

Slashings

It was my uncle who first made the discovery. As his father's only son, the less-than-pleasant task of ceremonially bathing his corpse had fallen to him. He had wanted to outsource this particular labour of love to the casket company, but my grandmother insisted he do it. When he turned his father over to wash his back, he yelled, dropped my grandfather's lifeless body on the bathroom floor and ran from the room.

I was ordered to retrieve him and so was in a position to confirm it: Thaathaa had a tell-tale tattoo on his left buttock, identifying him as a key leader of a group I had only heard about in whispers at school until now: 'BP Pettai', or BPP.

Funnily enough, this was the same group that was said to be behind the parang slashings in Bukit Panjang Park the week before. I mentioned this to my grandmother and received a stinging slap across the face. 'Don't be an idiot,' she told me. 'Only Chinese people have gangs.'

She assumed no more would be said on the subject to lend the notion any credence, so when my mother and uncle sat themselves at the table to discuss what, if anything, should be done about this surprising revelation, my grandmother entered a state of denial that would have been acceptable had it not also been belligerent. From her wheelchair, she rapped each of her children across the legs under the table for daring to suggest such an alternate reality, and would have started on me too, if I hadn't cottoned on and addressed her only from afar. She bellowed that her good husband would be turning over in his grave—had he already been in it—if he could hear what his ungrateful children were now saying about him. Her husband, an honest man who worked hard to provide for their family! She insisted that everyone had misinterpreted what they had seen, that it was not a tattoo but a birth mark, or a liver spot, contoured by the deep wrinkles of nine decades on this earth. What did they know of old age and how a buttock might look after ninety years, she demanded angrily of her children. She asked to be shown the mark, to disprove this theory once and for all, but then started screaming when my uncle approached the corpse to lift his veshti, saying there was no end to the disgrace her evil children would put their dead father

through. She might have continued down this path indefinitely for all I know, if the gangsters hadn't started arriving.

The first of them were on our doorstep within the hour. My uncle and I had already sent the casket company workers away, saying we wanted more time to prepare and dress the body ourselves, and that we would call them closer to the start of the wake. I searched the two young workers' faces for signs that they had spotted the tattoo during the embalming, but they looked nothing but sympathetic. We were all taking turns to shower post-corpse-contact, per my grandmother's instructions, when we heard the doorbell. My mother ran to let in the two elderly Indian men, elegantly clad in black Nehru-collared suits with chunky rings on nearly every finger, assuming them to be old friends of her parents.

'I'm so sorry, but the wake isn't for another few hours and the casket isn't ready yet,' she explained, offering them a seat in our dining room.

'Please don't apologise,' one of them said. 'We know we are early.'

My mother excused herself and left the room to fetch my grandmother, but by the time she had wheeled her back, the guests were gone, the only indication that they had ever been there a fat envelope of money resting on top of the dining room table, marked in thick black ink with a symbol we had already seen once that morning.

It was not clear which of them started screaming first, but they both blamed the other for causing my uncle and me to come running. My uncle, who had run out of the shower in a towel with shampoo still in his hair, stared briefly at the envelope before turning to head back to the bathroom, calling over his shoulder to ask his mother if she was convinced yet.

My grandmother, to her credit, managed to calm herself down enough after the initial bout of screaming to wheel herself over to the table—a feat we were discovering for the first time she was capable of—where she reached for the envelope to examine it more closely. 'Don't leave fingerprints,' said my mother in a screech-whisper, but my grandmother ignored her. She counted all the money, and I waited nearby, hoping she would announce the final tally once she was done, but she slipped the money back into the envelope and held it in her lap, wordlessly. She sat in silence until my mother had visibly calmed down too, and then announced that it did not make any

sense. ‘How could I not know,’ she said, with the intonation of a statement rather than a question, but I guessed that it was a mix of both.

‘That Thaathaa was a gangster or that there were gangs at all?’ I asked, helpfully trying to clear up the matter, but my mother shut me up with a whack to the side of the head.

‘He hid it from us, Ma, he hid it from us all,’ my mother started, but my grandmother interrupted: ‘He was not that good of a liar. My husband was not like your husband.’

‘What?’ my mother asked faintly, and I was slightly impressed that even in a moment of betrayal and anguish my grandmother had still found enough malice in her heart to make a jibe about my long-gone father.

