

THE SOUND OF A FALLING MANGO

A Memoir of

Anthony 'Kunjunni' Anthony

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*For my grandchildren,
so that you always know where you come from —
and so that you, too, keep running toward the sound of
a falling mango.*

CHAPTER ONE

Long before Anthony 'Kunjunni' was born, his grandfather built a house in the forests of Kottayam. It was a vast wooden structure with seven or eight rooms, constructed by hand from timber cut nearby, holding in the cool air the way only wood can. The house survived for nearly a century; Anthony watched it finally come down when age and monsoon rains made preservation impossible. Today only fragments remain. But like many old houses, it left behind something more durable than wood: stories.

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The man who built the house, Thomman Mathai, stood six feet four inches tall, and was the first settler in a place that was more wilderness than village. Tigers roamed freely, coming down from a cave about a kilometre away each evening in search of buffalos as the light failed. Anthony's grandfather built his first dwelling high off the ground for safety from tigers and elephants and hunted wild animals with a locally-made gun, the barrel of that gun remaining in the family for years after.

In the early 1900s, much of central Kerala was still frontier country: Families cleared forest by hand, planted rubber, spices, coconut and paddy, and built homes from the timber around them. Roads were scarce and many journeys required hours of walking.

By the time Anthony arrived, the tigers were long gone and the wildness had been domesticated. Rubber, introduced during the colonial era, gradually replaced coconut trees across

many parts of Kerala, including Kottayam. But the rich, fertile earth itself remembered what it had been — trees on the family's ancestral land still grow to diameters of 250 inches.

In 1946, India was still under British rule but the old order had cracked. Roads were slowly pushing deeper into rural districts. Literacy was spreading. The social reforms that would later make Kerala famous were gathering momentum.

Anthony was born in February 1946 in the village of Pala, the second son in a family that would eventually number eleven children, with four brothers and six sisters. In the Syrian Christian community that he belongs to, the first son is named for the grandfather, the second for the father. Anthony's father's name was Anthony. And so he became Anthony Anthony, more fondly known as 'Kunjunni' (which means 'small') at home.



The family, gathered together in Kottayam.

“I insisted on going to school when I was only four years old because I saw my elder brother going and I wanted to go with him. To appease me, my grandfather took me to the headmaster and enrolled me, fabricating my birth date as December 30, 1944, to meet the mandatory five-year age limit. I only attended for two or three days before deciding I didn't

like it and quit, but when I returned for real a year later, the false date stuck.

“We had no electricity, no television, no telephone. I had never seen a screwdriver as a child because there was simply nothing that required one. We did our homework under kerosene lamps whose light was warm and insufficient and smelled faintly of the earth. When we walked at night, we walked by moonlight, and when there was no moon, we walked in absolute darkness — no torch, no hesitation. We did not know what fear of the dark was supposed to feel like, and so we did not feel it.

“Mornings began at six. The school was three or four hundred meters away — five minutes on foot — and stood beside the church, which had a large enough ground for games. I would go to school early, chat with the other children, attend classes, and even walk home for lunch. When school ended at four o'clock, the games started — police and thief, marbles. We ate dinner by eight and usually fell into a deep sleep by nine at night because our days were full of activity.

“Every day I would help my mother by fetching water or dry wood to burn for cooking. Ammachi had so much to do raising 11 children and, sometimes, taking care of grandchildren but she never seemed to get tired. Her own father had been a master of Kalaripayattu, the ancient Kerala martial art, a man said to be capable of subduing ten or twelve attackers at once, who, unfortunately, died of smallpox when he was only thirty-two.”

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The six-acre property that Anthony lived on has now been parcelled into sections for family members but growing up, he and his siblings had the run of it. Anthony and his brother would take sticks and go looking for snakes, chase them through the undergrowth, sometimes kill them, sometimes watch them disappear into a hole in the earth. This was what they did when school was out and the afternoons stretched long and green around them.

Near the house stood a mango tree of extraordinary height — a hundred feet, Anthony estimates — and when a ripe mango fell, the sound of it carried across the entire property. He and his brother, Thomas Antony, would race to reach it first. Anthony was faster, being thin then as he is thin now, while his brother carried a little more weight.

"That's mine!" Thomas would shout the moment they heard a mango hit the ground.

"You haven't even seen where it fell," Anthony would yell back, already running.

The race would sometimes take Anthony beneath the coconut palms, and beneath the fallen fronds, in the cool and the dark, snakes slept. Twice, sprinting for a mango, he stepped on one. Each time, the snake moved suddenly and sharply, knocking him off balance, and he fell. But he simply got up and went for the mango.

He was also, in those years, an accomplished climber. He would scale nearly any tree on the property and sit in the canopy, eating small wild jackfruit — anikyachakka — and looking out over the green. He also, in those high branches, learned to find birds' nests, and would carefully take one or two chicks, build a small cage, catch grasshoppers to feed them, and keep them for a few months until they were tame enough to sit on his finger. Then he would open the cage and let them go.

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Anthony, young and athletic, near the family property.

“I have always loved being near water. Whether it is a river, the sea or the stream near my house.

