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A Sense Of Home (Opening sequence of a novel in progress)

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Abstract

Mama died two nights ago. Very quietly. No one expected. We were surprised because she's always so ... noisy. Don't know why but I didn't cry much. In fact, I think I feel ... different ... maybe like more free. Anyway, she never loved me much. I know because she even told somebody, in front of me. "I only love the boys," she said. "The girl I hate"

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(Opening sequence of a novel in progress)

Mama died two nights ago. Very quietly. No one expected. We were surprises because she's awways so ... noisy. Dono wy but I didn cry much. In fac, I tink I feel ... diffren ... maybe like more free. Anyway, she never love me much la. I know because she even tole somebody, in fron of me. "I only love der boys," she said. "Der girl I hate".

Mama love der younges boy der mose. Everyting Huat. "Waa, my Huat got firs class in der U ... my Huat jus back from tour, wen to Englan. You know how much dat cos?" Huat is now working in Kolumpur, seldom come back. Mama sick time, I call him to come and see her, he said got too much work. Now he's crying at der coffin. Wafor wan to cry now? Wen she was alive, nobody cared, now wy cry?

Firs Broder *lagi* worse. He living here in Penang, only take twenty minutes to come from his house, awso never bodered to come. Only wen he wans to borrow money, hnaa he will come lah. So many times he's taken money from Mama, from me, from dono how many people. Until der spinster auntie living opposite said she heard he's awso borrowing from der *chettiar*. Dat one der intres no joke. Every hundred, he got to give intres twenty. So he got no money lef to return us. Mama awways said it's like the river of no return.

Der las time Mama came back from hospital he came wit his wife and son to see her, den he never came again. She phone him, ask him wy, he said der wife woan let. Wy woan let? He said dono. Mama said his wife like three days wind, four days rain. Cannot tell wen her mood will change. But wat was so bad dat she woan let him come for so long? Eight muns he never came. Mama died witout seeing him again. Today he tole me he couldn sleep der whole night las night. I wanted to tell him I wonder wy.

Doctor said Mama died of stroke. Someting like der vein in her head burs. She had very high blood but she never cared one, dat's der trouble wit her. Der spinster auntie, Bor Ee, awways ars her to take care, doan eat dis, doan eat dat, but she still doan care. She said, "I got my medicine, never mind". Firs Broder awso got high blood but he so young awso scared, dare not even eat outside. Little bit of salt cannot. But she — "I *hentam* anyting la. Big prawn awso I eat. Mutton. *Chhar koay teow*, my favourite. Anyting".

Mama awways said she like steel. "Sometimes my heart pain wen I carry der basket going marketing. Wokking from der market to my car hnaa pain laa but still I go". She said she very clever woman. How if not for her, we would all be

nowair. Some more looking young for a woman orready sixty-eight. She got married young actually, not yet eighteen. Dat time wartime and der Jappenees were looking for virgin girls to rape, so Grampa matchmake her to one of der Quek family in Pekan Buluh. Der town was very small and her husban very timid one. Mama awways call him idiot. One time, Mama said, he wen for interview for a job but he got so nervous he couldnen tok, because the manager was an *ang moh*. He turn pale, said he wanted to vomit and got out of der room. He was shaking all over — aiya, you should see how Mama make like him wen she tole us about it. Funny laa. She real joker sometimes.

So, of course he didnen get der job lah. Finally, got some frien help him to get Gahmen job in der Healt Departmen as ... dono clerk or jus go aroun to check for mosquitoes. Mama said like labourer's job but I never ars him. Actually, he's not my real fader.

Mama met my real fader in Penang a few years after she gave birt to Firs Broder. He was very rich, multi-millionaire, Mama said, got big house in Nortam Road we can only look at wen we pass by. He was much older dan Mama and he awready got wife and chiren, but of course he never let dem know. Quite fierce la, even at dat time got people doing dat kind of ting. And some more awready married. Mama was still living in Pekan Buluh. I dono how her husban took it. I tink some people knew den she mus have a boyfrien. After I was born and den Huat, Papa bought Mama a house in Penang, far from town so no one will know. Mama just lef her husban behind in Pekan Buluh and move into der house wit all us chiren.

