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FIRST FIRES



*...but I am bound
Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears
Do scald like moulten lead.*

– William Shakespeare, King Lear

SAL

In those months, the sun scorched my skin and I felt its heat in my veins. My purple blood simmered under a blanket I wanted to peel off. My insides felt charred. I went a strange shade of brown. My skin started to crack.

A potato baked on high in the microwave.

In those months, the bristly smog scratched me everywhere. My eyes stung from its pricks, my nose itched and my skin erupted. The little cracks meandered, evolved into thicker canals that dried and burst into fissures. In those months, the clouds skulked under a wall of thick black ash and their greyness coloured my face. In those months, the angry sky spit planes out and rivers swallowed them.

You are lucky.

You are safe from the heat now. The ugliness of dry, sunburnt skin. The ozone layer, the greenhouse effect. Things everyone talks about but nobody believes. If you came back you would not recognise the world. You would not recognise me.

In the months you were gone, the world and I grew greyer.

The ash and smog from the fires covered my skin for too long. The greyiness seeped through the skin, entering the capillaries. The impurities that had lain quietly in the background huddled into a formidable force that gushed into the heart, the lungs, the brain. I let the weather infect me. I stopped trying to protect myself. I willed the weather to do its worst. Kill me. Give me cancer, AIDS. Something incurable.

You would sneer, of course. Tell me what a disappointment I turned out to be. How weak. And you had wanted us all to be strong. Especially me. Because I was different. I believed you. I fought all the time feeding on your conviction. After you left, I had nothing to prod me on. All that energy seemed unnecessary.

There was no point.

Life moves on. Our grandiose plans mean nothing to the world. Your strength, your integrity changed nothing. You wasted time attempting the impossible. You were trying to move nature. Convince the fires they need not burn. Away from you, I had time to reflect. Think without your breath blowing down my neck. The stale hot air howling through the fine hairs on my back, singeing the shafts.

I should have risen from the ashes like Lady Lazarus. No, you wouldn't have liked her. Okay then, I should have risen from the ashes like a phoenix. If you were around, I might have. Clichés came to life in your presence. You had a way of coaxing everyone into a romantic mould of your own concoction. You melted away scepticism like seaweed. You let these simmer in a big pot of sugary ideals. Mistrust melted away in the increasing heat of your conviction. Never too hot. You knew

over-zealousness would raise alarm. Embitter your syrupy speeches.

Subtlety was your strongest point.

You added a hint of humour for colour, to disarm and confuse, then gently poured your brew into a favourite mould. Then, you waited it out. Let things cool your way. Most people didn't mind. They were happy to play the part. Anything to escape reality for a while.

It was as simple as making agar-agar° from scratch, you said.

Your mother was a great cook. You must have watched from a safe distance as she boiled the agar-agar on an arang° stove. The black charcoal ashes and the heat would have bothered your sinuses. You would have sniffed and wiped your snot on the collar of your T-shirt. Your mother's keen eyes must have found you out immediately. Her quick, thick arms would have delivered stinging swipes to your legs. Almost daily, heavy wooden ladles tattooed your thighs with red streaks when you were a child. But despite your mother's efforts, wiping yourself with corners of your clothing comforted you. You never quite outgrew the old habit.

Old habits stick.

Like pulut°, that gummy, sweet, yellow rice your mother stuck into little glass cups before jamming a boiled egg over it. She did not let you help because your hands were always too dirty. Black with mucus and the charcoal ashes you would crush in your hands to make snow to throw over your sister's head. When she caught you, your mother's long handled spoons descended not on you, but on Auntie Jammi. Her legs were swiped almost daily too, often because she failed to keep you out of mischief.

Your mother called the crimson streaks on both your legs *warrior marks*.

When your eyes reproached her, she would say, "See, I told you? Very pain, right? Burning, right? How many times I have to tell you! But you never know how to listen... too clever, too brave. So brave you do bad things and then so stupid you get caught, right?"

