Sustenance

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We keep coming back and coming back
[...] to the hotel instead of the hymns
That fall upon it out of the wind.

Wallace Stevens

When you see people who are thin from lack of food, beg them to accept your help;
remember that you may need their friendship in times to come.

Rig Veda

Nothing about that sun-washed July morning suggested to the cook at the Elsewhere Hotel that by evening everyone there would think differently about their lives. As the steam rose from the stainless steel urns, Perpetua de Mello chewed a piece of ginger root and slurped on her black Bali coffee. Most days began with this mingling of zest and bitterness on her tongue, fading to a faint medicinal aftertaste by the time the first guests arrived for breakfast. She threw into the bin the postcard the Australian food critic had sent her. Over a month had passed and she'd heard nothing further from him.

'Should've known,' she muttered into her cup.

In the dining room, everything was in order: the chicken and rice porridge simmered on the hotplate near the small bowls of ikan bilis, ground nuts and red chilli; chopped shallots, tomatoes and mushrooms waited at the egg station next to the tall glass jugs of pineapple, pawpaw and star-fruit juices. Small banana crepes, croissants and Danish pastries in the warmer; squares of gelatinous green and pink kueh arranged like a chess-board on the white porcelain platter. There would be enough leftovers for the staff and her, even if the new Australian guests ate more than usual.

Through the kitchen window she watched smoke from the

villagers' woodstoves bruise the dawn sky above farmers already weeding their padi fields. Beyond them, silvery perennial springs threaded through the ascending warp of jungle, and three rivers flowed from the caldera of an ancient volcano just visible to the north-east. Yesterday's harvesting of the rice terraces across the river had revealed the arched storage recesses in the old stone retaining walls where grain had been concealed from Japanese soldiers during the war. On the outskirts of the closest village she glimpsed propitiations of flowers and food for ghosts disturbed by the newly constructed crossroads. She'd lived in this place in the Balinese foothills for nearly ten years, but the hidden things that sometimes surfaced here still surprised her: histories, spirits and gifts to the past and the future; legends of endurance, subterranean tributaries and dreams of eternity.

And there was the old woman from the village placing her morning offerings at the sacred spring beyond the swimming-pool fence. Still half-blinded by sleep, wearing her thin lace kebaya and faded batik sarong, offering hope before breakfast every day in her small hand-woven baskets that the wind or ignorant tourists would carry away by lunchtime.

Perpetua saw the villagers renewing their hope in such ways daily, even in these desperate times following the bombings and executions. Their optimism amazed her. She'd endured another kind of devastation nearly ten years before, and still found hope difficult. She pinned her grey-flecked hair back more tightly and sank her teeth into a lychee-garnished Danish pastry. Yesterday's leftovers.

Soon she would make sambal and baste the suckling pig and lamb with tamarind marinade for tomorrow's food festival. The Indonesian black nuts for the curry keluak softened in a bowl of

water. She coughed on a flake of pastry. The lychee tasted tinny. If she kept eating so much, she would have to lengthen the ties of her apron.

She stood at the kitchen's rear door watching the old woman walk back to the village and the men meander with their scythes down to the padi fields. The photograph pinned to the board next to her lifted gently in the breeze. Even after a decade, the images she recalled of her son in his final hours had a sharper edge than this photo of him running and waving at the cloud of seagulls on the beach near Perth. She placed her palms together.

Bless my beautiful boy, always.

On a clear day, she could just see the dark ocean that lay between them.

Enough years had passed for the cook to know that her son's fate would never really make sense to her. She finished her breakfast that day with the same question she'd often asked herself during those years: *how do you find your way through life when you've lost what you most love?* Swallowing the dregs of her coffee, she didn't suspect that after the coming night, she would never ask this question again.

The Way to Elsewhere

The most enduring recipes bring generations of culture to our barbaric tongues.

Perpetua de Mello, *A Taste of Elsewhere*

The bell on the dining-room door tinkled and Ketut the waitress sang her welcome as the first guests entered.

'*Selamat pagi*, madam. *Selamat pagi*, sir.'

As Ketut and Tedja served the guests breakfast, Perpetua began assembling the ingredients for the dishes she'd prepare for dinner and the food festival. The sambal, ginger drink and marinade first. Later, the seafood satay and devil curry, the black rice pudding with gula melaka syrup. Maybe she'd even make some white memories for an aperitif.

She soaked a few cups of grated coconut in warm water for the sambal. Some recipes she could get right. *Just a matter of following each step from the beginning*, she'd tell the hotel's guests. She always found it difficult to explain to the more inquisitive ones precisely why she'd stayed at the Elsewhere. *That story's way too complicated to follow*, she'd tell them.

