

REVIEW BY SARAH LYALL

"I have wanted, many times in the last 18 years, to reach out to you," reads the letter sent to Paloma Evans's adoptive parents from the Sri Lankan orphanage that was once her home. "To let you know of the terrible truth surrounding the adoption of Paloma."

We long to find out what this horrible secret is, of course, but in the fiendish, full-of-twists *MY SWEET GIRL* (Berkley, 372 pp., \$26), the Sri Lankan author Amanda Jayatissa keeps us guessing and worrying until the very end. Whatever it is, it is tormenting Paloma. Brought to San Francisco as a young girl by loving parents who have given her a "perfectly wonderful life that never felt like it was mine to begin with," she says, she is now a 30-year-old mess.

As Paloma confronts a series of bewildering crises in the present that make her question if she's just being paranoid or if people are genuinely out to get her, we're brought back, in alternate chapters, to her life in the orphanage. Who wouldn't want to escape from Little Miracles Girls' Home? Among other things, one of the residents is covered in burns and prone to hovering menacingly over other girls' beds at night and saying things like, "When you die, can I have your skin?"

Foulmouthed and self-destructive, a heavy drinker who's not above framing other people for her own advantage, Paloma does her best to push the reader away, as she has always pushed her parents away. (They love her just the same. They're away on vacation, but in their postcards they call her "my sweet girl.") As her past collides with her present, you begin to understand something of the confluence of forces that brought her here. Culpability is a relative thing. There's more than one villain in this story.

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In her latest column, Sarah Lyall weighs in on Vera Kurian's twisted tale, "Never Saw Me Coming," and two other new thrillers.