camera. It

would mean she would have to relive that night and talk about it to a black

hole with a red flickering light. It would mean she would have to be in the same

space as Gynani, and Poongothai worried if she would be able to handle the

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close proximity of his face and smell and smile. Her mother, however, agreed

to the proposition because there was money involved. Poongothai never found

out how much because she knew money in a refugee camp was like fire and

smoke – it would destroy itself and disappear, leaving behind black ash that

could only be collected and thrown into the overflowing sewer.

The next day, Poongothai woke up early, before the crack of dawn, so she

could have the common bathroom to herself for more than five minutes. She

washed herself carefully with the half bucket of water allowed, remembering to

wash between her toes and underneath her fingernails and behind her ears –

surely the eye of the camera could penetrate the darkest corners of her being?

She wore the only nice skirt and blouse she owned – nice being a euphemism

for something that did not have any obvious tear (there was one, near the hem

at the back of the skirt and one small tear in the armpit of her blouse but if she

remembered never to lift her arms up she should be fine), and something that

retained some of its colour. The skirt was a shade of red, like rust, and the

blouse was a pale yellow with pink flowers on it. She brushed her hair with

care, trying to remove as many lice as she could, powdered her face and wore

a black bindi. She thought she looked like Simran, from that Tamil film they

had watched last year on Diwali. They were allowed one movie every year.

When the girl came for her, Poongothai was ready. The interview was to take

place at the open ground just before the barbed wire that marked the end of

their camp. Gynani was already there with his camera, one member holding a

black umbrella over it, while another held a silver cloth stretched taut over a

wooden frame near the high stool set a few feet away from the camera. The

girl asked Poongothai to sit on the stool and for the next ten minutes people

hovered around her, with light meters and tape, lapel mics and colour charts;

words she couldn’t understand flew around her like dust and she had to shut

her eyes. And then she heard Gynani’s voice – tender like the coconut,

instantly reviving her.

“Hi, Poongothai. Are you comfortable? Can you look here for a minute?” He

was pointing to the face of the camera and Poongothai obeyed, like this was

her first day at school.

“Good. Now, I will ask you some questions, and you just answer them looking

here, okay? Whenever you are tired, we can stop, yes? If you need water or

some food, just let us know. And if you find it difficult to talk about something,

we can stop. Okay?”

Poongothai nodded. Then Gynani said roll camera and started speaking.

“What is your name?”

“Poongothai.”

“Can you say that a little loudly, Poongothai? Let’s try that again. What is your

name?”

“Poongothai.”

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“How old are you?”

“15.”

“How many years have you been at this camp?”

“6 years.”

“Are you happy here?”

“Yes, I am breathing.”

“You mean, you are happy to be alive?”

“Yes.”

Poongothai felt like she was a spectator watching this other Poongothai sitting

on that stool, her back straight, her face clear, and watching Gynani, his face

concentrating, his eyes tense, and she wondered if she could ever explain to

anyone what her life, lived in the silences between gunfire, in the free hours

sandwiched between curfews, in the laughter behind closed doors, in the grief

out in the open, had really been like. Would they ever understand that this

Poongothai is just a sum of her parts left behind? That this Poongothai lived in

a space, in a fractal landscape of memories, eternally fractured by time?

“Was your father part of the LTTE?”

“I don’t know, maybe yes.” Poongothai really did not know. She had heard her

father talk about the LTTE and had had people dressed in black meet her

father often, and he had disappeared for long periods of time and always

carried a gun with him. A real gun with real bullets. But it was as if everyone

she knew had one like that, so she wasn’t sure if that meant they were all a

part of the LTTE.

“Can you tell us what happened on April 17

, 2005, at the bunker in

Kilinochchi?”

“Yes.”

There was silence for about two minutes and then Gynani said “cut” and

walked up to her, wiping the sweat off his forehead, adjusting his cap. He knelt

down; his hands were dangerously close to her thighs so Poongothai couldn’t

concentrate on anything else.

“Is everything okay, Poongothai? Do you think you can talk about that night? I

know it must be hard, do you think you can try?”