Your mother was never idle so there would be a pause at this point. She would stop to taste and stir pots of gravy, to finish pounding muddy spice mixes in her mortar or to dice cuts of mutton with her cleaver. Whatever she was doing, her tools always performed a dual function. Wooden spoons stirred and struck, pestles crushed and pointed, cleavers chopped and conducted.

"Eh, the two of you better listen to your mother carefully. Life is too difficult for you to be this brave and this stupid. You want to be a pahlawan?° Then you better remember, warriors live difficult lives. They always go too near fire. They always get burnt. Always have scars. You better pay attention! Be careful, be smart! If not, you will burn and burn."

How could you not pay attention when she waved her inch-thick ladle so close to your faces? Your mother brought you up on her own, working as a caterer for weddings. It was a difficult life. She taught you to believe that every life is difficult, or should be. It was one's duty to prevent life from getting out of hand. Difficulties were fires. If you kept them in check, you could learn from them. You simply had to know how to fan them the right way.

But if you stopped paying attention, they would roast you alive.

You learned this the hard way. When you were a little older, your mother put you to work making satay^o at weddings. The catering business was getting very competitive. But your mother was formidable; she had been paying attention. She knew what people would like. Freshly grilled satay was an excellent gimmick.

Business picked up.

At first, the infinite precision involved in skewering chunks of meat and then roasting them over a blazing fire appealed to you. You fanned the dancing fires on the arang grill with such flourish and skill that the guests were charmed. You were good at making satay.

But the job became routine, the constant audience tiresome. Always, there would be a band of children gawping near the fire. It annoyed you. You became resentful. You stopped paying attention. You let stray sparks sting the skin of your adoring little onlookers. You burnt a lot of meat. People began to complain. Your mother couldn't swipe at you in public so she told you calmly that laziness always led to unpleasant returns.

"Never be lazy, Fir. Pay attention or you'll get burnt. Fire or no fire... you'll get burnt. Wait and see."

A mother's curse is potent, you used to say.

Soon after she delivered her advice, you burnt your arm making satay. You had to be rushed to the hospital. The third degree burn left an angry keloid on your left arm. Decades after the accident, well-meaning strangers would stop to ask about the scar and suggest remedies. None of them worked. It never stopped looking red and raw. The thick pink ridges on your arm

always looked like little volcanic craters waiting to explode.

Your mother wasn't upset.

"Scars stay with you so you don't forget," she said.

She seemed almost satisfied.

You never forgot. You did everything with a watchfulness that would have impressed a cat. You got the right job, got the right promotions and at the right time, picked the right wife.

Then you had us. The right number of children. Three. In the days of "Two is Enough", you wanted three. Ma^o protested. Auntie Jammi had just come home from her first hospital birth brimming with too much milk for her fourth son and horrifying stories of birth and sterilisation at KK.^o Her delivery had been easy. Like his three older brothers, Munzir had slipped out of her so obligingly that she spent her entire time at hospital comforting a young mother who had twins and an accidental sterilisation. She said so many women were having their tubes tied that the hospital got confused. Ma began worrying that this would happen to her. She wanted to stop at two. It was what everybody else was doing. The tax incentives were wonderful. There would be fines as well. And how would this third child be registered for school? Talk of expense normally swayed you. But this time you were immovable. You knew you were right. Two was not enough. Three was better. You tried explaining it to Ma but she couldn't understand. You let her think it was a whim.

It was careful planning.

For a while, everything went smoothly. According to plan. You had Adam first, then Sarah. A boy first, then a girl. Your own mother

had got it wrong. You were hardly any help to your sister. Adam was three years older than Sarah. You trained him to protect her from birth, making sure he watched over her like a professional guard dog.

The third child was a problem.

It took a long while for you to decide what you wanted me to be. Too long. You had to think through your decisions but you also had to act fast. You wanted your children evenly paced. Exactly three years apart. I was already formed, a solid, healthy girl when you decided I should be a boy.

It was the first time things did not go according to plan.

It shook you. But only for a little while. You were always quick to recover. I was a sign. A reminder that plans failed sometimes. You had to make the best of it. You knew it was just a matter of fanning the fire the right way.

I was a challenge. A fire to fan.