Den Papa died wen I was only fourteen years old. Mama was very los. She cried a lot. I cried awso. But Huat didnen cry at all, he never had any feeling for Papa. Mama was awso very sad because she couldnen go to der funeral, afraid Papa's family will find out he was keeping her. Papa lef us nutting excep der house, der Austin car Mama was driving, and an insuran policy wort about \$7,000. Suddenly, Mama had no income and she had to take care of us. She kep digging her saving until in de en, she had no choice, she had to sell der house. "I had to bite my teet and do it," Mama awways said. It was like losing something very precious. She sold der house for \$18,000, but now it is wort maybe ten times.

But wat to do? We move to stay wit Gramma and Grampa and Mama became like a servan to dem, cooking, taking care of der house, looking after dem. She didnen feel comfortable like in her own house. Some more, her sisters were jealous because dey were scared she would take over der house wen Gramma and Grampa died. But Mama was awways dreaming of getting her own house one day. She let Huat go to der U, hoping dat wen he come out, he can get a good job and make a lot of money and buy a house. And she and me can move in and stay wit him.

Dat never happen. He got a good job, den he got married, he got chiren. Two years ago, he bought a house in Kolumpur. You tink he call us in? Las time, before he got married, he bought insuran and put in girlfrien's name. Wafor put in her name? She was not even married to him. Put lah in my name. I put mine in his name waat. But he doan care one la. Der night Gramma died, he wen out

dancing. Quietly took out a green shirt, shiny one you know, and change at a phone boot, like Superman! Mama knew waat but she never stop him. She let him do everyting he wanted but she awways stop me from doing wat I wan. Because Mama was saving money for him to go to U, I coulden go to Form Six. Mama said no point for a girl to study so high, better go and get a job. Den wen I was awready working, she said I cannot go out late at night, afterds *kena* rape. “*See chhow lok,*” she scolded me all der time, “you doan know ah you cannot trus men nowadays! If dey put someting in your drink, den you know lah. If anyting happens to you, doan come back, I woan accep you as my daughter”. Look at me now. I’m more dan forty and still not married. “You become a spinster better still la,” Mama use to say. “You can look after me wen I’m old”. But I doewan to become a spinster.

She had a bad mout la. Sometimes I wonder wat’s der poin for her to be so religious, saying Buddis prayers every morning. Like dat time she call Firs Broder’s wife Carol a low-class girl and somebody reported to Carol. Waa, nex day, Carol came to *tooi chee*. “What do you mean I am a low-class girl?” she shouted and all der neighbours came out. It was so loud. “How can you call me dat, hnuh? Waa, in fron of me, you act so good but behind my back you say all kinds of tings. Somebody tole me you got ole man keeping you las time, your chiren got diffren fader, so you got more class or I got more class? If you tink I am so cheap, wy you let me marry your son? Wy not we get a divorce? Come lah, tomorrow we go to court and get a divorce!”

Shameful laa, dat quarrel. After dat, Carol never tok to Mama. Den she got pregnan and she was losing blood a lot and she had to be admitted. But Broder had no money to admit so Mama had to come to der rescue. So later, Carol realise lah and she tok wit Mama again. And wen der baby came out, Mama gave Carol *ang pow* and boil strengtening herbs for her to drink. I wonder how Mama can forgive dat bitch after all der bad tings she said. But I suppose Mama is like dat. She say tings and later regret. It mus be her temper la. Very bad. Wen Firs Broder was a baby, he cried a lot, and one time Mama got irritated she press a pillow over his face and nearly kill him.

“*Ee m chai see ah,*” Mama awways said wen she got angry wit Firs Broder for letting Carol control him. But he awso one kind la, so scared of his wife. Dey are staying wit his moder-in-law because Carol prefer it. It really broke Mama’s heart because der son mus awways bring back der wife to stay, not go and belong to der wife’s family. It’s disgraceful. So Mama awways scole him and say how hard she took care of him wen he was a baby. Dat time, he use to *tarik* a lot and she had to wok miles into der coconut estate to look for a medium to cure der fit. He tole her she had to catch cockroaches and take out deir intestine and boil in water, den let Broder drink. She did dis everyday for a few weeks, den only he was cured.

Mama died wit little money lef. A bit of jewelry. A seventeen-year-old *lor cho'* car. Dere's enough for a decen funeral. She awways wanted dat. Die awso mus be gran. Good ting der place to keep her bones at der Buddis temple is paid for awready. Der problem now is maybe her sisters will come and take over der house so dat means I'll have to move out. Only las week, Mama was saying she wish she had money to buy a house, small one awso never mind. "I wan to die in my own house," she said. It was as if she knew.

I tink for her funeral we mus arrange for her coffin to pass by our ole house. Mama might wan to see it again, for der las time.