

The Old Man Has Lost His Mind

By Padmini Sankar

He sat there, this old man, steadily devouring the cakes, pastries and tarts placed within his reach. His daughters said he had a sweet tooth and indulged him. Not that the surfeit of sugar showed on his frame. He sat ramrod straight, his pale, rheumy eyes centred on the sweet delights, a little smile hovering over his lips.

'Papa, tell the lady your name,' his elder daughter prompted him.

'My name is Michael Raman. My father's name is N Venkataraman,' he said, like a child in kindergarten.

'See, he knows his name and his father's name,' she said. She spoke as if he couldn't understand what she was saying, indeed as if he were deaf.

I'd come all this way to Kota Kinabalu specially to meet the old man. The daughters had taken me to their club for the meeting. It was the middle of the week so only one or two people were seated around the solid teak tables, sipping on long cool glasses of lemonade or pouring out jasmine tea into small porcelain cups, the ones with no handles. Our table, set alongside the French windows, looked out onto the club gardens. Long-stemmed fans hung from the high ceiling, lazily stirring the humid air. It had once been a club for the English sahibs, built in the 1930s when the country was part of British North Borneo. Mount Kinabalu, green and verdant, could be seen in the distance, a mystic giant both feared and worshipped by the native tribes. I looked up, sending a silent prayer to the mountains to help me with my quest, to quench my hunger for answers. Answers to questions I could not yet formulate.

'What did your mother call you?' asked the younger daughter, trying to prod her father's memory. He stared at her blankly.

'Papa, what did your ina call you?' she asked again.

Silence. His gaze was on the food.

She turned to me. 'He can't remember. Dementia. He's lost his mind.'

I knew what his ina called him. Kurupong. Folded ears. The elder daughter had told me this earlier. My father too had big ears that folded at the lobe. It had missed me, these elephant ears, but my son seemed to have made up for the aberration as his ears were not just huge but

also folded over at the earlobes. What unkind names he had to face – Dumbo, Big-Ears, elephant-ears.... Oh, the cruelty of children!

I'd arrived too late. If only I'd come a year or two earlier when the old man's mind was sharp and clear. The same blood ran in our veins. Michael Raman's father was my grandfather, N Venkataraman. Two sons by two wives, the first Michael by his Malaysian Dusun wife, and the second my father by his Indian Brahmin wife.

Appa never spoke about his father or even mentioned a half-brother. He never told me much. Barely exchanged two words with me, except when I received my school report. I'd been a stellar student. He'd grunt his approval and put it aside. Job done. I learnt not to talk to him, ask him any questions. Like, how come the nail on his pinky finger was so black. Like a rotten tip. He had beautiful hands with long fingers and polished, oval nails. Except for that little one. I knew the story behind the scar on his thigh that I happened to see by chance. A long, black scar, the skin thick and puckered. Dark against dark.

Appa had passed away many years ago, then Amma. Leaving me alone with unanswered questions, a deep stone of darkness weighing me down.

I'd seen only one picture of grandfather Venkataraman, part of a group photo. It had slipped out of Grandma's prayer book, verses from the Bhagavad Gita that she was constantly reading. 'Who is this?' I asked, with the normal curiosity of a ten-year-old. 'I can see you, Grandma,' I said, my finger pointing to a young woman in a puff-sleeved blouse, her sari neatly pinned to her shoulder. She was seated on a wooden bench and next to her sat a stern-looking man dressed in a formal suit. Between them stood a small boy of about three or four. And behind was a smudge of tall trees.

'That's your father,' she'd answered, pointing to the child. 'And this one your grandfather.'

My grandfather? There wasn't a single picture of him that decorated the walls of our house. Garlanded photos of Amma's parents, my maternal grandparents, graced the wall of our pooja room. But none of Appa's father. Why, I wondered, had neither Appa nor Grandma put one up? Grandma was always solicitous when speaking of her dead husband. 'A man like no other', she'd say, 'always following dharma, the path of duty.'

I gazed at the sepia-tinted photo, mounted on a fraying piece of cardboard. The name of the photo studio where the print was developed had faded into a hazy greyness. I could just about make out the dark letter of a 'J.'

'And where was this taken?' I asked.

'Jesselton,' she answered. 'In British North Borneo.'

She'd pushed it back into her prayer book, and even though I'd looked for it later, I never managed to find it.

I'd noticed that even then, in that photo, my father never smiled.

