

*A* is for *A*char,  
*L* is for *L*ove

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*For Jon, who reminds me daily, to not forget,  
that love is steadfast, sweeping and free.*

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Now we are talking about local architecture, and you seem a little less remote. At the end of our conversation, you invite me to look at a house that is temporarily vacant. I am not sure why you have asked me, but the pleasure, ah, the pleasure of seeing for myself such an iconic building is too tempting. And so I greedily say, *Yes*.

And so I see you again.

## Part I

Popo's house sits at the top of Cheviot Hill in Siglap. Two houses away, there used to be a sprawling kampong and a Muslim graveyard. The kampong is gone now, but the cemetery remains, teeming with grand old trees and the throngs of faithful who occasionally visit. Parking is a problem when they do, because Popo's street has been turned into a narrower, one-way route. The road sign declaring that you can only move this way is an ugly jolt to my eyes. As long as I remember, people, traffic, just about everything moved in varied directions, especially at Popo's house.

There were nine of us. There were nine children — seven cousins, and my brother and I — who lived with Popo. Nine sets of utensils, uniforms, pairs of shoes. During the monsoon season, we would stack rows of wet school shoes just about anywhere, willing them to dry.

\* \* \*

I am not certain how it begins – if he is standing, sitting, or lying down. But I wake up and I am startled by his hands shaping me, the strength of his arms, and the length of his legs folding my body this way and that.

He has lived a little longer than me. At dinner, he remembers a time when Orchard Road was a two-way street. His way is always quiet, always gentle. I find this soothing. If he ever looks at me directly, eyes drinking in mine, drinking me, I see a hint of tenacity, of spirit that I recognize, and I will myself to look away.

\*

Saturday nights growing up in Popo's house were "Maggie Mee" nights. Popo would then take a break from cooking, and we would wait instead for our turn to cook our own packet of instant noodles. If we were lucky, we could add slices of char siew and kai lan.

\* \* \*

My hands feel raw from all the chopping, washing, cooking. He startles me again, this time, walking into my kitchen with plates in hand. I take them from him. I turn away and I remember, a long time ago, my grandmother loved a man in a similar way.

\*

The old silver-colored swing still stands in Popo's garden. I am too big for it now. But once, when I was six, I accepted a challenge from a neighbor's son to climb aboard and swing higher and faster than him.

I am a little girl, lying face up to the sky. My head is heavy, listless in a pool of blood. The neighbor's kid is screaming incoherently.

At the General Hospital, my body is covered with a piece of cloth. I feel very cold and very scared. Alone, I think of Popo's sarong, her smells embalming me, and the idea of death lingers, an affable visitor, seductive.

\* \* \*

In the dream that startles her, they move with muscularity. They are shy and clumsy with each other. They are hesitant of hurting. They commit to grace and find familiarity, perhaps solace, in the uncharted landscape of friendship and the collision of bodies.

\*

The accident at the swing has left a small bald spot on the right side of my head, the stitches neatly tucked aside. Sometimes a hairdresser will compliment me on the sheer volume of my hair. Then his fingers chance upon the stark nakedness, and the sleeping scar will stir to life.

\* \* \*

## Achar

.....

### Ingredients:

3 large cucumbers  
3 large carrots  
1 medium-sized cabbage  
1 packet of French beans  
1 bundle of long beans  
12 red chilies  
12 green chilies  
A fistful of garlic  
1 packet of roasted peanuts  
3 tablespoons of sesame seeds  
Salt and sugar to one's taste  
Vinegar

### Rempah:

20 to 25 red chilies  
A fistful of shallots  
A fistful of candlenuts  
A generous dash of turmeric powder

### Method:

- Cut the cucumbers into thin rectangular strips. Remove all the seeds. Add a tablespoon of salt to the cucumbers and set this aside. (The salt will help draw out moisture from the cucumbers.)
- Cut the rest of the vegetables into thin rectangular strips.
- Bring the vinegar to boil and blanch all vegetables, except the chilies, with it.
- Lay blanched vegetables to dry on a flat tray, preferably under the sun for about an hour. The vegetables must be as dry as possible. Squeeze excess moisture from the vegetables with a towel.
- Peel and pound the garlic. Squeeze it dry. Fry this.
- Slice rempah ingredients as finely as possible. Blend/pound it. Fry the rempah in oil.
- Ground the peanuts.
- Add rempah, peanuts and fried garlic to the dried vegetables and mix well.
- Add salt and sugar to taste.
- Set this aside for serving about 2 days later.

There are faint lines on your face, whispering a story. I want to place my fingers there, and stay for a while, listening.

\*

Early mornings on school days at Popo's house, I sit at the dining table, head bent forward, chin touching chest. Popo stands behind me, her hands parting and sifting through my hair, tying it into a long tight braid.

No one else is awake at this hour. The kitchen is dark. We are alone, my grandmother and I, my curtain of hair binding us.

Popo thinks my hair is too thick. Stubborn, she declares, recalling an ancient Chinese belief that such is the nature of girls with too much hair.

Once, in the City of Angels, a man named Steven said the same thing, as he kissed hair fanning across pillows and sheets.

My husband likes me putting my hair up. He tells me, this way, he can enjoy my face.

But I know what he enjoys more.

He enjoys seeing me reach with undressed arms to release all that hair, and he enjoys even more, the sensation of hair tumbling, tumbling down towards him.

\* \* \*

I am trying to remember what it is like each time you say goodbye. I think I hear words masking intentions and truth. I see you lean down, my face turns at an awkward angle, and I feel the promise of lips caught on hair.