You knew you couldn't bring me up like Sarah. She arrived a month early; slight, nervous and almost breakable. You must have planned that too. She was always suffering from something. Not anything visible or disgusting. She had mild stomach upsets, headaches. Fever. She was treated like something precious and fragile. Care was to be exercised in the food she ate, in the clothes she wore, even in what was said to her.

Sarah was your vision of a lady.

I was different. I defied you at birth by being the wrong sex. I deceived you even in the womb. The doctor had been sure that

I would be a big strong boy. I was a changeling. The devious one. You called me your chameleon.

My body showcased my moods almost effortlessly. I changed colour all the time.

I was even more light-skinned than Sarah whose golden skin was the envy of all the other young mothers in the kampung.^o But my skin was almost translucent. Its thinness wasn't attractive. You could see the veins and the capillaries swirling about my face, making in-roads, meeting in cramped spaces before swerving off onto their own paths. If anything or anyone annoyed me, I turned pink from rage and the effort of crumpling my face into a scowl. Reparations had to be offered immediately and if they were not, my lungs unleashed such thunderous screams that there was no air to spare for breathing. I went quickly from pink to red, to a pale iodine blue, and if still allowed to continue, I turned a sickly shade of yellow.

It was a colourful time in my life. I yelled a lot as a baby.

I came yelling out into the world, disturbing Friday prayers at the kampung surau^o next door. Sarah had announced her arrival with soft whimpers. I was handed to you still yelling. Such magnificent lungs. A big yellow baby with long thick hair overpowering a tiny head. You still thought I was another Adam.

There was only one Adam.

It took a while before reality struck you. I was too healthy. Too loud. Too defiant. You didn't understand why I wasn't a boy. You knew I could never be Sarah's protector. But at least you were sure I would not need Adam's protection. Adam and Sarah were a package deal. People would stop and ask if they were twins.

They belonged to each other. Adam could not be expected to protect me. He had his hands full with Sarah.

You had to make sure I could take care of myself.

The first sound a child hears is very important. It determines character. A Muslim child always hears the Azan^o first. Words in praise of God.

Words to live by.

The sceptics will call this superstition but I know the first words I heard ruled my destiny.

Minutes after birth, you held my head to your lips and whispered, "Difficulties are fires."

It came unbidden, unplanned. Your mother's voice speaking through you. Ma would have been horrified. She would have accused you of being irresponsible. Failing in your first duty to me as a father. You never told anyone that you had whispered your mother's words to me before the Azan, except me. You couldn't wait to tell me.

As always, you planned it carefully.

Four was a special age in our family. To you, it signified the end of babyhood. A time to start moulding. Sarah was given a life-sized doll's pram for her fourth birthday. She tried to put me in the moment she received it. Ma told me I turned yellow so fast, they were afraid I would stay that colour forever. Even as a one-year-old I had a keen sense of dignity. I would not be Sarah's doll.

I turned four less than two months after Dadi's° death. Still, you insisted on a proper party and bought me extravagant presents. Richard Scarry's *The Best Word Book* and a lantern.

Constructed expertly out of bright red cellophane wrapped around a thin wire frame, its edges were fringed with orange tassel that swung lightly in the breeze. The orange scales painted neatly over its long body ended in a swirl of colours, a fiery tail. It even had sharp white teeth and grey talons. As I held it carefully, black eyes winked at me through long lashes. It was such a magnificent dragon. Even Sarah was impressed.

You told me it was a phoenix. But I didn't want to believe you.

"It is not! Phoenix die... Baba,° you said. Burn and die. My dragon won't, Baba!" I glared at you, my face already changing from red to blue.

"They come back after. They come back better, stronger. Don't you remember?" Your calm only infuriated me. I was convinced I was being fooled.