“Yes, I can.” And she meant it. So Gynani walked back to where the camera

was set and they repeated the question and she said yes and there was

silence again. It took Gynani about five takes and some blowing out of

frustrated breaths to understand that Poongothai was simply trained to answer

exactly what she was asked. When he understood that, he laughed a short

laugh that crinkled up his eyes and Poongothai couldn’t help laughing along

with him. And she surprised herself because she couldn’t remember the last

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time she had laughed – a sound free of guilt – and she couldn’t stop being

awed by the fact that their laughter fit each other like two halves of a broken

egg. Poongothai knew when she stopped to take a breath she would notice

the cracks, but for now, this much joy, fragile and thin, was enough.

The rest of the interview went without a hitch. Poongothai answered all

Gynani’s questions – how was the night, hot or cold (cold); what did the

explosion sound like (loud); what did she feel (scared); what was she thinking

(am I going to die?); how did she find the other family (she just fell in line with

them). She even told him about the strange lady in the safe house thrusting

that paper and crayon, as if that was the only plank of wood she could find

from a drowning ship.

When they finished the interview – and Poongothai finally understood the kind

of list a journalist really makes – Gynani took off his cap and ran his fingers

through his wet hair. Poongothai watched, distinctly feeling her parched throat

grate against her skin like sandpaper. She watched as Gynani walked up to

her and shook her hand, saying thank you over and over again, that smile

filling her up like a storm filling up the ocean. She must have swayed – maybe

she was thirsty – because Gynani caught her, his hands circling her waist in

one smooth motion, his eyebrows furrowing together like eels in love.

Someone thrust a bottle of water under her nose, and she vaguely

remembered drinking it, and Gynani walking her home, his hand placed

protectively between her shoulder blades, telling her something funny because

he was doing his short laugh, but Poongothai was floating in the sky, willing

her entire being to remain in that memory of his touch, because she knew,

more than anyone else, that memories soon become redundant, creating more

grief in the remembering than the forgetting.

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Poongothai slipped into her long black coat and ran out bare feet into the

garden. She loved the feeling of the season’s first snow, the cold racing into

her blood like the rain rushing down to meet the earth. She lifted her face up to

the heavens and sent up a quick prayer of thanks to her mother and brother, a

little stone in the pit of her stomach reminding her that Gynani too would soon

join them.

She went back into the house, her feet numb with cold, but she didn’t mind

that too much. She was with Gynani. In London, no less. She heard Gynani

cough in his room and hurried to the kitchen to make him his cup of tea. Later,

she would take in a slice of toast and a simple omelette. There were no more

restrictions on his diet. Not anymore. The nurse would come in at 10 for a

quick check, as if she was the class monitor making sure the illness was

behaving itself. And his mother would be back from her volunteering at the

local church – anything to keep her busy – by late afternoon, the sky a dull

grey like the underside of a scavenging crow.

When Poongothai first found out that Gynani’s documentary had gone viral

and had created quite a stir, forcing the Sri Lankan government to find

alternatives for the Tamils still living in refugee camps, she was already in

London. She had become the face of the documentary with tremendous

support pouring in for her. Gynani had enough funds to apply for a

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sponsorship for Poongothai and by the time she had turned 18, she had, yet

again, felt like her life up until then had just become leftovers for mangy dogs

on the street. It was as if she had never existed.

She had felt a hole the size of an underground bunker in her heart when

Gynani and his crew had left after that first week at the camp. He had come to

say goodbye to her, giving her some extra money, which Poongothai had

refused. He then patted her on her head, and left without a backward glance.

Poongothai had waited, watching him go further and further away, knowing

she would probably never see him again. The last image of Gynani she stored

in her head was of his blue cap, the last speck of sky in her already darkening

world.

So when she saw him again, a week before her 18

birthday, his beard gone,

his cap gone, and some of his hair gone too but the smile still intact, she

couldn’t believe her eyes. When he told her about the film and the funds for

her sponsorship in London and her imminent departure, she fell on the floor in

front of the picture of her father who had died a couple of years ago, kissing

the earth for finally registering her footsteps among the many, many that walk

the earth every day. She cried in relief, in happiness, in anguish, in pain, in joy,

in love and felt like all of her was emptying itself out to make space for the

new. Most of all, she absorbed Gynani’s happiness of privilege bleeding into

the tapestry of the less privileged and then hugged herself.

“Poongothai.”

