

## The Cleaner's Daughter

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Devi does not like to talk about her family, which consists only of her mother and a dim-witted younger sister, with anyone. No matter how many times she has rehearsed in her head, she just can't bring herself to tell others that her mother is a cleaner at the McDonald's complex in Ang Mo Kio; they will never understand how she feels, or care to know.

Worse than the fact that she's a cleaner's daughter, is the place where she stays: a tiny one-room flat, just a street away from McDonald's. The entire floor of the flat is muck-coloured cement, with no clear demarcation to separate the kitchen and the sleeping area, and a cramped bathroom with a squat toilet. Devi has never invited her friends from the polytechnic over; it hurts her to notice the condition of the flat: the peeling, discoloured poster of Ganesha on the wall, the stale-smelling fold-up mattresses, her sister's chewed-up plastic dolls scattered all over the floor. Gecko droppings pepper the upper parts of the walls, and sometimes, a stray alley cat would wander in from the corridor and drag into the flat leftover food, dead cockroaches and, once, the decapitated head of a bird.

When her mother is too tired after working a long fourteen hours day, Devi helps with the cleaning at home. She likes to throw things out, things that her mother and sister would bring back from the piles of rubbish at the complex. She is merciless when it comes to keeping a clean flat; less is better, she believes, and discards anything she deems useless at the refuse compound a block away. If she keeps the bags of trash aside for even a short while, her mother would rummage through them and attempt to salvage things. Her fiercest fights with her mother have always been about the amount of trash to keep or throw, her mother a staunch believer in saving every item for future use. Devi often gives in to her mother, after a bitter fight, but when her mother's eyes are turned, or when she's asleep, Devi would throw out the salvaged items discreetly. Her mother never catches on, or is simply too tired to fight over a lost cause.

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When her mother has to work overtime, Devi buys dinner – a packet of *nasi goreng* or *murtabak* – and bring it to her. At the complex, the building cleaning supervisor, Mr Dinesh, has allowed Devi's mother to use a spare utility room as a cleaners' quarters for her own purposes, provided she keeps it neat and clean. It is the place he comes to, for his smoke breaks or to chat with Devi's mother. Mr Dinesh is always there when Devi delivers dinner, looking up at her with undisguised, eager eyes, cajoling her to stay and chat. But Devi knows this type of men all too well, so she gives him a wide berth, and leaves quickly without exchanging looks or words.

On days, when the work is never-ending, especially weekends, Devi's mother would bring Lathi, Devi's younger sister to the complex, where she would task the girl with small, simple duties, like folding the carton boxes into stacks, or crushing empty drink cans to be resold to the *karung-guni* man who comes by every Monday. Though Devi hates to be seen at the complex with them, sometimes she will tag along, out of boredom, when nobody asks her out. She would stay in the cleaner's room, flipping through the discarded women magazines collected by her mother, tearing out random pages of fashion or recipes or celebrity gossip. When she gets too restless, she stares out of the room at Lathi, standing beside the green rubbish carts, ripping apart the fastened flaps of the boxes and flattening them with her hands. Devi likes to observe Lathi when she is distracted with mindless tasks, when she becomes a different person, who possesses a deep level of concentration.

When Lathi is done with her task, Devi brings her to McDonald's and buys her a vanilla ice-cream cone that she finishes in a few bites, leaving sticky stains on her fingers and shirt, an idiot's grin on her contented face. Devi wipes Lathi's face, a bit too harshly, with the serviettes, and pinches Lathi on her arm so she would stop smiling. Then they walk around the other shops: arcade games, comic books, instant photo booths, a billiards-and-pool and a coffee shop. Lathi loves to linger at the arcade-game shop with the loud dance music pumping from speakers in the machines, and dance to whatever song is playing. She lifts up her hands in the air, and tries to gyrate her eleven-year old body with little spins and jerks, her steps out of sync with the music. Devi stands aside, her face flushed with pride and shame, and wonders when to stop her. Eyes stare and look away, mostly out of amusement and indifference. The shop attendant, a young man called Wee Teck – Devi has seen him there several times before – comes out from behind a counter and presents Lathi with a toy rabbit, taken from one of the grab-a-toy machines lined along the front of the shop. She grabs the rabbit and holds it to her face, her saliva staining the white-fur toy.

