

Dancing to the gongs of the South China Sea

A short story by Jasmine H. Low



The Flight Stewardess

Aishah's charcoal pride is rhythmic in its cadence, flying in between ghosts of humid tropical wind of the East Coast and her scarf, grazing her cheeks ever so gently. Her flying days over, she floors the pedal, peaking at almost 165 kmh and chases the setting sun, an impossible speed to travel at even if she were still alive. It's a race against nature and this was her only window of opportunity to catch a glance of her beloved Mus just as the community were getting ready for their Taraweeh prayers. Ramadan in the East Coast is like Christmas down under, except wetter. She hurtled down the dusty road into the resort town village to make a point.

The Dreamer

Marjorie is stoically seated on the empty second pew from the front, feeling abandoned by the family at her second husband's funeral. She thinks of the last time they made love. He was such a suave gentleman, making love was like a romantic interlude, a slow waltz, a Japanese Bento box with side dishes for breakfast. She missed him so much and couldn't believe he had left her behind. She was as romantic as he was, both of the artistic kind. Relatives often thought they were both off with the fairies.

Wait until I get the chance, Aishah smirks, breathing heavily while seated as light as a feather beside Marjorie, the 'other' woman. They both shared a time of their lives with this same gentleman. Oh boy, thought Aishah, little did they all know about our time together, kan, Mus?! That was historically meaningful for our nation as much as it was for my decorated timeline and I will never abandon you. I'm still here driving against the backdrop of the emerald green ocean in that green MG you bought me. I'm wearing the blue and yellow striped scarf you put around my neck when you returned home from Paris. My hip hugging kebaya on the day we first met high in the skies wraps around me so tightly, as if you were still holding me ready to pucker on my amber red Dior lips, and I'd accidentally miss and kiss your large long Buddha lobes. Not your typical Malay man and woman we were, weren't we, Mus? I'd dare say, we'd star in a film, *Perempuan dan Lelaki Melayu Terakhir on Wall Street*, if only Riza would have bought our script instead, kan, Mus?

"You know, Kak long, macam hari tu, I was talking to Marjorie, then suddenly she walks off humming a song and waves her hand at me as if to say, enough talking already lah, I'm going, talk to the hand... she thinks it's cute you know?! But I think she's a neurodivergent tau. Beto!"

Regardless, both Marjorie and Mus, as she'd call him adoringly until goose bumps will appear in every single acre of skin of your fauna, were the epitome of a couple in their little town. They were made examples of, spoken well of, thought well of, except nobody knew about Marjorie's little secret, did they?



The Humanitarian

Chatter drones among villagers reverberated all the way across international waters as passengers from the Hung Hai vessel pleaded with the maritime police to come ashore. They were starving, thirsty and desperately looking for land. Little did they know it'd be another year before they'd find stopping land down further under thanks to an Australian

Prime Minister who abolished the White Australia migration policy. War always leaves casualties and those wounds can remain for a lifetime. Duong puts his ears close to the sideboards, he observes the other men, women and children and they all listen quietly as the wooden boards that precariously hold the boat together creak with the waves, they felt rocked by two cherubic hands of God. When Saigon fell and the American soldiers left, *Orang Hanyut* like Duong and his family made their way across the seas, not knowing where they were going except that it was a calculated risk. Stay under the thumbs of the Northern army or leave and let nature take us under her arms. Many of his countrymen would land at Hell Isle, just across from popular local hero Mo' Mustafa's quiet fishing village, a dot in that deep emerald sea, except this time, it'd be far from a gem.

One rainy night in a different time zone at +2 GMT, Duong would strike up a conversation with a moustachioed gentleman in the smallest bar in the world. Named after a journalist-writer who used to drink there, Bar Hemingway was a familiar place for Duong every time he visited his twin offsprings, Natalie and Sofia. After settling in Northern Australia in the late 1970s with his family, displacement was in his DNA and as a result, he spent his 20s at university in Paris, ironically land of his country's colonialisers searching for a place to call home. Now this place, however, was one of those places he felt right at home. Perhaps it was the barman. Or, his drinks, served with an old-world charm about it, reminding him of a bar in Saigon his father used to frequent. It wasn't as if he followed his father to a bar then, but the stories Duong's pa brought home were layered with his thick breath leaving scents of cigar and cognac between sentences, mysterious at times because there would be a hint of a certain sweet smelling perfume only women stenographers from law courts famously wore, but nevermind. A renowned newspaper editor, Duong senior, had access to Vietnam's who's who in the 1950s and worked tirelessly in the newsroom in that decade, where the Điện Biên Phủ battle finally had the French colonialists term of 80 years conclude. In that bar, Mo' Mustafa and Duong trace their uncanny link to Hell Isle, just across from a quiet fishing village where Mo's family called home for generations, a dot in that deep emerald sea, except this time, they'd be celebrating and clinking glasses of *eau de vie*.



What a small world, they'd both exclaim. What an amazing life we've had after all that, they'd both exclaim again, in disbelief. Life is indeed full of serendipitous surprises, Mo' said, just like your first bite into Mek's *sotong sumbat*, remember that, Duong? And the two men just guffawed and laughed life so full as they would soon both meet the loves of their lives outside the bar.

The Mothers

It's the mid-year school holidays again and the two step brothers Ariff, at 12 years old has suddenly *berbuluketiak* grown hair under his armpits while Jo Han, who's 8 going on 80 laments to his Chinese mother in Hokkien about his lack of facial and bodily hair. Hair is such an important sign of wit, intelligence and wealth in their extended family household. Ariff's Malay-Thai mom dons her kebaya and floors her green MG across the border on a daily basis to buy produce, chat with dead school mates and drops in regularly to visit cousins like Anis. Before the bombings, life was tranquil, neighbours cooking up sweet desserts and childrens' laughter heard from a distance among the roosters' evening crow.

