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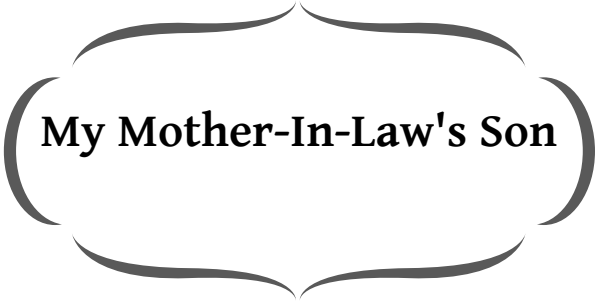
~ Julia d’Silva, Sub-Editor

“Josephine Chia has done it again; My Mother-in-Law’s son whisks you back to a crossroads in Singapore’s past when political identities were still being forged and a woman’s role was still to be wife and mother. Swee Gek is both gentle and fiercely loyal, and her intelligence cries out for more than tradition allows. But Singapore is changing...”

~ Sharon Couteau,
English Trainer and Interpreter, France

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My Mother-In-Law's Son

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My Mother-In-Law's Son
A novel by Josephine Chia



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Shadows Across The Sun

Isn't Singapore Somewhere in China-Luv?



NON-FICTION

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1955 to 1965

Frog Under A Coconut Shell

Your Body: Gateway To The Divine

Body And Mind Sculpture/Shape Up For Self-Discovery

Rasa Singapura/Taste Of Singapore

Boredom between two people doesn't come from
being together physically:
it comes from being apart mentally and spiritually



RICHARD BACH

The Bridge Across Forever

CHAPTER 1

A quick grunt. Just like that. No prolonged cry of passion or love. As if he had achieved a physical relief and nothing more.

How I wished the muscles of my sex were like scissors so that I could snip his off. Would I be hateful if I said Kum Chong disgusted me? I loathed his very touch. His sweat trickling onto me made me want to retch. As he relaxed, his big belly, flaccid and white, sank into me, almost squeezing my breath out.

We had married before the Japanese invaded our tropical isle. We lost our first child during the war, still an invisible ache for me. Despite the deprivations that were in the country, we were privileged. We survived because of the tenacity and entrepreneurship of Kum Chong's father, the man everyone affectionately called Grandpa Wong. I gave birth to one child during the war, one just after and the last, a few weeks after we entered 1949. They were all girls, my Mother-In-Law's bane.

"You're twenty-seven, Swee Gek!" Mother-In-Law had flung the words at me as if I was ancient. "When are you going to produce an heir for my only son? Four daughters! No use at all. Girls waste rice. After all that, they will belong to their husbands' families when they marry!"

Was Choy Yan not herself a woman? From the way my Mother-In-Law had spoken, it sounded like we were still in the Middle Ages, not 1949! Perhaps if Mohandas Gandhi had lived, he might have fought for women's rights, like he fought for the down-trodden, like the Untouchables. Mr Gandhi and my father-in-law were the kind of men I admired; men who risked everything for their principles. It was tragic that Mr Gandhi, who had lived for peace and nonviolence was himself assassinated this time last year. It made me sad and disappointed with humanity. I often wondered whether he would have said this, if he knew he was going to be killed:

"You must not lose faith in humanity. Humanity is an ocean. If a few drops of the ocean are dirty, the ocean does not become dirty."

If only my husband would stand up to his mother for me.

"Good night Gek," Kum Chong said.

It never occurred to him that I might seek the same gratification as him; a good woman should not express her requirements in sex. Within two minutes, he was snoring. In the tropical moonlight, his pitted face looked more sallow than usual. I must leave him. I could not bear to spend the rest of this existence with him; I would go mad! Yet I could not leave. Oh *Kwan Yin*, Goddess of Mercy, have pity on me, please help me find a way out of this dilemma.

Kum Chong's sonorous breathing and my own tumultuous thoughts kept sleep at bay. One image chased the other in my mind, offering me no rest. Then suddenly, my husband turned and flung leaden limbs over me. Even in sleep, he trapped me to him. How I longed for escape.

Gingerly I prised off first his arm, then his leg and slid away from him. I parted the gauzy mosquito-net, slipped out of bed

and tied a *sarong* over my bosom. I knew that the household was asleep, yet I tip-toed along the wooden floor in my bare feet. A central corridor separated our suite from Mother-In-Law's. The bungalow had been designed by my father-in-law, so that the principal rooms faced the sea and the morning sun. The verandah that wrapped itself right round the house gave us a place to sit outdoors to admire the view but it also helped the breeze to flow around the house to keep it cool. He named the place *Pasir Emas* in Malay; Golden Sand, after the endless stretch of beach with its fine sand. During the war, the Japanese Imperial Army nearly took over the house but Grandpa Wong was a prominent businessman, had important connections and spoke excellent Japanese so we were spared. Our family was luckier than others in the country. During the war, some big houses were commandeered by the Japanese; men, particularly Chinese men, were rounded up and shot, or beheaded, their severed heads put on display at prominent bridges. Anyone whom the Japanese thought had links with mainland China, their sworn enemy, was punished. That was the period of the *Sook Ching* Massacre, so named because it was a purge and cleansing. Grandpa Wong fought to keep his son safe and alive.