My grandmother looked over at me, and then trained her eyes into the distance. ‘I always knew when he had been with someone else. He would come up with many reasons to explain his lateness, and I would pretend to believe them, but I could always sense a woman’s scent on him. I could always tell where he had actually been,’ she said.

It occurred to both my mother and me that either my grandfather had been the best of liars, inventing one lie to cover another, or that my grandmother had built up an impressive layer of self-delusion. We shared a knowing look but were saved from having to respond by the arrival of more mourners, this time a group of five or six youngish men with rattails and thick gold chains around their necks, who had evidently taken some pains to dress in long sleeves and button their collars to hide their heavily tattooed bodies. But there was nothing they could do about the ink on their faces: short, identical lines of dots on their foreheads, that apparently even my grandmother could recognise well enough. She sat up straight at the sight of them, and moved as though to get up, before giving up and beginning to cry.

I’d expected her to start yelling again, so the sudden appearance of tears alarmed me. I hurried over to her and wheeled her out of the room, making sure to bow my head in an overt gesture of respect to the trained killers who were now traipsing into my family’s flat. My mother shot me a look of mixed annoyance and terror at my leaving her alone with them, but she quickly made herself deferential and left also, purportedly to get them cold drinks.

My grandmother was still crying noisily when I wheeled her into her bedroom and shut the door behind us. ‘It’s ok, Paati,’ I tried, in my best soothing, level voice, even though this was the most exciting thing to ever happen to our family. ‘You really didn’t know. You didn’t even know there were Indian gangs in Singapore.’ I’d thought this would be a comforting thing to say, but as soon as I said it and her head whipped up, I knew I had belittled her further.

She stopped crying momentarily to hiccup a few times in quick succession, evidently the effort of trying to get too much speech out in too short a time. ‘Now I feel even more stupid,’ she said, lifting up her shawl to dry her eyes. ‘All this time I was married to the biggest Indian gangster of them all.’

‘Well, we don’t know that he was the biggest,’ I said, feeling the situation was getting a little bit away from us, while still enjoying a slight thrill that I might be the grandson of the feared patriarch of an Indian secret society. Maybe I had even been walking in Bukit Panjang Park one day and some gang members had considered slashing me with a parang, but the older members—those in the know—had restrained them. *That’s Ramachandran’s grandson*, they might have whispered urgently, *don’t even think about touching him*.

I wisely elected not to share this particular fantasy with my grandmother, whose sobs were now fading. She was staring into the distance, her eyes a mixture of despair and resignation. This was the longest conversation I had had with her in as long as I could remember—she spoke only in Tamil, and typically didn’t like it when I responded in English, but today she seemed not to mind. I wasn’t sure what to do to prolong our conversation, so I ventured a suggestion that we might want to go out again, to relieve my mother of the sole responsibility of entertaining our guests.

She looked hesitant. ‘Did you see the tattoos on their foreheads? I thought only Chinese people had them,’ she said. I was already an expert on the subject due to some serious Wikipedia reading the night before, but I was surprised that she knew what the dotted-line tattoos, usually used to mark the fighters, were.

‘I think they started with Hokkien gangs. They call it *tiam*,’ I said, but she had already lost interest.

‘It means they kill people,’ she intoned. ‘I won’t go out.’

I debated bringing up our enhanced protected status as the relatives of an influential member of this gang, and the fact that the men in our living room were likely to be the minions on the front line while my grandfather seemed to have been a behind-the-scenes, head-honcho-type figure. I wasn't sure if she would appreciate this reassurance, so I settled for patting her hand in what I thought was a comforting manner, and told her I would go check on how my mother was doing.

I'd taken three steps towards the dining room when I heard my mother usher the last of them out in the fakest cheery voice I'd ever heard. She shut and double-bolted the door, even though we hardly ever had it locked. She saw me and motioned to the table, upon which was now a new thick envelope, again with the same marking. 'Wow,' I said, for lack of anything better, and she shuddered and grabbed some tissue, which she used to wrap the envelope before gingerly carrying it to my grandmother. 'Fingerprints,' she said again by way of explanation, and I nodded.

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By the time the casket company arrived again to set the coffin up for the wake, two more groups of men bearing similar envelopes had come and gone, and my grandmother had thumbed through all of the money, despite my mother's faint protests. She sorted through the money on her bed facing the wall, with her back to us all, so I had no chance of spotting the denominations of the bills or guessing at the total tally. Just as my uncle arrived, my curiosity won out over the deeply ingrained sense that talking about money was vulgar, and I asked. She shrugged without even glancing at me. 'I didn't count. I was just looking at the money to make sure there were no markings on any of the bills.'