Grandma often talked of the past, of how the Japanese occupied the country and sent the British officers and soldiers to POW camps, of how they faced shortages and she had to dig up tubers when no food was available and evaporate seawater to get salt, of hiding in caves when the Allied planes bombed them. To me, these were faraway tales of hardship. Perhaps she found it cathartic, narrating and living through those experiences again.

But there was no mention of another wife, another child.

Maybe she didn't know? No, how could she have not known.

But the truth will out, as they say. Bodies buried in the sand, tossed into the ocean, thrown into a well – they always surface, somewhere, somehow. Like oil on water.

It was just a chance search through the web that led to old secrets tumbling out. An academic paper my son had written about the history of Sabah and Sarawak, where he'd mentioned that his great grandfather, N Venkataraman, had spent the war years there. Just this one stray sentence in the preface to his article had set in motion this sea of events. Michael Raman's daughter came across the name. Yes, it was the same name as her long-lost, or long-missing grandfather, the one her father used to mention. Mention with pride. He hadn't seen him after the war. He was just seven or eight. The daughter contacted my son. The connection was made. I had relatives, blood relatives, in far-off Malaysia! The news reverberated within me. Call it the pull of blood if you like, but urgency overtook reason, the whats, whys and hows tossed aside. So here I was, in Kota Kinabalu, the new name for Jesselton, to meet my – well, how should I put it, my half-uncle and distant cousins.

I was in search of answers.

So, my grandfather hadn't exactly been saintly. But Grandma always spoke of how upright and moral he was, what a brilliant man he'd been, an exemplary mathematician. He'd done all the

work for the British, she said, venturing deep into the jungle, marking off territories, finding hidden springs and streams, drawing maps of the coastline. The Japanese found him useful too and treated him with respect. Raman-san, that's what they called him.

Sometimes he disappeared for days together leaving her alone with her infant son. Secret meetings. He never told her where he went or why. I now wonder, were those 'secret meetings' with his Dusun wife?

Grandma spoke bitterly of the time grandfather was termed a traitor by the British after the war was over. 'It was one of our own, the same people he was trying to protect, who stabbed him in his back. He said your grandfather was a collaborator, an informer, and received extra rations from the Japanese. What else can you do when there is a pistol at your head? But your grandfather always did his duty, trying to protect his people.'

'What then, Grandma?' I asked. I'd heard this story many times over, but never tired of it.

'He was sent back to India in disgrace. We left, all three of us, with just the clothes on our back. We arrived after a week. The country was in turmoil, what with returning soldiers and cries for independence. But no one wanted to employ him. He went from door to door, but no. They politely declined, although many termed him a hero.'

'But why?'

'His reputation had preceded him. A collaborator, an informer. Who wanted someone like him to work for them? No, they preferred some bootlicker of the British, not a man who stood his ground and did his duty.'

I asked her just once why he had never tried to return to Jesselton. A wary look came over her eyes. 'Return? To what? We were here, his own family, his wife and son.' She retreated, once more, into her silence.

Perhaps grandfather had brought back the darkness of the Borneo jungle. This darkness spilt out, over my father, over me. That's why I was here, making the long journey from Delhi to Kota Kinabalu.

Michael looked at me and smiled.

'Ina,' he said.

His elder daughter drew a deep breath. 'He thinks you're his mother.'

I wasn't offended. My grey hairs and wrinkles made me look older than my fifty-five years. And I bore an uncanny resemblance to my grandfather. Thin, dark, my heart harbouring a grief I could not yet fathom.

He stroked my hand. Tears brimmed in his faded eyes. He began weeping uncontrollably. 'They cut off his head,' he said. 'Chop- chop Chinaman. They come in a lorry. With a big sword. So much blood. I shit. I shit for days. Ina, I can't sleep.'

'It's what he saw the Japanese do to some poor Chinese man. Mama told us. She said he used to get up at night crying and cowering under the bedclothes,' explained his elder daughter.

I patted his hand. I got up to hug him as if he were a child. My child.

The weeping stopped. 'We owned cows. Three cows. My mother used to milk the cows every day. But we had to hide them from the Japanese. We knew when they were coming. Our bamboo hut was deep in the jungle, up on a little hill. We could see whoever was coming and going.'

His eyes had a faraway look. He was speaking coherently.

'He has patches of clear sense,' whispered the other daughter. 'But he's usually lost it.' She touched her head lightly.