Just days before, Adam had shown me a picture of hairless grey chicks emerging from a basket of broken eggs and told me that we were all doomed to look like them because Ma kept all her eggs in the same basket. I continued to have nightmarish dreams of my arms withering into limp grey wings even after Ma made Adam explain his lie. Unlike Ma, you were never treacherous enough to participate in any of Adam's fibs but as his deceits became more elaborate, I grew more wary. Bad dreams were tolerable but with the lantern, the stakes were higher. You had already shown me where the candle would go. The phoenix with its propensity for burning and dying should surely not be led so near a flame. It had to be a dragon. Dragons who winked

at you with such cunning were not stupid. They would not risk getting burnt.

"Baba's hand burnt up. Satay fire. Long, long ago. How come it's not stronger?"

"Not hand, Sal. Arm. This is my arm." Your face turned dark.

The satay story was a family favourite. Dadi used to whisper the story to us at bedtime though she always made us promise not to mention it to anyone. Adam and Sarah knew better than to break a promise to Dadi and they would never have challenged you. But my temper and my status as the baby of the family had always given me leverage till then.

I was too sure of myself.

You had to put a stop to it.

My birthday fell during the Lantern Festival. You took me out to the park, lit the candle in the dragon and let me loose in a sea of glowing lanterns. I didn't know the other children at the park. They stared resentfully at my lantern and didn't speak to me. They stuck their tongues out at me and whispered dark things to their parents in Hokkien. Turning their heads slightly, the adults looked unhappily at my dragon and urged their children away.

Most of them had cheap paper lanterns, pale pink, green or yellow cylindrical things. They looked tacky and clumsy beside my magnificent dragon. The flames in those fragile lanterns flickered about too much so they could only get a faint light.

My red dragon stood alone in the darkness. It seemed to glow with molten fire.

I remembered watching the long line of lights dotting the darkness from my window the year before, wishing I could be a part of it. I had come to show my dragon off, hoping it might attract a friend. Flustered by the unexpected hostility, I turned pink, stuck my tongue out back at them and strutted along with my dragon. I swung it about too much. But you waved at me from a bench and didn't warn me.

The cellophane caught fire much faster than paper would have.

I'd only been in the park for five minutes.

Pride and fire. You said that ate my dragon. I swung my dragon about too much. I strutted too much. I stuck my nose up too high. Then, I cried too much. I could have tried to stop the fire. Instead, I chose to stand still and cry myself blue. But I was a clever girl. I was right. It wasn't a phoenix after all.

For the first time, being clever and right was a punishment. I stopped changing colour that night. When I cried, I stifled my sobs in a pillow lest I burnt another dragon with my pride.

Difficulties are fires.

After this triumph, it became your mantra. To keep you calm on unexpected occasions. To give you time to think. From then on you delivered your mother's platitudes to me as if they were verses from the Quran.

You always went back to your mother.

Dadi died unexpectedly. She was only fifty-nine. A big woman with stout ankles and the strength of a man. She had no known illnesses. She slipped stealthily away in her sleep. The doctors

said it was her heart.

You never believed them.

You were sure your mother had planned it all. Life was difficult and she was tired of fanning fires. She must have willed herself to death. Only someone like her could have done it. She was always in perfect control.

She could even control the weather. She would sniff the air, the skin on her nose wrinkling into a prune in the middle of her face and say that a storm was brewing. Sometimes you wondered if she was a witch. She was never wrong.

Your best friend drowned because he wouldn't listen to her. It was a hot day and he had wanted to go fishing at the big canal at the end of the kampung. She refused to let you go. Wrinkling her nose, she sent you off to your homework and told Adam to go home.

There was a storm brewing. When it rained very hard, water could fill the longkang^o to the brim. Rainwater gushing through the canal created currents strong enough to drown a grown man. She knew that both of you swam there on the sly, all the kampung boys did. It was one of the few things she let you get away with. But not that day. Twelve-year-old Adam left without you, followed by a troop of boys.

You never forgave your mother for not stopping him. You named your first-born after him out of spite. Every time you held him in your arms and called him by his name you would search her face for some sign of remorse. It must have infuriated you when she agreed to the name without even a murmur, when she showed no sign of remembering, when she registered no

surprise at your choice. You thought you had defied her at last. She was always saying how babies named after someone who had been unfortunate would inherit the misfortune of his name. And so, you cursed her first grandchild.

Poor Adam.