

Ah... the  
**f**ragrance  
of Durians  
*and other stories*

David Leo

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## AH... THE FRAGRANCE OF DURIANS

F<sup>E</sup>W people really understood the passion Madam Moh had for durians. If there was something which this poor widow, living in a small, dank and dilapidated room in old Chinatown looked forward to each year as it sped by, it was that time of the year when she could savour and exult in the taste of that awesome fruit. Ah... the fragrance of durians. It was enough to set her heart yearning. No wonder June, beset with heat and high humidity, was Madam Moh's favourite month.

By an old kerosene lamp which provided only a faint light, the simple woman would be counting the dollars and cents she had saved in a little, rusty cigarette tin. The few odd dollars were all creased and dirty. Her skinny fingers trembled as she poured them out of the tin, eager with childlike excitement, not so much for the touch of money as to feel the power it embodied. A good durian could cost as much as twenty dollars. But Madam Moh would be content with something less expensive. Fifteen dollars was all that she could afford. If she could wait for the glut, which normally arrived mid-season as rapacious vendors competed to unload the fruit, or for the tail-end of the season when most durian lovers had had their fill, she might be able to get more for less. By then, too, she could have saved a little more.

By day Madam Moh roamed the back lanes collecting discarded carton boxes and performing a mixture of odd

jobs; folding take-away lunch boxes, stitching buttons and hemlines, and stuffing soft toys. Sum Sum's magazine stall on the sidewalk downstairs was a good source of income at night. Madam Moh would offer to look after the stall for a dollar or two. Most times, she would be sitting by to keep Sum Sum company, and the two women would yarn all night long.

"The durian season has arrived," said Madam Moh one evening.

"Aye, it's too expensive," remarked Sum Sum.

"Aiya, once a year, why worry about the price? But I have some good news; Ah Long told me the price would fall."

"Fall? Even then, it will still not be cheap. Since when, anyway, is durian cheap?"

"Ah Long said there were many lorry loads coming from Malaysia. Too many, he said. So the price will fall."

"You believe him?"

Madam Moh shrugged her shoulders. Ah Long was a young man who lived two doors away. He was a notorious job-hopper who professed to know everything under the sun. Last year he reaped a small fortune selling the thorny fruit, and gave his neighbours a treat. He made a bid for five huge baskets at a wholesale market and retailed the durians at hefty street prices. However, he was not getting into the business this year as, according to Madam Moh, he foresaw a glut. Moreover, there had been too much rain and the crop was not so good. They were sensible reasons, from a good head. But what Madam Moh never knew was that the spendthrift Ah Long was penniless; he had not a copper to make a bid.

"I don't understand why so many people are crazy about durians," said Sum Sum. "They're so smelly."

"Not to me," asserted Madam Moh. "I simply love the fruit."

Ah... the fragrance of durians. To Madam Moh it was exotic and exulting, like nothing on earth. For days after a durian feast, the fragrance would linger in her tiny room and remain on her fingers. She could not remember anything more uplifting. And the taste of the fruit's fleshy pulp was inexplicable, sometimes bitter, but always fantastic. No wonder the durian was hailed the king of fruit, ugly-looking, but overpowering when eaten. If she could afford the luxury, Madam Moh believed she could live on durians alone!

Sum Sum recounted the story of how a group of *gwai-los* on a tour of Chinatown, pinched their noses as they passed a durian stall. Those "foreign devils" were amazed at how the folks here could tuck into something so pungent. "The cheese the *gwai-los* eat, all blue and mouldy, and they complain about durians!"

\* \* \* \* \*

AH... the fragrance of durians and the sweet thoughts of Mui Kwai that it brought! Although Madam Moh would not admit it, she had fond memories of the orphan she adopted. Openly she balked at any mention of the name, brushing it aside with bitterness. So when Sum Sum asked what happened to Mui Kwai, Madam Moh frowned and grunted, "Heaven knows what's happened to her!"

"She used to bring you one or two durians every year, didn't she?"

"Used to, indeed! Not for five years now."

Mui Kwai was brought to Madam Moh without any identification papers, and while the kind woman provided the

child with food and shelter, she never sent her to school, afraid that she might be wrenched from her if this became known when she registered for school. Moreover, they were poor and an extra pair of hands to help with the sewing meant a little more money for sustenance. Mui Kwai grew up stubborn, rebellious and hating the world. As a child, she fought with boys, and knocked a tooth out of one who could not resist tugging her pony tail. She had fights with the older woman too, and sometimes disappeared from home after a severe bout, the skin of her legs smarting from the caning she had received. The first time it happened, she was found in the market picking *taugeh*. She made fifty cents in two days. Madam Moh was quietly proud of her. That girl sure had gumption! Poverty had made her a very hard person, one determined to collect her pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. At sixteen, she gave up sewing for dancing and became a much sought after hostess at a sleazy night club. Thereafter life became a little easier for Madam Moh and Mui Kwai.

