

Lost Nostalgia

Stories



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LOST NOSTALGIA

I was the happiest person that evening. We were due to depart for Changi Airport at eight. After three decades of failed attempts, I was finally meeting my brother. I had imagined his face. Ibu said that he was the closest among my siblings to resemble Ayah. I had imagined him with fair complexion. While he may not be as pasty as a Caucasian, he was surely not as dark as the rest of us. After all, he was in England not just for a mere month or two, not even a year or two. It had been forty years.

I had always wondered how he got to become an English citizen. He was born here. According to Ibu, he left for England because he had been sulking. He first found work as a sailor. Over time, he built a life. Got married. Had children. His three young ones are of English-Javanese descent. They look strapping if the pictures he sent us can be taken as any indication.

"Ibu, what was he sulking about?" I asked her one day when she was in the mood to talk about him.

"About a girl. He felt dejected. So he went. He was crazy about that girl. Head over heels. On his behalf, I asked for her hand in marriage, but she rejected me. She chose a well-to-do man. That's why your brother left."

I had visualised his demeanour too. Surely, he must be hyper-modern. He must speak with a British accent. He probably dines with a fork and knife. He must possess European mannerisms. Everything about him is Western. I envisaged his appearance. His fair skin would be reddish. The skin of a Javanese mixed with English. How wondrous!

I then tried to picture his wife. A full-blooded English woman. What did she see in him? How did my brother treat her? Was it easy for them to get married? How is her cooking? My brother must be so used to dining like an Englishman. He must consume potatoes, cheese and butter every each day.

"When is his flight scheduled to land?" asked Ibu as she peered nervously at the huge clock in the arrival hall.

"In fifteen minutes, if all goes well," I replied in a bid to assuage her anxiety. I could sense that Ibu was aching to see him. After all, it had been thirty years since she held him in person. It is the nature of mothers to be maternal; and mine was no different. Without fail, she spoke of him at every Hari Raya gathering. She hopes he would meet her sooner than death.

Once, she had even expressed a desire to visit my brother in England. We managed to collect some money to fund her trip. Yet, when we had finally gotten enough, she decided against going. Instead, Ibu instructed me to pen dozens, even hundreds, of letters to my brother. Tell him to come home, she said. Come visit, his mother is old. His mother misses him. Her eyesight isn't as sharp. She can't hear as well. All manners of things she had instructed me to write.

Thus, I became the conduit for her feelings. Each month, Ibu would prod me to pen a letter. Each week, she would ask me if he had replied.

"Has it landed?" enquired Ibu impatiently. She was visibly restless. She could not sit or stand for long.

"Which door will he appear from?" she asked just seconds later.

"There, that door right in front of us," I pointed to the arrival gate that will soon be graced by my brother's presence. Squinting, Ibu's eyes were transfixed on the gate.

I could sense the boundlessness of Ibu's love for her child, her son she had not seen for three decades. In an attempt to pacify her, I asked her to recount the reason for my brother's departure, though I had heard it countless times. "A girl. Your brother was foolish. If I were a man, I wouldn't feel so rejected. If a girl wasn't into me, I could always find another. There're plenty of girls in this world. She wasn't even pretty!" said Ibu, sounding bitter that my brother left out of unrequited love.

"If your brother hadn't left, he might've been a school principal today. Before he left, he was a trainee teacher. Fool! Ran away because of a girl," Ibu kept on. Meanwhile, my brother's plane was delayed by ten minutes.

Moments later, my brother appeared. As he exited the gate, Ibu rushed to him. He hugged her, pecked her on her forehead and cheeks. He kissed her hand. Tears lined Ibu's cheeks. My brother looked calm. I suppose he had matured in a foreign land. Having spent much of his adulthood elsewhere, he was no longer sentimental and maudlin. I too hugged him. He looked fit. He did not seem fifty-eight years old. More like forty-five. His face was clear, his cheeks were full, and his eyes were full of sparkle. His lips shined with a perpetual gloss.