My uncle heard this as he was walking past and made an exasperated noise in his throat. 'Count the money, Dev,' he growled at me, and I groaned and dragged my feet towards my grandmother's bed as though it wasn't the best order I'd ever received in my life. My grandmother was also surprisingly willing to part with the money, and just stared at me as I moved the wads of cash out of her reach so I could count it.

My first shock was seeing that a \$1,000 note of Singapore currency existed, and my second was seeing a \$10,000 one. I was now primed for a \$100,000 bill and was looking impatiently for it, so comparatively, the third shock seemed tame: our total takings so far at Thaathaa's wake were \$42,004, and the wake hadn't even actually started.

My grandmother barely batted an eyelid when I went to inform her of this, so I sought the reaction I desired from my mother, and got it. She shrieked and seemed to be deciding whether the moment called for tears or not, before my uncle said sharply that nothing could be done about it at the moment, and that we should all focus on receiving visitors at the wake now, and reconvene to discuss the situation later.

The wake itself was fairly uneventful. My mother and grandmother put on old, slightly faded saris so they would look sufficiently bereaved. Apparently only the women needed to dress the part, because my uncle wore a regular office shirt, now stained with nervous sweat. My clothing choice of a STAY HUNGRY STAY FOOLISH: R.I.P. STEVE JOBS T-shirt went entirely unremarked upon.

Far fewer people turned up to the wake than I had expected, and I was slightly miffed, although I couldn't quite name specific people who I felt should have cared enough to come. A few relatives were there, scattered among the many Chinese neighbours we barely knew who were putting in their polite fifteen minutes, and some others called to promise they would be at the funeral tomorrow. We didn't have all that many relatives in Singapore, as many of my grandparents' siblings had died off and their children were mainly in Malaysia. Many who did live here were only barely mobile, and seeing them out and about at the wake might have been more of a shock than even the fact of my grandfather's heart attack. Still, I would have thought that a death in the family would have made people overcome limitations of mobility or distance and come to comfort my grandmother and her children. I said as much to my uncle, whom I had sort of allied myself with for this occasion, what with our shared history of washing my naked grandfather and all, but he pressed his lips together and said nothing.

When the last visitor left, my grandmother announced that we all had to shower.

'We are all dirty,' she intoned. 'From keeping this money the whole day.'

My mother sighed and rubbed her temples, as though she had been hoping for a slight break between the wake and the blood money discussion, and my uncle said nothing. I would have actually liked to take my grandmother up on her suggestion, having shaken hands with and been hugged by far too many people whose personal hygiene seemed questionable throughout the day, but the three of them now seemed to be circling each other in the living room, as though sizing one another up and assembling for the decisive moment.

My mother and uncle took seats on separate chairs, and my grandmother wheeled her chair around to face them. 'We will call the police,' she said simply, the matter decided.

'No,' shot back both siblings. They started talking at once, and for some reason the conversation shifted entirely into Tamil.

'This money was a gift to us.'

'We can't tell the police about who Appa was.'

'We're not even sure what we think we know is definitely true.'

'We may get implicated in all this.'

'People give us gifts and we get them in trouble?'

'It will tarnish his reputation forever; what will all your friends and relatives say?'

In addition to not being able to tell who was saying what, I also was not entirely sure what exactly was being said and was straining to catch every word, but my grandmother put an end to it by brandishing her stick and bellowing over them: 'Just think about how the money was made, it was bought with the lives of people!'

My uncle winced and motioned for her to lower her voice, an unnecessary precaution since none of our neighbours would have understood anyway. My mother was undeterred. 'We don't know how that money was made,' she said. 'We don't know what they do.'

I couldn't be sure if this point was in support of her brother or her mother, but this was one question I did have the answer to. I started reciting the litany of BPP's activities I had found on its Wikipedia page: 'Loan shark running, drug running, territory-marking activities, intimidation activities, and occasional weapon-assisted violence,' I said, proud of myself for being able to

contribute, before the horrified look in my mother's eyes told me that they had all forgotten I was there.

'Even the boy knows,' screeched my grandmother. 'Is this the kind of example you want to set for your son?'

'Oh, I don't mind,' I started saying, and then decided I should just back out of it. My uncle took control. 'Okay, sure, let's give back all the money to the police,' he said. 'A funeral is a lot of money, but usually a family has some help to pay for a funeral, some monetary gifts their friends and family are thoughtful enough to give. Did many of your relatives come today, Ma? To show their support? To offer their help?'