“Lathi, it's not your toy, return it,” Devi says. “Don't dirty it.”

“Never mind, it’s for her. She can keep it,” the young man says, smiling at Lathi.

“Really, you shouldn’t. We can’t....” Devi cuts off mid-sentence, aware of how her words sound, shrugs and says thanks.

Then she pulls Lathi’s hand and heads for the entrance. Lathi giggles, thinking Devi is playing a game with her, and starts to tug in the opposite direction, dragging the toy rabbit across the dirty floor. Devi slaps her on the thigh, and when that doesn’t work, yanks Lathi forcibly out of the arcade-game shop.

Devi often wonders what it is like to fall in love, and to fall in love with someone from another race, a Chinese man. She thinks about the complications, the accompanying troubles, and the unknown that follows. It is not simple, that’s her first conclusion, and as she ponders more over the issue, she affirms it is much tougher than she imagines. Love is hard, what more for people of different races; the odds are stacked against you, no doubt. Yet that does not stop her from going up to the shop and spying on Wee Teck whenever she is at the McDonald’s complex. Slowly she begins to form a fantasy around him, of him, of them together, and it occupies most of her daily thoughts, until one day, the predictable happens: she falls in love with him.

Mr Dinesh has a pretty young wife who often loiters around the complex, like an aimless cat, looking bored and defeated. Amutha came to Singapore from a village near Chennai, Mr Dinesh’s hometown, and theirs was an arranged marriage. She has a university degree in Business Management, and tells Devi that even with this degree, it was still very difficult to secure a full time job in Singapore, where almost any job an Indian could get has been outsourced overseas, to Philippines, or India.

Mr Dinesh and Amutha never appear at the same place at the same time, and Devi sometimes wonders whether it is some sort of arrangement they have. It’s strange for a couple not to be together all the time, especially since they have been married less than two years. But Devi never asks Amutha when the latter pops into the utility room to look for Devi for a chat. She’d pull Devi to the nearby coffee shop, order hot milk teas and spend long afternoons talking about her pitiable married life: how the flat they are staying now is only one-third the size of her house back in the village, the South Indian food that is bland and watered down compared to what she has back home, and how the costs of living are so high that she can’t get a decent blouse or buy anything without feeling the pinch, not that Mr Dinesh gives her much in term of household allowance, given how much he earns every month; pitiable is how she puts it. Amutha doesn’t come out explicitly about her marriage with Mr Dinesh, always skirting around the issue, but Devi can feel her disappointment, the disenchantment between hope and reality. She feels sorry for her at times.

“You are still young,” Amutha says, “So much possibility, and so many things to experience in life, so don’t waste it on a man, no matter how good he seems. Live for yourself, that’s what I’m telling you.”

Devi considers Amutha’s words and keeps her thoughts to herself. What are the possibilities for a girl whose mother has been a cleaner her whole life, and an idiot sister for whom she feels responsible? She can try to study as much as she can, but already, she is feeling the redundancy of her education against the reality of life, one filled with duties, monthly bills and hard work. She feels tied down, like a captured prey in a spider’s web.

When Devi looks at her mother, she sees a life wasted, meaningless, holding down a job nobody wants. Her mother lives each day cleaning, eating, sleeping, in a fixed cycle, and never questions any part of her existence, and Devi often feels like grabbing her mother and shaking her hard, telling her to snap out of it, to break the cycle, but somehow she just can’t muster the courage to say all this to her mother, to upset her. It will only make things worse. So Devi keeps to herself, and spends long hours at the complex, helping her mother sweep and mop the corridors on the upper floors, away from the crowds that throng the lower floors. Even as she mops, keeping her head down, there are always people who would step on the area she has just cleaned, ignoring her, and making the floor perpetually dirty. Sensing her growing irritation, her mother would tell her to take a break, take over the mop and do it all over again.