“You want to know why I named her Mui Kwai?” Madam Moh said one day in better times. Mui Kwai was Cantonese for ‘rose’, and Madam Moh had hoped that the bud that was brought to her would blossom into a fine woman. The rose was no ordinary flower, the intricate pattern formed by its petals mysterious and alluring. It was the ultimate beauty.

Ah... the bitter-sweet memories of Mui Kwai. Madam Moh remembered the morning when the young lady came home with her first pay-packet. Mui Kwai had said she would like to celebrate her independence and, at the same time, give Madam Moh a treat. Arm in arm, they trotted down the street and feasted on durians at a makeshift stall. As they walked slowly home, Madam Moh wondered sadly if they had done

the right thing. She was afraid that Mui Kwai was growing up too fast in a harsh world. Ah... the fragrance of durians. It was good only while it lasted. But what choices were there for Mui Kwai, handicapped by a lack of formal education and an absence of worthy connections? To be a seamstress all her life? Certainly not, when Mui Kwai wanted so much more from the world. Maybe Madam Moh should look for someone who would make her a good husband.

Just as the old woman had feared, Mui Kwai got her first bag of woes at eighteen, when she became pregnant. Marriage was out of the question as the man involved was already married and had a family. Mui Kwai had a painful abortion in a backstreet clinic, and stayed home without work for months. When she got over her misery, it was back to the night club as a hostess. Toughened and more cynical about the world around her, she became belligerent and detached. Madam Moh began to feel her slipping away as she came home less frequently. Sometimes she stayed away for weeks, but whenever she returned, there was money; not much, but good enough to eke out a meagre living.

Madam Moh would have liked to have seen more of Mui Kwai, but she knew it would be foolish to demand it. Though the occasions of her homecoming decreased steadily with time, Mui Kwai seldom failed to return when the fragrance of durians wafted through the air. Madam Moh’s craving for the soft creamy pulp of the fruit and her longing to see Mui Kwai became one and the same desire each time the season came round. Her heart would pump with expectation as she strained to catch the sound of Mui Kwai’s feet clattering up the narrow stairs. Mother and daughter would then dig voraciously into the fruit that Mui Kwai had brought, and yarn away the

night. Despite the tumultuous early years, the two women had never felt closer as their relationship matured. But Madam Moh knew that Mui Kwai was not hers to keep. The last the old woman heard of her, after making some enquiries from the few acquaintances known to her, was that Mui Kwai had gone to Kuala Lumpur. For a while Madam Moh was upset and depressed. But she was a firm believer in fate.

\* \* \* \* \*

“I’m going down the street to check on the prices,” said Madam Moh as she made an excuse to leave the magazine stall when Sum Sum mentioned Mui Kwai. “Maybe they have come down.” With that, she strutted off, leaving Sum Sum shaking her head in disbelief.

Ah Long was right about the glut, as the prices had come down. Madam Moh noted with excitement the range of prices advertised on pieces of crude cardboard hanging overhead, or stuck between the fruit. Some stallholders were retailing their wares at six dollars each, a far cry from the twenty dollars in better times. There were also basketfuls of little ones for as low as two dollars each. But these were not good enough for Madam Moh, who had boundless reasons for turning her nose up at them. Too small. Not quite ripe. No fragrance. Why not give yourself a good treat after having waited a full year for it? By the end of the week, she should be able to afford three reasonably good ones.

“So did you buy yourself any durian last night?” Sum Sum asked her the following day.

“No, but the prices have come down. You can get quite a good one for six dollars.”

“Six dollars? I saw Ah Long just a couple of minutes ago. He said some were going for two dollars each.”

“Aye, who wants to buy those? They’re only good for making durian cakes.”

The day arrived for Madam Moh’s big splurge. She trotted down dirty Trengganu Street and turned into busy Smith Street. There were several stalls alongside each other selling the thorny fruit. Everything seemed to be in abundance, from the people to the noise, as the stallholders shouted out at the top of their voices to prospective buyers in fierce competition. Some people, oblivious of the surroundings, were gorging on the fruit at shaky wooden tables, placed at the edge of the narrow street. Motor vehicles tried to meander through the crowd, their impatient drivers tooting the horns relentlessly. Curious tourists stopped and stared. It was near pandemonium.

With experience garnered over the years, Madam Moh wasted no time in choosing her stall. From her recce she had decided that Tai Fatt had the best-looking *sampah* durians at the best prices.