What *had* brought her to this slightly precarious place somewhere between Malacca and Australia, to this point between hope and despair? She couldn't really blame it all on her ex-husband, Ernest. Both desperate for a new life, they'd stumbled upon each other with a mixed sense of predestination and chance. Neither of them had known the new country they headed towards. What a fraught journey: marriage and migration, all

at once. She and Ernest had risked too much, and not enough.

Tedja brought the first dirty dishes to the sink, rolling his slightly mournful dark eyes behind his small round spectacles.

'Fussy customer. Wants a clean plate for each piece of kueh.'

Perpetua clucked her tongue sympathetically as he hurried back to the dining room. She carried the spices for the sambal to the scrubbed teak table in front of the window, just in time to see the old Englishman meandering around the padi fields on the other side of the river. Even from that distance she could tell it was her father, Oswald: silver-maned, pink-skinned and round-shouldered, a confused wanderer wearing a white cotton Marks & Spencer vest over his sarong. Watching him, she supposed it was no wonder she'd felt lost so often. From opposite sides of the world, both her parents had been bewildered for most of their lives.

Perpetua still had one of the last letters her father had written to her mother. Her mother's brother, Nazario, had unknowingly sent the note deep in her mother's old jacquard apron pocket after her funeral. Had Mercedes meant to keep the letter, or forget it forever?

Dear Mercedes,
I have gone looking for bigger tigers. Sell the last Aristocrats to the plumber for no less than five pounds each and keep the money. Do not wait for me.
Oswald.

She recalled her mother finding that note on the kitchen table. Her mother had known a rejection when she read one.

Her weeping over five days and nights had alarmed Perpetua, who was then only ten years old.

Ah-yah! If I'd insisted on marrying your father, I wouldn't be begging for money, and you wouldn't be a convent charity girl. I'm sorry. I was too grateful for too little. Now look at us.

Poverty-stricken and unwanted by the local bachelors lah, Nazario had agreed sadly. *Another abandoned Straits Settlements story that'll never be told in England.*

Looking at her mother's red-rimmed eyes and lustreless hair and skin, it had seemed to Perpetua that Mercedes had caught the illness to end all illnesses. But Mercedes was a practical woman with more experience of expatriate men than she'd ever revealed to Oswald. On the sixth day after he'd left, she'd given away nearly all his clothes to the Christao fishermen in her kampong and brushed the spiders and the baby python from his unsold Aristocrat squat-position lavatory pans in the alley.

There were thirty-eight of the porcelain pans left, in *eau de nil* only. Mercedes changed the name of this colour to 'jade' and, within days, she'd sold the lot for fifteen dollars each to the Chinese builder of a new housing development.

Jade is a sign of prosperity for the Chinese. It just goes to show. You don't need to change the essence of something to sell it. Just change the name, she'd told Perpetua that night as they ate devil curry in the small windowless kitchen of their wooden, three-room kampong house.

Still, Mercedes had fallen a long way. Her church and most Eurasians in her community disapproved of de facto relationships, and their misgivings had been proven correct.

Perpetua sliced some fresh red chillies diagonally, soaked

them in cold water and removed their seeds. Which sambal would she make for the food festival? Sambal belachan, her mother's favourite. She sneezed as she ground the chillies and shallots in her large mortar and pestle, made from the local volcanic stone, until their juices were absorbed by the briny crumbs of her toasted shrimp paste. Ah, that smell. Ah, Malacca.

Mercedes had put this sambal on the table even when they were at their poorest.

Sambal belachan makes even the most frugal of meals taste rich; it awakens the senses, warms the blood and clears the mind. It eases our everyday longing for a better life.

Perpetua could almost see her mother sigh with satisfaction as she tasted this sambal, could almost sense again her own childhood mortification at her father's friends' aquiline English noses puckering with distaste. *It smells like the end of the Empire,* one of them had said. *If we could eradicate belachan, there would probably be a marked decrease in the incidence of disease in the Straits Settlements.*

Only a woman like her mother would dare eat belachan so shamelessly in front of such Englishmen.

Forced by Oswald's departure to resume selling food from a makeshift stall, Mercedes stayed open late at night to capitalise on the hunger of the wealthier Malaccan men on their way home after satisfying other appetites at the brothels. Cooking good food was Mercedes's way of refusing hopelessness. Over the following months, pinches of spice and precisely cut cubes of meat and vegetables began to carry more weight for her than the opinions of her family and neighbours, though she barely made enough income from her stall. She subsidised her daughter's school books by cooking for the patients in the dying house.