I hadn't been sure whether only I had noticed, but the way the room fell silent proved otherwise. To my surprise, this stopped my grandmother's rampage in its tracks, and she now bit her lip as tears filled her eyes.

'Oh Ma, I'm sorry,' my uncle started and moved as though to comfort her, but she waved him away.

Everyone waited for her to dry her eyes and speak again, and in the interim I may have fallen asleep. I woke to hearing my grandmother utter the only curse word in Tamil I knew, and that I had never in my life heard pass her lips.

We all sat straight up and the silence in the room was suddenly more charged, as my uncle and mother exchanged looks that seemed to be deciding who would speak next.

If my grandmother was embarrassed by her sudden loss of control she didn't show it, and sat back in her chair and crossed her arms, as if daring someone to speak, to refute the sentiment that she had just expressed about their family.

My mother unfortunately took the bait. 'They might have been busy,' she said tiredly, and her droopy eyelids told everyone in the room that she didn't completely realise what she was saying, but that didn't stop my grandmother from starting her second outburst in less than five minutes.

'Busy?' she screamed. 'Busy with what, sitting on their arses the whole day because they are too fat to stand up? Those dogs, those pieces of shit couldn't come for my husband's wake?'

Their own relative—when I die are they going to do this too? Make a phone call and pretend to say nice things while being too *busy* to leave their stupid house to come for a wake? I hope one of them dies next, I hope they all die one after another very quickly so I can sit here and watch and not go to a single one of their wakes—’

‘Okay Ma, I was just trying to give them the benefit of the doubt,’ my mother started, trying to talk over my grandmother, but then just giving up. She stood up and looked around at all of us.

‘I’m going to bed,’ she said. ‘You all do what you want with the money.’

‘I think we all need to go to bed,’ said my uncle as my mother left the room. ‘We’re all tired, we’re still upset about Pa, and we’re disappointed in our family. This isn’t the time to decide about the money.’

I tended to agree, although it felt like a cop-out and I expected my grandmother to have it in her for one final outburst tonight, but she just sat there and said nothing.

As I turned off the lights in the living room and started wheeling her out, she suddenly said: ‘I wonder why they—those gangsters—came before the wake started. We put the time in the obituary, you know.’

I’d thought this was obvious. ‘I mean, they’re gangsters, right? Someone might have called the police,’ I said. I didn’t add: *You* might have called the police.

I helped her wash her face and get ready for bed, a task my mother normally did but seemed to have abandoned for tonight. ‘That’s a pity,’ she said quietly as I helped her into bed, and I wasn’t sure I’d heard her right, but was too tired to inquire further.

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The next day, the household was awoken for the second consecutive day by a scream. By the time I had stumbled to the dining room, my uncle, who had spent the night on our couch, was already there, standing over the open *Tamil Murasu* that was apparently the source of my mother’s consternation.

The newspaper was open to the Obituaries section, where we had just the day before placed a small 6cm-by-8cm black-and-white notice about my grandfather's wake and funeral. Today, however, his larger-than-life countenance stared back at us from a full-page colour ad.

The picture used was one we had never seen before: in it, my grandfather was not smiling as I always remembered him, but his mouth was set in a straight line and hidden beneath his thick moustache. His eyes were piercing, his hair neatly combed back, and a thick gold chain peeked out from beneath the stiff-looking shirt collar of a sombre black suit he was wearing, as if donned to mourn himself.

The words were simple: 'Always in our hearts. We continue what he started.'

I looked nervously at my mother, who now seemed to have moved from shock to an almost wry disbelief. 'And if that were not enough to tell the whole world exactly who he was,' she said, and flipped the page, 'this should remove any lingering doubt.'

On the next two pages were six more of the same image of my grandfather, in varying sizes, a mixture of colour photos and black-and-white, each with its own inscription. The inscriptions themselves were tame—most were variations of 'R.I.P.' or 'Always in our hearts', again—but they were followed by different strings of initials, and then: BPP.

'Ah,' said my uncle, and that was really all that could be said.

My grandmother was wheeling herself slowly into the living room, and now my uncle tried to block the newspaper from her view, but my mother just grabbed the newspaper and handed it to my grandmother. 'What's the point in hiding it?' she asked her brother. 'Like I said, the whole world knows.'