"Where's your wife? Didn't you say she was coming along?" asked Ibu.

"No. She couldn't get off work," said my brother in near perfect Malay. He alternated his gaze between Ibu and I. "Where's Timah and Ramli?" he asked.

"They're waiting for you at home," Ibu replied.

My brother had on him a perplexed look throughout the taxi ride home. He was rather taken by the changes to the Singapore landscape. "So this is what became of Temasek."

I was surprised to hear him use that word. Temasek.

"Singapore has progressed much too quickly," he added.

His eyes darted left and right. His jaw was agape. Confused. Impressed. Amazed. I could imagine all kinds of emotions raging within him. He enquired after every single road name, every single lane. The taxi sped towards Marsiling.

We conversed throughout the night. I asked about his life in England. Turns out that my brother had never forgotten his ethnic roots. He still practises writing the Jawi script. He loves eating belacan. He kept up with developments in Malay literature. He was familiar with Shahnnon Ahmad, and was keen on discussing the writer's novel *Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan*. He had been close to Malaysian graduates in England. There, he would invite anyone from Singapore and Malaysia to his home for a chat.

"Take me to Kampung Wak Tanjung tomorrow," he requested. "I miss my childhood playground." I was rendered speechless as my mind raced for an answer. Nothing was left of the Kampung Wak Tanjung that my brother once knew. Bulldozers obliterated that place years back. Somehow, I found my tongue. He was clearly stricken by the news. He was gripped by a sense of remorse.

"Take me there anyway. At the very least, I can still see the foundational ground," said my brother dejectedly.

I acceded to his request the next day. At his former childhood playground, my brother was deep in thoughts as

he hovered over its red earth. A complex conundrum must have presented itself to him. After some time, he requested to be taken to Sekolah Padang Terbakar. Once again, I found it hard to acquiesce. He insisted. I relented. Once there, I could see my brother overcome with wistfulness. He was standing at the site of his old school, an institution that did not survive development.

"How did it get to this?" he asked.

"Advancement. Progress," I answered defensively. I detected a certain cynicism to his question.

"Is it progress to discard the old? Is it advancement to demolish the past?"

I kept quiet. We kept silent for a bit.

"Thirty years. For thirty years, I'd hankered after my kampung. Thirty years did I indulge in the sweet reminiscences of my childhood playground. My formative years in beautiful Temasek. It's all gone now. This change is harrowing," he replied, sounding like a true-blue poet. It played like a romantic song.

"The Singapore you see today isn't the same Singapore three decades ago. Today, Singapore is a huge cosmopolitan city. On par with London. On par with Tokyo or New York," I said. It was a reply tinged with nationalistic pride.

"We've got to accept these changes. The Malay community too had progressed. They're quite pragmatic these days. Always pursuing success. They don't want to be left out of this march towards progress. A community that doesn't change is a community that's dead. Frozen in its tracks," I continued, having found the courage to answer him.

I was convinced that my brother needed to understand the social change that was happening here. It stumped me

though that my brother, who was resident in England for three decades, was now so disappointed by news of the demolition of Kampung Wak Tanjung. I could not understand the reason for his cynicism about the progress that had taken place here.

"There is an abyss to this development you talk about; a deep gorge to this growth. I welcome change and progress but they must coincide with the spiritual evolution and cultural stability of a people. I worry that you're all standing at the edge of this gorge. You're teetering at the brink of this abyss. And you're all naked. Not a single garment protecting your skin."

"You speak the language of progress. I fear that you're all much too small to face the monster that is unbridled development. I fear that you'd all have to pay a high price for this advancement. You'd all suffer a loss that you may never recover from. Everything is up for sale," came my brother's morose reply.

I thought of his words as he played with the sand where his alma mater once stood. He peered at something in the distance. A flood of memories must be unfolding before his eyes. A thousand reminiscences were probably playing in his mind. I thought this was an opportune time to continue our debate.

"Do you think culture is crucial to surviving life here? Do you think that our conditions would accord us the time to secure all that is considered cultural and romantic? Do you think that our fast pace of life would have given us the luxury to even be cultural? Is culture to be made the priority?"

