GANGSTER

She chose September, that most excellent month, to make her move. The monsoon had receded, leaving Kerala gleaming like an emerald strip between the mountains and the sea. As the plane banked to land, and the earth rose to greet us, I couldn't believe that topography could cause such palpable, physical pain. I had never known that beloved landscape, never imagined it, never evoked it, without her being part of it. I couldn't think of those hills and trees, the green rivers, the shrinking, cemented-over rice fields with giant billboards rising out of them advertising awful wedding saris and even worse jewellery, without thinking of her. She was woven through it all, taller in my mind than any billboard, more perilous than any river in spate, more relentless than the rain, more present than the sea itself. How could this have happened? *How?* She checked out with no advance notice. Typically unpredictable.

The church didn't want her. She didn't want the church. (There was savage history there, nothing to do with God.) So given her

standing in our town, and given our town, we had to fashion a fitting funeral for her. The local papers reported her passing on their front pages; most national papers mentioned it, too. The internet lit up with an outpouring of love from generations of students who had studied in the school she founded, whose lives she had transformed, and from others who knew of the legendary legal battle she had waged and won for equal inheritance rights for Christian women in Kerala. The deluge of obituaries made it even more crucial that we do the right thing and send her off the way she deserved. But what was that right thing? Fortunately, on the day she died the school was closed and the children had gone home. The campus was ours. It was a huge relief. Perhaps she had planned that, too.

Conversations about her death and its consequences for us, especially me, had begun when I was three years old. She was thirty then, debilitated by asthma, dead broke (her only asset was a bachelor's degree in education), and she had just walked out on her husband – my father, I should say, although somehow that comes out sounding strange. She was almost eighty-nine when she died, so we had sixty years to discuss her imminent death and her latest will and testament, which, given her preoccupation with inheritance and wills, she rewrote almost every other week. The number of false alarms, close shaves and great escapes that she racked up would have given Houdini pause for thought. They lulled us into a sort of catastrophe complacency. I truly believed she would outlive me. When she didn't, I was wrecked, heart-smashed. I am puzzled and more than a little ashamed by the intensity of my response.

My brother put his finger sharply on that nerve. 'I don't

understand your reaction. She treated nobody as badly as she treated you.' He could be right, although according to me, it was he who held that trophy. I can understand him feeling that I was humiliating myself by not acknowledging what had happened to us as children. But I had put that behind me a long time ago. I have seen and written about such sorrow, such systemic deprivation, such unmitigated wickedness, such diverse iterations of hell, that I can only count myself among the most fortunate. I have thought of my own life as a footnote to the things that really matter. Never tragic, often hilarious. Or perhaps this is the lie I tell myself. Maybe I pitched my tent where the wind blows strongest hoping it would blow my heart clean out of my body. Perhaps what I am about to write is a betrayal of my younger self by the person I have become. If so, it's no small sin. But I'm in no position to be the judge of that.

I left home – stopped going home, or what passed as home – after I turned eighteen. I had just entered my third year at the School of Architecture in Delhi.

In those days we finished high school at sixteen. That's how old I was in the summer of 1976 when I first arrived at Nizamuddin Station, alone, without even a working knowledge of Hindi, to take the entrance exam for the School of Architecture. I was terrified and had a knife in my bag. Delhi was three days and two nights away by train from Cochin, which is a three-hour drive from our town, Kottayam, which in turn is a few kilometres away from our village, Ayemenem, where I spent my early childhood. In other

words, for me Delhi was a different country altogether. Different language, different food, different climate, different everything. The scale of the city was beyond my comprehension. I came from a place where everybody knew where everyone lived. Pathetically, I asked an auto-rickshaw driver if he could take me to the home of my mother's older sister, Mrs Joseph. I assumed he knew where she lived. He took a deep drag of his bidi and turned away, looking bored. Two years later I was the one smoking bidis and cultivating that peerless look of bored disdain. In time I traded in my knife for a good supply of hashish and some big-city attitude. I had emigrated.

I left my mother not because I didn't love her, but in order to be able to continue to love her. Staying would have made that impossible. Once I left, I didn't see or speak to her for years. She never looked for me. She never asked me why I left. There was no need for that. We both knew. We settled on a lie. A good one. I crafted it – 'She loved me enough to let me go.' That's what I said at the front of my first novel, *The God of Small Things*, which I dedicated to her. She quoted it often, as though it were God's truth. My brother jokes that it's the only piece of real fiction in the book. To the end of her days, she never asked me how I managed during those seven years when I was a runaway. She never asked where I lived, how I completed my course of study and took my degree. I never told her. I managed well enough.

After our brittle, tentative reunion, I returned to her, visiting her regularly over the years as an independent adult, a qualified architect, a production designer, a writer, but most of all as a woman watching another with love and admiration – and a fair amount of

disquiet – not just for her great qualities, but the opposite, too. In that conservative, stifling little South Indian town, where, in those days, women were only allowed the option of cloying virtue – or its affectation – my mother conducted herself with the edginess of a gangster. I watched her unleash all of herself – her genius, her eccentricity, her radical kindness, her militant courage, her ruthlessness, her generosity, her cruelty, her bullying, her head for business and her wild, unpredictable temper – with complete abandon on our tiny, insular Syrian Christian society, which, because of its education and relative wealth, was sequestered from the swirling violence and debilitating poverty in the rest of the country. I watched her make space for the whole of herself, for all her selves, in that little world. It was nothing short of a miracle – a terror and a wonder to behold.