In the polytechnic, Devi does the least that is expected from her, for her course of study in Business Studies and Management. She attends most of the lectures and tutorials, and never hits below the eighty-five percent attendance rate. Sometimes she skips classes and spends whole afternoons in the school library, napping or listening to songs on her MP3. She turns in all of her assignments and, when she misses out on important classes, would photocopy the notes that she borrows from her classmates. She gets Bs and Cs for her tests and examinations, and often comes near to failing Maths, getting borderline Ds. After her first year in the polytechnic, she ruled out the subject, treating it as irrelevant to her life. All a person needs in life is to add, subtract, multiply and divide correctly, and that would be it; all these complex equations and formulae mean nothing, not a single thing, in life – her life – and what would be the point anyway? She has only one more year left in her course, and she wants to cruise through it, without any hassle, knowing that that would be all the education she wants, or needs, dropping any idea of pursuing a university degree. Her mother won’t be able to afford it, the school fees, even if she wants to. Devi will get her polytechnic diploma and then find a job, though she doesn’t know what kind of work she likes, maybe a sales job in retail, but definitely not an office job, desk-bound all day. She doesn’t have to stay long in a job if she doesn’t like it; she

can move around, trying one job after another. She is young, and she can afford to do it, Devi knows that.

Since the polytechnic is near the McDonald's complex, Devi often bumps into her classmates. She would avoid them deliberately, and only if it's unpreventable would she talk to them for a short while before excusing herself, slipping into hiding in the utility room. When she's bored or restless, she goes to the arcade-game shop and plays a game or two on the memory-card machine. Wee Teck is always there, behind the sales counter, and smiles at Devi when she changes for loose coins. They'd chat for a while, about movies and pop songs and fashion, before another customer interrupts, breaking their conversation. Back at the machine, as she plays the game absent-mindedly, Devi would conjure the conversation from her memory and come up with smarter, wittier replies to what Wee Teck had said. She smiles at her own ingenuity, her wit. On two separate occasions, he had even given her small soft toys, an Elmo and a Winnie the Pooh, and told her that she was adorable. Devi placed these toys by her pillow and kissed them on nights when she fantasised about her relationship with Wee Teck.

Then one day, Wee Teck disappeared from the arcade-game shop, and Devi heard from her mother that there had been a raid the day before, and the police had arrested a few guys, including Wee Teck. They had been selling Ecstasy pills and Special K over the counter to the secondary school kids who frequented the shop. It was uncommon to hear of raids at the complex, and while Devi was surprised and upset at the news, she knew there was nothing she could do, that whatever feelings she – one-sided as it was – had, had reached a dead-end. She chided herself for her foolishness, her foolhardy actions, and when she got back home, she threw the toys down the rubbish chute.

The shop was closed for a month, and when it reopened, it was transformed to a body-and-foot spa fronted by loud-mouthed, heavily made-up girls from China who called out for customers with broken English. Devi avoided the place when she helped her mother with the cleaning, though she had seen Mr Dinesh talking to the girls during his rounds at the complex, laughing and flirting openly with them.

Once, Devi tried to bring up this topic with Amutha, but she didn't seem interested to pursue it. She sipped her tea sweetened with condensed milk, looked at the passing crowd, and said, "I don't care what he does, just as long as he keeps it to him. I really don't care. I'm just waiting for the right time." Devi wanted to ask what she's waiting for, or what the right time was, but Amutha said nothing further. She moved her fingers across the red *bindi* on her forehead, as if she were scratching an itch, and sighed loudly.

As much as Devi avoided Mr Dinesh, there was no way of staying clear of him, with his appearances at the utility room, chatting with her mother, buying

her lunches of *tandoori* chicken or *roti prata*. Devi kept to her chores and never looked at him, though he spoke to her directly, asking her to join them. When Devi didn't reciprocate, Mr Dinesh turned his attention to Lathi, cajoling her with the rice that she ate from his clasped fingers, licking the taste off them. Devi found it nauseating, and when she looked at her mother, the latter returned a blank look, pretending that she hadn't noticed anything inappropriate. When she had the chance to be alone with Lathi later, she slapped and pinched Lathi hard on her thighs and face, warning her not to do this kind of thing, to eat from a stranger's hand, that it was disgusting, disgraceful. Lathi cried bitterly, rubbing the tears off her eyes, and nodded at intervals, uncomprehendingly.