Their beloved Abah sits under the lone Merbau, not pine nor sycamore tree, and smokes his *cerut*. He caresses the hair of Aishah, unbeknownst to all.

Boi..... Lai!

Ah Boi! Jo..... Han.....

Huan Naa Khnia! Lai!

Ah Boi! Jo..... Han.....

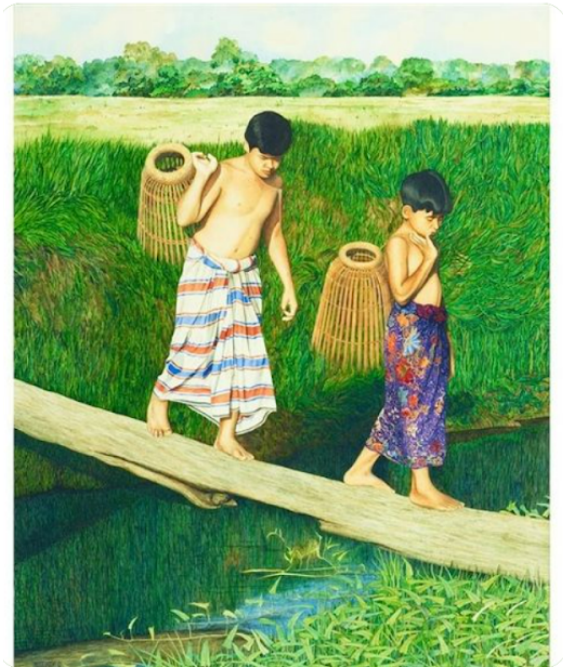
anak lelaki Muuuuuuuustafa! COME HERE NOW!

Marjorie places her hog hair Brosse RoseMary paintbrush Mustafa bought for her from that oldest store in Paris. You know, the famous one at the corner of St-Germain & Les Invalides, yes that beautiful forest green shop with giant gold letterings. When I was in art school, I would frequent the store with two local Parisian acquaintances.

“Picasso maintenant?! C'est incroyable! So you really can feel his presence, Jo Lyn?”

Natalie would query each time we slid by the heavy wooden doors. She is such a darling, so easily impressed by big name artists. Coming from a family of artists, names didn't impress me as much. And besides, some of the best artists remain unknown, their works in attics and stores hidden from the public eye. My Abah was one such talent, and it was in this same Parisian art school that he met and fell in love with my mom Marjorie. I learned from my mom the art of channelling and feeling the presence of a room. Sometimes I feel more than I should, but I have never told her.

“He helped the owner in the creation of the store, mais oui! Vraiment, Sofia said. Natalie and Sofia are twins, my Godsisters. My parents and their parents were often on double dates and had undertaken each other's children as godparents.



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“Yes, my mother’s grandfather and brothers made this art store in 1887. Did you know we’re the oldest one on the Seine?” Sofia, the more verbose of the two would exclaim, clearly proud of her mother’s lineage of genetically enabled artists. Her father’s side was hardly ever mentioned, but proud she was of him nevertheless, as his story was one of tenacious struggle. Her daddy’s tanned sinewy arm would offer prized artistic strokes on canvas. The type her mother’s family would approve and treasure. And that was their love story against all odds. A French heiress of one of the most renowned art supply stores meets a chiselled cheekboned and kind-hearted Aussie whose family gambled their lives and escaped Saigon on a boat.

Back in the kampung, Jo Han and Ariff are enjoying a gentle breeze in the afternoon. Each of the boys have family heirloom passed down from Abah’s father who was a *nelayan* in this fishing outpost. The boys have one of those state-of-the-art light weight 7’ Japanese rods and reels each. But it’s the *bubu* traps that catch squid best. So they will bring it out on special occasions on their grandmother’s request. The handwritten notebook on wave patterns of the South China Sea is precious, stored in the book case at home beside Granny Mek’s cook book of Malay Thai seafood recipes and three photo albums with newspaper clippings of a war-torn country from the 1970s neatly catalogued and captioned.

Ariff casts the line and whispers under his breath in tandem with the sound of his reel spinning, as if speaking to someone ethereal, “Mama, you told me that Mek’s *sotong sumbat* is the best in the world. Abah is really so talented, mama. Last night he told me about his trip and that he was nominated for a prize. You think he will win, Mama?”



Aunty Marjorie feels it’s time for her secret to be revealed and like a fish gasping for air, puckers her mouth like a K-drama star and with her mobile set on a selfie-stick, contorts and sets to record LIVE, then spins on the spot into a 7’ purple ogre! Ariff looks at her without budging, measuring his rod against her as they’re the same length. He felt the rod reverberate in his hand, it felt like a handphone on silent mode. Aunty Marjorie didn’t look scary though, she looked like a giant *sotong sumbat* he thought. The ogre then bellowed in a thick Hokkien accent, a surprising slight Parisian twang giving way sometimes when the tepid East Coast wind blew in from behind her crevices. Like a scene from a Japanese anime where the hero blocks the rising sun before standing aside for the light to kill its monster, she, this purplish cephalopod lets the setting sun’s rays in between her tentacles, “Your mama Aishah can’t hear you lah, boy! I’m not sorry but I ate her last Christmas! I missed your Abah so much. She was in the kitchen helping Mek stuff the squid, and suddenly she just smelled like a cognac fruitcake and I had a sugar-craving. I ate her in one mouthful! Maaf ya...”.

In the distance, sounds of waves beat against a gentle evening breeze and a deafening gong is heard across the land. The youth uprising is near, Mustafa thought, while the television announcer congratulates a young Malaysian artist, Jo Lyn binti Mustafa for bringing home the prestigious art prize - Hell Isle.

The End.