When we were kids, my elder brother Thomas and I made a dam across the stream. We built two wooden walls, packed coconut palm leaves into the gaps, and laid teak leaves across the top. The water rose five or six feet behind our construction, and that pool became the centre of summer life for every child in the neighbourhood. We spent two or three hours there every afternoon, jumping in, swimming, climbing out and jumping in

again. In the evenings, the women from the village came to bathe.

We fished there too. We cut earthworms into pieces and threaded them onto hooks. They brought up catfish, baton, and other fish, so many of them. Even now I remember the happiness of catching them.

Decades later, when my own children and grandchildren came to Kerala for their summer holidays, I decided to rebuild the dam. We used rocks this time. The whole family, down to the smallest grandchild, spent four or five hours clearing stones and piling them into place. That evening we swam together, just as we had done when I was a boy.

During the night, heavy rain fell.

The next morning, the dam was gone.

Everyone was so disappointed. I stood looking at the broken stream for a while. Then I went to the local authorities to ask about building a proper check dam. They told me I would need permission from the water authority, from the panchayat, from Trivandrum. I knew that route would lead nowhere productive.

So I found a contractor who had once supplied stone for my house. He found a mason with a workable idea: a two-foot stone wall, faced with four inches of reinforced concrete, with a window one-and-a-half feet high fitted with planks that could be raised or lowered to control the water level. I had it built.

The water came up to a good swimming depth once again, and my children and grandchildren get to enjoy it. It's too cold for me these days but, sometimes, when everyone is in the water, I also join them."



Three generations, together on the family veranda.

Anthony was born into a Kerala still living in the long shadow of scarcity due to the Second World War. When he was older, during the years of John F. Kennedy's Presidency, food aid in the form of powdered milk and wheat flour was arriving through the local church from the U.S.A.

Yet Anthony's family was more fortunate than many. His father cultivated a paddy field, and rice was never absent from the table. His mother kept chickens, which meant eggs most days and, when guests arrived, a chicken meal that transformed an ordinary day into a celebration. Every Sunday, his father returned from the butcher with 2kg of beef or pork, and the week's meals revolved around this modest luxury.

The rest came from the land itself. There was tapioca, which Anthony still loves; jackfruit in season; sweet potatoes; and a variety of root vegetables — Chena, Chhenpur and Kachil in Malayalam. There were no potatoes, tomatoes or onions in the household then. Instead there was Irumban puli, a tart local fruit used for sourness, and dried fish, which was plentiful and paired naturally with rice in a combination generations of Malayalis considered complete nourishment.

Anthony's favourite meal, then and now, was uncomplicated: tapioca with fish or meat. Any fish. Any meat.

There is an old Malayali saying: Kappa undenkil vishappilla — “If there is tapioca, there is no hunger.” For rural families across Kerala, it was less a proverb than a statement of fact. Tapioca was dependable. It arrived year after year regardless of drought, market prices or uncertainty.

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“At age 15, during the summer between Classes 9 and 10, I climbed a coconut tree my grandfather had planted — seventy, perhaps eighty feet tall. Somewhere near the top, my hands lost their hold and I fell.

As I came down, spinning, the banana plants flashed past in sequence like pages turning. Below them, I saw my younger brother, picking up coconuts from the ground, his back to me.

I did not scream. There was no time. I saw the ground approaching.

Coincidentally, I had loosened that patch of soil the day before, preparing it for tapioca planting. I landed on my elbows and knees in soft, freshly turned earth. The impact drove all air from my body. I lay there unable to move, looking up above.

I called out to my brother, my voice coming out level.

"Go and tell them at home that I fell."

My brother turned and stared.

And then he ran as fast as he could. My elder brother came out, carried me home on his back, and they took me six kilometers to the nearest hospital with an X-ray machine. It

turned out to be a small fracture. A week's recovery. I still can't believe it.

In 1967, India was only twenty years into independence and still finding its footing as a nation. Kerala had made history by electing the world's first communist government through democratic elections. Literacy, land reform and social change were reshaping rural life.

Anthony left for New Delhi that year as a twenty-one-year-old radiography student. The youngest of his ten siblings was still only a few months old. What began as a journey for education became a 42-year career in hospital radiography. He spent much of his working life in Delhi and ten years in Libya, living alone for part of that time while his wife and children returned to Delhi for the children's education.



Anthony at work, early in his 42-year career in radiography.

His wife grew up just seven kilometres from his ancestral home. He jokes that she returns to Kerala and gains three or four kilos in a week, proof that the body remembers what it loved.

Anthony was born into a world of kerosene lamps, no electricity, no television and no telephone. Today, he lives with

solar panels, mobile phones and technologies he follows with the curiosity of someone who has witnessed extraordinary change. Having seen the world transform, he remains optimistic. He believes people will continue to progress, and his advice is simple: help others whenever you can, and never cause harm.

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never cause harm.***

The stream still runs through the land in Kottayam. The water rises after the rains. The trees continue to grow. And somewhere in that landscape, there is a man who still seems to be running toward the sound of a falling mango.