It was the owner of the bubble-tea shop who told Devi and her mother what he had seen in the stairwell at the back of the complex one night when he was bringing down a bag of rubbish to the collection area. He saw Mr Dinesh with Lathi, hiding in the shadows, doing something, Lathi's shorts at her ankle. What that something was he didn't specify, though guessing at his indignant tone, Devi could only assume the worst. Devi wanted to confront Mr Dinesh immediately, but her mother held her back, telling her not to create a scene, not to jump into quick conclusion. Devi glared at her mother, and then at her idiot-sister outside the utility room, breaking apart the carton boxes and piling them into a heap, lost in her mindless task, and felt an injustice eating its way through her, leaving her breathless with helplessness. She shook off her mother, and called the police anyway. They came, looked around, asked some questions, and brought everyone involved back to the station.

Devi answered everything that was posed to her, some factual, some slightly embellished, influenced by her own opinions of Mr Dinesh. Amutha was also called to the station, and when she saw Devi, she didn't acknowledge her. She was led to a room, and when she came out later, her ashen face was expressionless, lost. That was the last time Devi saw Amutha; she disappeared after the whole incident was resolved. The police kept Mr Dinesh for a day while Lathi underwent a physical check-up at the hospital. They found nothing on her, and he was released, the charges dismissed. He was subsequently fired from his job, and spent whole days at the coffee shop, smoking and mumbling to himself.

Shortly after what happened, Devi's mother decided to bring Lathi to the Sri Mariamman Temple in Chinatown for puja and cleansing. She asked Devi along and told her to buy some fruits, jasmines and incense. Before they left for the temple, Devi showered Lathi under a running hose, and noticed that her sister's body was beginning to show signs of puberty, with the budding breasts and tiny hair growth on her pubis. She wondered whether Lathi was aware of the changes to her body, or the future needs the body would demand from her.

Devi bit her lips as she soaped Lathi into a lathe and washed it off with a bruising jet of water, attempting to clean her sister up as thoroughly as possible.

They put the incident behind them after the temple visit, and carried on as if it had never occurred. A new cleaning supervisor was hired, a pint-sized, middle-aged Chinese man who rarely spoke to them, except to issue instructions to clean up this, to mop that. He was a severe, no-nonsense man. He took away the access to the utility room, and told Devi's mother to throw away the huge mess of trash in the room, that it was a potential fire hazard just waiting to happen. When he saw Devi and Lathi, he would throw darting glances, with a forbidding look on his face, but he didn't mind their presence since three pairs of hands for one person's salary was just too good not to take advantage of.

Late at night, after they have finished their chores at the complex, Devi sits on the concrete ledge beside the rubbish collection area with her mother and they people-watch, passing a bag of prawn crackers between them. From where she sits, Devi can see the grey in her mother's hair, and the sight of it causes her to go quiet and pensive. She wants to tell her mother everything, about her silly crush on a Chinese boy who was caught pedalling drugs, or about Amutha's unhappy marriage with Mr Dinesh. She feels an urgent need to know her mother's thoughts about these things, whether she knows anything about them.

Looking at her mother, Devi imagines the kind of life that her mother had wanted, at her age, as a young Indian girl. She wonders about the choices she had made, the decisions, the beliefs she held that had led her to this point, to be a cleaner for most of her life, and a mother of two daughters. Devi knows enough to be aware that she isn't going to be like her mother, yet she can sense her immobility, her unwillingness, to move beyond her lot in life, that she will always be the cleaner's daughter.

But this is okay now, in her heart, where for once, in this moment, her fears and doubts are briefly silenced, to know what matters to her: her mother's rough, tender hands, the small flat where they live that is her whole world, and Lathi's laughter that chime in her ears with simple, unadulterated glee. This is her life in a hard kernel, and it is a full, real and complete life.

Lathi joins them at the ledge and digs her hands into the bag of prawn crackers, chewing loudly. A dance song drifts out from the open doors of a CD-DVD shop, heavy with trembling bass. Lathi smiles and stands up, standing before Devi and her mother. She begins to sway in awkward angles, her whole body committed to the dance. She moves towards Devi and pulls her up. "Dance, dance, dance," she says, and laughs. Devi holds her sister's hands and starts to move to the music, closing her eyes to the night, to the dark sea of thoughts. She doesn't realise how much she had always wanted to dance until she is swept up in it, body and soul.