Mercedes made herself an apron from the deep yellow jacquard English smoking jacket Oswald had left behind. *The colour worn by Malaccan royalty in the old days,* she'd explained with satisfaction as she sweated over the stove.

Perpetua now wore that old apron. She patted its pocket and wiped her eyes on its hem as she chopped the onion for the sambal.

Add chopped onion to the spice paste and pound.

Crush ten round white candlenuts into powder and mix through paste.

Add a pinch or two of salt and sugar.

The flavour sang on her tongue. When Mercedes had cooked, her movements and demeanour grew firm. *Making a new life and profiting from the leftovers of the old are excellent antidotes to rejection,* she'd advised when Perpetua returned home after convent school to help serve food at the stall.

Mercedes had dished out more pointed lessons, too. *There's nothing like loveless sex to make you hungry,* she'd murmured to Perpetua in her smoky voice after serving a well-known British lawyer two helpings of caldu pescador – the seafood soup that every Christao fisherman's family cooked slightly differently. *Lots of expatriate men like him around, living with the local women, eventually abandoning them. No-one wants to marry those women after that. I should know. That one lives with a Malay woman now. Hope he doesn't give her any diseases.*

Sometimes, Mercedes had served slightly more palatable kinds of knowledge with her food to those customers on their way home from the brothels.

How you eat is as important as what you eat, she'd say, taking a fish from the soup, biting its head off and sucking on it. *Eat the*

whole creature. Reject no part of it. This way, you will finally taste the wide ocean that leads to every place in the world.

Some civil servants and businessmen had averted their gaze from the fine trail of yellow juice running from the corner of her mouth; others mopped at their brow with their fine Egyptian cotton handkerchiefs. But Perpetua had noticed admiration or wistfulness in the faces of the more discerning men.

Had Mercedes hoped to woo one of them? Perpetua wondered now as she toasted a cup of grated coconut in a dry pan until it was golden. She added the sambal paste. Its spicy vapour pricked her eyes.

'The French child liked the special porridge you made her,' Ketut murmured as she topped up the coffee percolator from the urn. 'I can't understand her accent, but her father said she thinks I'm funny. Why do so many Western guests seem to find me funny?'

'Maybe because you smile so much.'

'No choice. Balinese have to smile more than Westerners,' Tedja muttered as he rushed more plates to the sink. The bell on the door tinkled again. Ketut hurried back to the dining room and sang out another welcome.

The cook glimpsed her father again, still wandering in circles out there in the padi. *Did the lies he'd lived as a younger man increase his bewilderment during old age? And why had he spun such lies?*

She guessed that somewhere on his journey to the east coast of Malaya, her father must have felt not only remorse about leaving Mercedes, but more than a pang of cowardice. He'd sent a blood-stained shirt to her with a few hundred English pounds and a note purporting to be one of condolence from the district

governor in Johore. It claimed her de facto husband had been killed by a tiger. The Malay peninsula was full of stories about English men who'd walked into the jungle and met such deaths, but Mercedes wasn't deceived by the package. She'd detected the ash of Oswald's Rough Rider cigarettes and his arrogant upstroke in the forged note. A crow's breast feather had stuck to the dried blood. She'd already decided he was as good as dead, anyway. She'd put the money in her new bank account and burned the letter and the shirt in her oven.

That summed up her mother's approach to love, really: the whole fish or nothing.

Perpetua turned the flame down under the paste. She set half the coconut liquid aside and poured the rest over the paste, increasing the heat again until the mixture boiled. She stirred it carefully as it simmered on the lower flame for a few more minutes. Curdle or burn it and the Elsewhere Restaurant would smell like the village rubbish tip on a hot day.

Such nightmares she'd had for months after her mother had burned that letter and shirt. Dreams of blood, black feathers and being hunted, but in those dreams, Perpetua had always been the tiger, not the crow. She was the real, elusive prize, deep in the jungle of her adolescent vanity. She'd inherited Oswald Lucas's blue eyes, almost luminous against her olive complexion, and she'd shown a precocious comprehension of the love sonnets and stories taught her by the learned Irish nuns of Our Lady Convent.

Perpetua took the sambal off the stove and left it to cool. Back in Malacca, she'd never once suspected that love would bring her to her knees.

She turned on the small radio above the sink. On a good

day, she could clearly hear the news from Djakarta, but today the newsreader's calm voice crackled with static. Something about an Indonesian cleric urging his followers to beat up infidel Westerners. She turned the radio off quickly. Such news would only make everyone anxious.