'We were happy then, my Ina and me,' he said. 'Apa would visit and spend days or weeks with us. Whenever we saw the soldiers approaching, I'd take the cows to a clump of trees and hide them. I didn't know those Japanese would bring their lorry into this same clearing. They never saw me. They never saw my cows. But I saw everything. Apa was with them.'

He reached for another tart.

'Papa, don't you think you've had enough,' said his elder daughter, putting out a restraining hand.

He ignored her. 'I like the yellow ones best,' he said.

'Lemon curd. That's his favourite. He never eats anything red. Not even red fruit.'

I wasn't interested in his favourite fruit. I'd come all the way here for a different reason. I wanted to know more about my unknown grandfather, N Venkataraman. And here was my chance. The old man was having a lucid moment, his brain no longer fogged up.

'Was your father kind to you? Did he play any games with you?' My father had never played with me nor uttered a kind word. Not even a word of encouragement. Holidays were spent at my maternal grandmother's home in Ernakulam. He never accompanied us, always citing work. Grandma too. She stayed back, mother and son lost in a silent gloom. But I had to know the answer to this question. It was pivotal, the key that would open the lock.

'My father's name is N Venkataraman,' he said. 'My name's Michael Raman.'

'Uh oh. Gone again,' said his daughter. My hopes for a small break were dashed to the ground.

A ringing mobile cut into the moment. 'It's my son,' said the elder daughter.

I sensed the meeting was at an end. But I still didn't have my answers. 'Can I take a walk with my uncle?' I asked. 'Just a small walk in the garden?'

The elder daughter was busy on the phone. The younger looked to her for approval, but seeing she was busy, agreed, almost with a sense of relief. 'I have to go to the club bake-shop to buy some tarts and cup-cakes for home. The former chef – well, he was trained by an English cook so could make light-as-air angel cakes. But this new pastry chef, his son – he's only good with small bakes.' She smiled at me. 'OK, I'll leave you two for a bit.'

I liked my half-cousins. They were nice. Like angel cake.

The old man was looking at me with bright, inquisitive eyes. Perhaps he understood more than we thought?

I took his arm and we set out into the club gardens. It was a wild, unkempt piece of land with a wrought-iron fence around it. An apology of a garden, with shabby flowerbeds and untrimmed bushes. At one time, it must have been immaculate, an English garden where Chinese amahs wheeled their wards in large, shaded prams while the memsahibs played cards or mahjong or gossiped inside. Mount Kinabalu loomed before us, its trees and foliage darkening with the advancing day.

We walked in silence for a few minutes. The old man did not have an old man's gait. I did not have to slow my pace. I pointed out to the mountain.

'Is that where you and Ina lived?'

He gazed at the distant mountains, not answering my question.

'Where is Apa? Is he up there?' he asked.

I waited with my breath held, hoping he'd go on. He turned to me.

'Ina.' His eyes were the eyes of a little boy, wet and shiny. 'Did the bites hurt you? I will kill those Japanese when I become big. How they tied you up to the tree, Ina, with those red ants crawling around. How you screamed and cried. And how they laughed.'

He took hold of my arm and, pausing in his walk, examined it. 'It's alright now. Remember how Apa brought burnt tobacco paste and mixed it with coconut oil? And how he put it on all the bites? He cried seeing you in so much pain. Don't you remember?'

He looked at me earnestly, still holding my hand.

I nodded. My mind riveted to the burn mark on my father's thigh – Amma told me that his father had burnt him with an iron rod as punishment for not getting cent percent in math. He'd topped the class always, coming first in the state, and then going to Cambridge on a scholarship.

I'd never been beaten or threatened. Neither scolded nor praised. Just ignored.

An ache, a blackness, ate into my core. A heavy sadness, a raincloud. That's why my name was Meghna. Rain cloud. A sadness that had seeped down generations.

I looked up. The old man was watching me, a smile lighting up his face.

'I miss my Apa,' he said. 'He loved me very much. Me and Ina.'

Truth reared its ugly head. He was loved. He was blessed with a father's love.

My heart clouded, heavy with resentment.

The palace of lies my grandmother had built around him came tottering down. That scar on the thigh, the black nail, the lack of laughter, the long silences. They spoke the truth.

Michael, the first-born, had always been the loved one. Michael and his mother. While my father was the unwanted one, the dark, unwanted child.

Lucky old man, I thought to myself as I held his hand and smiled back into his eyes.