Ah... the fragrance of durians. Madam Moh could feel it tickling her nostrils as she busied herself with the selection. She looked an expert as she held each durian under her nose and sniffed. If the aroma was absent, she was told, it could be that the fruit was still unripe. Then she shook it close to her ear; if there was a hollow sound, it could mean that the fruit was old or immaturely formed, and the pulp would be thin. She examined the thorns carefully and made sure that they were sharp and not too far apart. That would tell the age of the fruit. Much to the annoyance of the stallholder, a burly and unshaven fellow, Madam Moh took her time making



her pick, enjoying every minute of it. When she had finished her meticulous inspection of the fruit, she reached under her *samfoo* for her purse. Just as she took it out, a quick hand from behind snatched it away.

“Thief! Help!” cried Madam Moh. “Someone’s stolen my money! Help! Help!”

The old woman turned to pursue the thief, pushing her way through the throng of people blocking her path. Several heads turned too, only to watch nonchalantly what had happened. Some others rushed forward to fill the vacuum created by Madam Moh, and the stallholder continued to shout his wares at the top of his voice.

It was a futile chase. More bad luck befell poor Madam Moh as she tripped, fell and cut herself. She trudged home, weeping, her face and arms bleeding. Sum Sum was terrified at the sight of her and helped her upstairs to her room. Besides a table, two stools and an old bed, covered by a blanket sewn of rags, there was very little else in the room. A disused sewing machine, rusty through neglect, was left in a dark corner covered with cobwebs. There was a musty smell, heavy with incense, and the pungency of some herbal oil, quite unlike the fragrance of durians.

There was nothing much that Sum Sum could do but to offer words of consolation. She had enough on her hands without minding other people’s business. Shaking her head, she left Madam Moh moaning and groaning in her bed. The poor woman implored the gods for justice, unable to comprehend why they had been cruel to her. The days stole by without any intervention, earthly or supernatural. Madam Moh alienated herself from the world, seeing no one and talking with no one.

Not long after, illness befell her.

“She’s stubborn as a mule,” said Sum Sum to a neighbour. “She’s determined to starve herself to death.”

“Tsk, tsk.” It was all anyone who heard her story could say.

For Sum Sum, it was painful knowing that someone was suffering upstairs without being able to help. She was beginning to miss Madam Moh’s loquacity. Manning a magazine stall by a dim street light could be so dull without some gossiping as a diversion. Most of her customers were teenagers, some of them spending long hours browsing without buying, but Sum Sum rarely turned them away. Sometimes, when business was tardy, she wished more readers would hang by her stall even if they had no intention of buying anything.

\* \* \* \* \*

IT was one of those slow nights and Sum Sum was dozing by her stall, waking up now and then to ward off mosquitoes, when a voice fell sharply upon her ears, almost throwing her off her stool. She opened her eyes and beheld a young woman, quite round and all dolled up, grinning before her. Clinging on to the woman were two children, who had the same big, round, ebony eyes like their mother’s. Sum Sum swore they sparkled in the dark.

“Sum Sum, don’t you recognise me?” said the young woman. “I’m Mui Kwai.”

Sum Sum could not believe her eyes. “Oh, Mui Kwai,” she said, her heart pumping with excitement. “You look different; so much prettier. And your children, wah! They’re so big!”

Rev Anthony did not know what to say.

“Padre?”

“Yes, Joan.”

“What do you suggest I do with the dress? Mind you, it’s a pretty one.”

“Well, why don’t you save it?”

“That’s a good idea. I’ll save it for the finale.”

Rev Anthony was nonplussed.

“Padre?”

“Yes, Joan.”

“I know it sounds cruel, but she’ll die one day, won’t she?”

“As will all of us.”

“And when it happens, I’ll be prepared.”

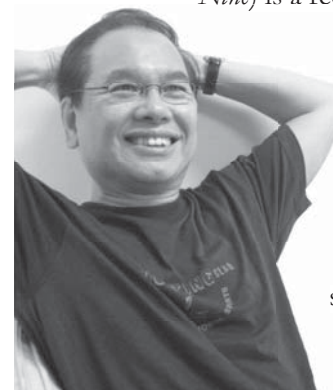
Pause.

“Padre? Are you there, padre?”

## About the author

David Leo has produced a wide repertoire of works that include poetry and prose.

He was awarded the Publisher’s Prize for fiction (*Ah...the Fragrance of Durians & Other Stories*), NBDCS commendation (*The Sins of the Fathers & Other Stories*) and Singapore Literature Prize commendation (*Wives, Lovers & Other Women*). A fourth collection of short stories (*News At Nine*) is a recommended secondary school text.



Between books, Leo writes commentaries on a wide range of subjects but specialises in aviation and customer service as a freelance columnist.

He enjoys travelling, swimming and word puzzles. A nature lover, he abhors cruelty to animals.