I could see my brother grimace at my questions. He stared at me in confusion. I could not read his thoughts.

"I don't know. Perhaps I've been away for far too long that I've lost touch with the pace of life here. I've no idea!" said my brother, starting to sound depressed.

"We can't be frozen in time. We mustn't be static. There're hundreds of cultural organisations here. They are dynamic. Drama clubs. Dance clubs. Hadrah Kompang associations. Gasing clubs. Silat. Literature. Lots of religious institutions. Beautiful mosques. We still have culture. If you consider these, do you still think we paid a high price for development?"

He was quiet for a time. I felt bad about my string of difficult questions. Then, he spoke. He asked to be taken to Tanjung Katong. I told him that the place was no longer. The land there has been reclaimed. Instead, I took him to Marine Parade.

There, he stared far beyond the sea's horizon. He was reliving his former life. His youthful years. His first love. Tanjung Katong was where he whispered sweet nothings to her. What is the meaning of life without love? His lover had responded to his promises with hers. They must have promised to stay loyal to each other. The pursuit for fortune and stature were not his priorities. She was, and he would give her his all. He was gripped by the feeling of a great love. And wherever he was, he could not forget her face. He felt that the world was more beautiful when he was in love. And he was madly in love.

He urged Ibu to ask for her hand in marriage. She did as he asked. This was when things turned sour for him. He was rejected. He felt like the skies fell on him, crushing him. He felt like the earth swallowed him whole. All he could see were dark, stormy clouds.

He began to hate all within sight. He had given up hope. His body became limp. His ambitions no longer mattered. He was not taking care of himself. Love had killed his life. He suffered deeply.

At his friend's advice, he signed up to be a sailor, going where the ships would take him. He brought with his travels his spurned heart. As he continued to stare into the horizon, he pictured his first love as an elderly woman. She must be about fifty now. She must have had grandchildren. She must surely have performed the obligatory hajj.

"Here, a materialistic person can thrive," exclaimed my brother out of the blue.

"So too in England. What's the difference?" I responded in an attempt to contradict his statement.

"The changes here are frightening. I'm terrified by it. Here, machines wipe out cultures."

"Machines kill culture everywhere. This revolution will obliterate us all," I countered. "How do you feel living in a foreign land?"

"I'm happy. My wife's a good woman. My children are bright and in good health."

"But, your spirit. How's your spirit?"

"I do feel lost. To live where no one knows nor appreciates your culture. Still, it's better to live there than here."

"Why?"

"What do we have here? It's much better over there. I'm happier not looking at all that we have lost."

"Isn't that running away? Escapism?"

"Ah, but all humans are on the run. Which person isn't running away? Who?"

"If you get the chance to live here, would you?"

"No. I wouldn't."

"Why?"

"I no longer feel any ties to this place. Except family. My only tie to this place is my love for my family."

My brother saw Singapore as a city that had robbed him of love. But was it his failure at love that has tainted his view of this place? He had always sought excuses to dislike the conditions here. What kind of person is my brother? Malay or English? What is his culture now? Or is he a half-formed human being? Half Malay, half English? What is his attitude towards the English who had colonised us for hundreds of years? What are his thoughts about the Englishmen who had oppressed his race? Signs of such insults are still apparent today.

These questions whirled in my mind. I did not express them to him. I was afraid that staying here longer would only enhance his hatred for this place.

I studied my brother's face. He looked like someone who had lost a priceless treasure. He was missing something that he could never again possess.

Having spent a week here, my brother proclaimed that he had to return to England. He said his vacation time had run out. Ibu was sad to be separated from him again. She believed that this was the last she would ever lay eyes on him. She bawled while sending him off. And for the first time, I saw my brother weeping too.

I imagined him seated in the belly of the plane, suffering from the grave loss of something amorphous. Something no words could capture.

Ibu collapsed in grief. I held her. We made our way back to Marsiling, as visions of my brother danced in our minds.