Once I learned to protect myself (somewhat) from its soul-crushing meanness, I even grew fascinated by her wrath against motherhood itself. Sometimes the barefaced nakedness of it made me laugh. Not the laughing-out-loud kind of laughter, but the kind that comes upon you when you are alone. When you surgically excise an incident from its circumstances and look at it dispassionately, shorn of context. As though she were someone else's mother and as though it were not I but someone else who was the object of her wrath.

As a child I loved her irrationally, helplessly, fearfully, completely, as children do. As an adult I tried to love her coolly, rationally, and from a safe distance. I often failed. Sometimes miserably. I wrote versions of her in my books, but I never wrote *her*. She liked those

versions, though, and embraced the character of Ammu in *The God of Small Things*, whom she would refer to as 'I' and 'me'. She wanted to be Ammu because she knew very well that she wasn't. When a mischievous journalist asked her whether she had indeed had a tragic love affair as Ammu did in the book, she looked him in the eye and said, 'Why? Aren't I sexy enough?' She was in her sixties by then, a diva of her own making. She could say what she liked.

When the book came out, she was worried about what secrets it might reveal. To be safe, she checked herself into hospital. There she read it hurriedly and was greatly relieved that it wasn't any kind of exposé. At first, she said she couldn't understand what the fuss was all about. Then she studied it closely. After her third or fourth reading – she was home by then – she summoned me to her bedside. It was a bright afternoon and the light that filtered through her curtains was bordello red. Her eyes were shut. She said that she thought it was a good book. Well written. She wanted to know about a particular passage, one in which Ammu's seven-year-old twins, Esthappen and Rahel, remembered their parents fighting. How they grew huge, like giants, and pushed the children from one to the other, saying, 'You take them, I don't want them.'

'Who told you about this? You were too young to remember.'

'It's fiction.'

'No, it's not.'

And she turned to the wall.

I have never felt the weight or the sorrow of this memory. I really believed it was fiction. I learned that day that most of us are a living, breathing soup of memory and imagination – and

that we may not be the best arbiters of which is which. So read this book as you would a novel. It makes no larger claim. But then, there can *be* no larger claim. Fiction is that strange, smoky thing that writers don't entirely own, even if they think they do. Where does it come from? Our past, our present, our reading, our imagination – yes. But perhaps from premonitions of our future, too? How else can it be that like the characters in my second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, I, too, am now the caretaker of a sort of grave in the grounds of a sort of guest house? It's outlandish. It keeps me awake at night. But then I ask myself: Why should we know everything?

In my effort to fathom my mother, to see things from her perspective, to accommodate her, to understand what hurt her, what made her do the things she did and to predict what she may or may not do next, I turned into a maze, a labyrinth of pathways that zigzag underground and surface in strange places, hoping to gain a vantage point for a perspective other than my own. Seeing her through lenses that were not entirely coloured by my own experience of her made me value her for the woman she was. It made me a writer. A novelist. Because that's what novelists are – labyrinths. And now this labyrinth must make sense of its labyrinthine self without her.

To bridge the chasm between the legacy of love she left for those whose lives she touched, and the thorns she set down for me, like little floaters in my bloodstream – fish hooks that still

catch on soft tissue as my blood makes its way to and from my heart – is why I write this book. It is as hard to write as it is not to.

Perhaps even more than a daughter mourning the passing of her mother, I mourn her as a writer who has lost her most enthralling subject. In these pages, my mother, my gangster, shall live. She was my shelter and my storm.

FUGITIVES

A teacher was what she had always wanted to be, what she was qualified to be. During the years she was married and living with our father, who had a job as an assistant manager on a remote tea estate in Assam, the dream of pursuing a career of any kind atrophied and fell away. It was rekindled (as nightmare more than dream) when she realized that her husband, like many young men who worked on lonely tea estates, was hopelessly addicted to alcohol.

When war broke out between India and China in October 1962, women and children were evacuated from border districts. We moved to Calcutta. Once we got there, my mother decided that she would not return to Assam. From Calcutta we travelled across the country, all the way south to Ootacamund – Ooty – a small hill station in the state of Tamil Nadu. My brother, LKC – Lalith Kumar Christopher Roy – was four and a half years old, and I was a month away from my third birthday. We did not see or hear from our father again until we were in our twenties.

In Ooty we lived in one-half of a 'holiday' cottage that belonged to our maternal grandfather who had retired as a senior government servant – an Imperial Entomologist – with the British government in Delhi. He and my grandmother were estranged. He had severed links with her and his children years ago. He died the year I was born.

I don't know how we got into that cottage. Maybe the tenant who lived in the other half had a key. Maybe we broke in. My mother seemed familiar with the house. And the town. Perhaps she had been there as a child, with her parents. The cottage was dank and gloomy with cold, cracked cement floors and an asbestos ceiling. A plywood partition separated our half from rooms that were occupied by the tenant. She was an old English lady called Mrs Patmore. She wore her hair in a high, puffy style, which made us wonder what was hidden inside it. Wasps, we thought, my brother and I. At night she had bad dreams and would scream and moan. I'm not sure if she paid any rent. She might not have known who to pay it to. We, certainly, paid no rent. We were squatters, interlopers – not tenants. We lived like fugitives amid huge wooden trunks packed full of the dead Imperial Entomologist's opulent clothes – silk ties, dress-shirts, three-piece suits. We found an old biscuit tin full of cufflinks. (Obviously he was an enthusiastic collaborator with the colonial government and took the Imperial part of his professional designation seriously.) Later, when my brother and I were old enough to understand, we would be told the legendary family stories about him; about his vanity (he had a portrait of himself taken in a Hollywood photo studio)