One of the women in your life wears hair cradling her head. I wonder if the sight of her ears, her neck, her eyes, her nose, her mouth, delicate and unadorned, stirs you.

At Thanksgiving in Los Angeles, Steven helps me with my bags, walks me home up steep stairs. Steven kisses me goodnight, eyes shut, his hands journeying through my hair. When he finally opens his eyes, Steven tells me that he can no longer be with me. His words, I still recall. *I love you, I just can't be with you anymore. It's not you. It's me.*

Riding the Santa Monica Big Blue Bus, my hair, pulled high on my head in a dancer's bun, feels as heavy as my heart. The bus chugs down Wiltshire Boulevard and familiar scenes – of Steven eating with me, balancing groceries, walking the dog – taunt me. I need to erase Steven from my life. I need to erase these memories like shards of glass cutting me.

Shigeko-san begins by snipping off my ponytail. I tell her to cut my hair as short as possible.

*Kami kitte kudasai. Please, onegai-shimasu, Shigeko-san.*

I avoid the mirror. I surrender to the feeling of cold scissors darting against scalp, and the sound of hair falling in pools on the floor. About an hour later, Shigeko-san exclaims in pleasure, *Tammy-chan, honto ni kawaii desu ne!*

But, I don't feel beautiful.

Neither do I feel free.

I feel, I look, sad.

*Daijobu, Tammy-chan? Daijobu?*

Wearing hair so short in the middle of winter, I soon learn, is a

mistake. My ears get cold easily. I walk to class, eyes cast down. And I am mistaken for someone else.

Eric takes my picture.

We become friends.

We become lovers.

We stay friends.

Mrs. Nakamura, returning from Hakata Restaurant before midnight, notices my platform sandals outside Eric's room.

Eric says, *Tammy-chan, totemo kawaii desu ne, daisukii desu.*

But my heart is hollow, Eric, and my hair too short.

I cannot abcdefghijklmnopqrst you back.

Eric is angry.

I tell him, he is too young, too young, and I need, I need.

Eric says he can be all I need.

So we go to the MOCA.

We watch Kazuo Ohno dance.

We watch *Ju Dou, Raise the Red Lantern, Red Sorghum.*

We eat at Matsuhitsa's, at Hide Sushi, at Chaya Brasserie, at the Rose Café.

We attend poetry readings in Hollywood and on 3rd Street.

I cook curry with apples.

I fix miso soup, gohan, grilled fish, and cold tofu for breakfast.

At dinner, we clap our hands, bow our heads briefly and invite his grandmother's spirit to eat with us.

*Obaachan, itadakimasu!*

We drive to San Francisco.

We drive to Watsonville.

We drive to Big Bear.

Downtown at the Japanese American Museum in Little Tokyo, we peer at computer screens and see Bob Nakamura – 10, 12 years old – interned during the war.

Eric teaches me a new word: *itsuka*.

*Itsuka?* When?

When, Tammy?

When?

Eric teaches me another word: *itsumo*.

*Itsumo.* Always.

*Itsumo, Tammy-chan. Itsumo aishiteru,* Eric says.

Eric runs into the ocean off the Santa Monica Pier, and I dive in after him.

Wait, Eric!

Wait.

Winter passes and soon it is summer in New York. Now my hair falls almost to my chin. Mike calls from Texas and the memory of a younger girl, sitting at the edge of a bathtub in her panties waiting for him to wash her hair, returns to still a beating heart.

Popo tells me I am too young to marry Mike.

Mike tells me he cannot be with me because now he is with her.

Popo tells me once you hurt a man, he will never forget.

Mike reminds me to move to New York City for dance.

Evenings after ballet and PE days, I wash my hair in the bathroom beside Popo's bedroom. I like being lost in the cold water raining on me, and dream often of ocean and flight. Between dreaming and the sheer length of hair, time crawls and I forget.

I forget the mismatched furniture.

I forget my mother's unhappiness and its blunt shape.

I forget there are seven of us, plus my brother and myself audibly growing up in Popo's house.

I just forget.

\* \* \*

I forget your face sometimes.

I have a picture of you in my mind, long legs, languid on a red couch, drinking tea. I like the shirt you had on that day – crisp with blue patterned flowers.

I like its humor.

Sometimes, as women, we discover ourselves immobile and without choice.

When it was time for me to marry, I, a beautiful, educated Peranakan girl in colonial Singapore, had no choice in the matter. The uncle next door on Duxton Hill was fond of me, and wanted me to be a part of his family. He had a nephew from Indonesia whom he wanted to see settle down with a good girl.

And so the matchmaker, my parents, his family stature, my Methodist education, chose for me. I chose instead to blind myself to your sloth, to the persistent liquor, to the smell of many women accompanying you. These were not easy choices to live with. There were also seven young children, seven mouths to feed. And often you were never home. When you did come home, my words were impatient, perhaps harsh. You are not as educated as I am. You do not know what it is to want. You do not know what it is to be a woman, and to need.

I made other choices. I chose to allow her, your other wife, a final meeting with you. I chose to ignore my hurt, and chose instead to hold on to serenity as she ranted at me, angry that you were dying. And to my daughters, to my granddaughters, yes, I admit, once, I have known love with another.

He was not a fancy man in the manner you were. He was scholarly, mild in manners, bold in intellect. I chose that moment when my mind could soar, my body shot through with fire, then ice, and then the burning again. I chose when to arrange my legs and ankles in scented shapes. I chose to lock them, knees pressed tight. And now until the end of my days, I choose always to remember.

I remember you, my husband.

My husband, I remember to offer food, burn incense, bring flowers to your grave.

My husband, I remember you.

My lover?

I forget.

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