My grandmother stared at the full-page picture of her late husband with her lips slightly parted, as though she could not quite recognise his face when blown up to such proportions. She flipped between that and the pages with the smaller pictures slowly, repeatedly.

In the silence, my uncle said: 'I can't believe the *Tamil Murasu* let them just take out obituaries. Isn't it against the law?'

I asked hopefully: 'Maybe this means that BPP isn't a universally recognised acronym?'

My mother shut us up: ‘You think that stupid newspaper is going to turn away anyone’s money?’

I kept my eyes on my grandmother, who still hadn’t spoken yet that morning after her loquacity the night before, and soon we were all staring at her in silence, the only sound in the room the slow flipping of newspaper.

Finally she looked up, and I swear she had tears in her eyes. ‘They really loved him,’ she said.

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The funeral was at Mandai Crematorium and a priest—part of the package we had paid for at the casket company—showed up at our flat at nine a.m. sharp to chant some mantras and then accompany us there. My uncle had asked to do the funeral the day before, right after the wake, but the priest had refused, saying he would not conduct a funeral on a Sunday. My mother and uncle were not in a position to object, being completely unversed in the best practices for sending a loved one to the afterlife, and we spent one last night in our flat with my grandfather.

The priest, a skinny prune of a man, arrived dressed to impress: a traditional veshti around his waist, a string taut and diagonal across his bare chest, and every manner of ash and pigment smeared across his forehead. My grandmother seemed mollified by how very holy he appeared, and squeezed his hand and beamed up at him when he approached to give her his condolences.

The funeral itself was short: sandalwood paste applied to our foreheads, prayers sung by the priest, last rites that my uncle had to carry out that he didn’t know about, and an uncomfortably empty hall.

While she had stressed to me on the car ride over to the crematorium how important it was in Hindu funerals for the family not to be seen welcoming the other mourners but to instead be lost in their own grief, my grandmother turned around in her seat every thirty seconds during the funeral to see if anyone had arrived to pay their final respects. When it became clear that the priest

had finished and was eyeing us for clues as to what to do next, my grandmother closed her eyes and let out a long, sad sigh.

‘I’m so sorry, Ma,’ said my uncle, putting an arm around her.

‘It might have been the *Tamil Murasu*,’ mused my mother. ‘They must have seen the obituaries and decided to stay away.’

‘It wasn’t the obituaries,’ said my grandmother. ‘Please, let’s finish so I can go home.’

My mother and uncle walked on ahead with the priest, as workers from the crematorium came in to take the coffin on its final journey. I wheeled my grandmother to the casket so she could say her final goodbye to her husband. She put her fingers against the glass covering his face. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said softly. And then, to me: ‘Let’s go.’

I pushed her wheelchair into the connecting room, following the clearly demarcated route to the viewing chamber. I already had a queasy feeling in my stomach. It was my first time at Mandai and this final part, where the family is expected to watch as their loved one’s coffin goes through the flames, struck me as the most perverse of all. I deliberated wheeling my grandmother into the chamber, and then excusing myself, but I stopped short when I got to the small, dark room and found it full.

My mother and uncle were standing in the middle of the chamber, looking simultaneously bewildered and terrified, while at least thirty members of BPP, dressed in almost identical black shirts and white veshtis, milled around them. Some were in wheelchairs and some had the dotted forehead tattoos that had so frightened my grandmother at first, but they all turned reverentially towards her now as we entered the room. All at once, they raised their hands, palms pressed together at their chests as if to say *vanakkam*. I spotted two familiar, impassive faces: the casket company workers. I felt a sudden rush of gratitude.

I pushed my grandmother’s wheelchair into the centre of the room, and she motioned to me that she would like to stand. I helped her up, grabbing one of her arms while my uncle quickly grabbed the other. She walked slowly towards the black-clad man closest to her, one of the younger ones with forehead ink, clasped his hand and shook it. She turned slowly and did the same with the man next to him.

The BPP members slowly formed a semicircle around us as they realised what was happening. It took almost twenty minutes but my grandmother managed to shake hands with them all.

The crematorium attendant had been watching respectfully, and as she shook hands with the last of the members who had come, my grandmother nodded to him that she was ready.

She shuffled back into the centre of the semicircle and let go of my hand and my uncle's, taking hold of the hands of two BPP members instead. I followed her lead and so did the rest of my family, and then we all stood hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder, the people who knew my grandfather best in this world, as we watched his body burn.