She jumped when Gynani called out to her, pushing the past away as she

tucked her hair behind her ear, revelling at the softness of her hair without dust

or mud or dirt (or blood), and took the cup of tea to Gynani’s room. She placed

the cup carefully on the table next to him, propped him up on his hospital bed

with its wires and beeps, placed the small table on his stomach and kept the

cup on it. She beamed a smile at him which he did not return. Poongothai

squeezed his hands, walked towards the bay windows in the room and pushed

the curtains aside, allowing weak winter’s light to filter into the room. She took

a moment to look at the snow settling slowly on the world outside, burying

everything underneath it, like an angel gently suffocating life; cruelty always

seemed to lurk behind beauty.

When she turned around, Gynani had finished his tea and had been watching

Poongothai. When her eyes met his, he turned away and flung the cup against

the wall on the far side of the room.

“Get out!” he thundered, the effort making him gasp for breath, until

Poongothai had to help him, using her body to hold his weight as she gently

laid him down. He kept his head turned away, closing his eyes, his breath

coming in painful rasps. Poongothai cleaned up the broken bits of the cup from

the floor, cleaned the drops of tea plastered on the wall like flesh, and left the

room. She was used to this now. The illness, which no one had spoken to her

about and that had existed even when he came to pick her up from the

refugee camp two years ago, was eating Gynani away.

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He had been angry from the day she had come into his life in London. Maybe

the illness had already made him bitter. Or maybe, it was the fact that the girl

he was meant to save was the one left saving him.

After the nurse had come and gone, having given Gynani a dose of painkillers,

which made him fall into the sleep of the dead, and leaving Poongothai with

instructions for medication in the evening as if she was unfamiliar with

sickness, Poongothai stepped into Gynani’s room to give him his sponge bath.

This was the favourite part of her day. She felt completely uninhibited. She

would sing songs from her childhood, the childhood before the night of the

bunker; she would tell an inert Gynani stories of her life – some real, some

made-up, but who was there to really check? Even Poongothai wasn’t sure

many times. She would tell him about her thoughts and dreams and about her

love for him that had travelled the distance of time, space and even age. It did

not matter to her that Gynani was 25 years older. It did not matter to her that

she never told him how she felt about him when he was awake, but suspected

that maybe he knew when she slipped her hands into his as they stepped into

Heathrow the first time or when he caught her smelling his shirt one afternoon.

She suspected he knew because soon after this happened – about a week

after she landed there – she was sent to another friend’s house, the same girl

with the dolphin tattoo who had been part of his crew. They were waiting for

some of Poongothai’s legal paperwork to come through so she could work in

England, though technically she had enough funds to support herself without

it. Poongothai liked to believe that it was Gynani’s way of looking out for her; it

was his way of, perhaps, loving her. Within a month, however, Gynani was

hospitalised and something happened to him that wouldn’t allow him to move

waist down. Poongothai didn’t understand it, but knew it was something to do

with his heart. All she understood from snippets of conversation she heard the

girl have with someone else was that Gynani’s heart was like the hand

grenade that had rolled near her brother’s feet – no one knew when it would

explode.

For the next year, Poongothai would watch Gynani fall apart. She had found

an apartment she shared with two other girls from India, and had enrolled

herself at an adult school to learn English. She kept to herself, restricting her

travel to the grocery store and back, to the adult school and back, and to the

hospital and back. She visited Gynani every day, would sit by his bed like a

forgotten dog, or wait in the common room even if she couldn’t meet him, and

leave without saying a word. What could she possibly say to the man who had

picked her up with the practiced nonchalance of a rag-picker’s pitchfork, only

to place her in another dump? She would often wonder if she was being

ungrateful. But she loved Gynani. Wasn’t that enough? And now, here she

was, living with him after all, paying back her dues. Someone had to care for

him when the fight in him dried up and he returned home like a shrivelled

tomato.

She quickly looked at the time. It was going to be 1pm and she had to make

his lunch. It also meant he would soon return to the conscious world. But she

had another half hour. She removed her clothes and lay down next to his

naked body – his body cold, hers full of fire. She held his limp hand in hers

and placed it on her bare stomach, soaking in the roughness of his palm and

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breathed in. For a brief moment she wondered if perhaps his heart could feel

the urgency of her body, and if it would become too much for him to bear,

leading it to explode with the deafening sound of that night at the bunker. But,

that, she was already prepared for. As she moved his hands further down her

body, Poongothai smiled to herself. For now, this much joy, fragile and thin,

was enough.

Poongothai is one of the three winners of the 2017 DWL Short Story Contest.

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