In times of adversity, many people displayed the strong and resilient side of their character, like Grandpa Wong. I loved his personality and his high ideals. We got on very well, to the chagrin of Mother-In-Law. If it was not for him, Kum Chong and I would not have married as Mother-In-Law wanted Kum Chong to marry a pure-bred Chinese girl, not a hybrid like me, a *Peranakan* whose ancestry was a Chinese-Malay mix.

"Don't be ridiculous, Choy Yan," Grandpa Wong said. "Swee Gek is suitable for Chong. She'll give him a new perspective in life."

Somehow Grandpa Wong's good genes bypassed Kum Chong, his only child. Kum Chong was petulant. He moaned about his loss of freedom during the war years, grumbled about the curb on his night-outs, the fact that he couldn't get butter and other luxuries which he was used to. Whilst the country was in turmoil and people suffered from hardships, he complained incessantly and tried my patience. I never realised what a wimp he was till the war came. My respect for him slowly diminished.

"Chong," I had said. "You had such lofty dreams when we met. Why don't you make use of your privileges in life? Maybe you can find work interesting?"

"Aiiyah, what do you know? You're only a woman."

I came from a less-privileged life. My mother was a hawker-woman selling *Nonya*-food in our village. We lived in a one room, *attap*-hut, sharing the bathroom and outhouse with the rest of the villagers. Initially I was glad to marry into wealth but I increasingly found it difficult to deal with Kum Chong's lack of understanding of the real world. He allowed himself to be mollycoddled by his mother, treated with such preciousness that it almost seemed unmanly.

"He doesn't need to work," Mother-In-Law said. "Why endanger his life when he can be safe at home?"

Now, the soft light of the moon came in through the lattice above the door and windows. It gave a sheen to the dark, timber floor and threw highlights on the antique vases that stood on the redwood pedestals along the corridor. I made my temporary escape from Kum Chong, opened the louvred doors quietly and stepped onto the back verandah. At once, I was greeted by the salty breeze which blew freshness into my face, cooling the sweat of my conjugal wrestling. I sat on the steps and let the sea-water lap gently over my feet. I took pleasure in the sound of the

shifting sand as the water ebbed and flowed, running under the house halfway up to the concrete supports which had replaced the wooden stilts of the older sea-side bungalows.

"Thank you Grandpa Wong! You had such foresight." I said softly, wishing that he was alive. He wouldn't let Mother-In-Law treat me the way she did if he was still around. "This is truly a magnificent setting!"

The moonlight dappled the otherwise dark sea. In the distance, shadowed fishermen were bobbing up and down in their *sampans*, fixing the lights along on the *kelong* so that each flared into life consecutively along the wooden fence-like structure situated about a mile out at sea. Apparently the fish were lured by the sequential line of lights which led them unsuspecting into the nets. The night air was strong with the scent of fish so I expected the fishermen to be duly rewarded for their vigil when morning came. Villagers and stallholders from wet-markets would swamp the beach in the morning to buy fish fresh from the boats. People bargained and talked in riotous tones at such times, speaking predominantly in Malay; the Chinese-dialect speakers struggling in fractured Malay. It made for a great rustic community atmosphere.

It was not that long ago, only four years in fact, in September 1945, that life had returned to some kind of normality when the British managed to oust the Japanese. They swiftly set up the British Military Administration to repair the war damage, freed the prisoners from Changi Jail, whatever was left of the 100,000 that were interned. The BMA cleared the wrecked warships at the dock. The *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* battleships had been decimated by the Japs. They restored as many of the essential services as possible. During the war, the Japanese Government had produced their own money. As the one dollar note had a

picture of two combs of banana on it, it came to be called *Banana Money*. After the war, these became worthless and many who had hoarded them became poor overnight. The British issued the new Malayan Dollar, with the head of King George VI displayed on it. But the destruction and chaos on the island caused by the Japanese took more time to set right; they had to find homes, food, and jobs for thousands. The British gave out free rice, sugar and salt to the people. In 1946, they set up eating places for the poor, calling the cafes People's Kitchen, in the same ilk as the Soup Kitchens in UK though each person had to pay eight cents a meal. For the labourers and workers, they specially set up People's Restaurant. Without food, people had no energy to work. And workers were needed to put the country back together again.

"Let us go and help in the People's Restaurant," I said to Kum Chong.

"What for? Got nothing more important to do is it? How about looking after your own husband?"

"There are people starving, Chong. You don't have to go. Just let *me* go..."

"No. I don't want you bringing any disease home!"

Schooling had been curtailed during the war. The Japanese had opened their style of education in their language. So the British quickly resumed English education. The vernacular schools reopened. There was a shortage of teachers.

"Can I go and train to be a teacher, Chong? The children are well looked after by the servants and your mother. I've not much to do at home."

"You're a rich man's wife. Why do you need to go out and work?"

"Teachers are much needed, Chong. When we met, you

said you thought I'd make a good teacher. With my convent education, I can be of help..."

"No! Stay at home!"

When we met, he had wanted to be somebody.

Fortunately, before he died, Grandpa Wong had persuaded Kum Chong to go and teach in a Chinese school as Kum Chong had been educated in one. Grandpa Wong and his friend, Sia Peng Hoe, and mentor, Tan Kah Kee, had helped establish several Chinese schools in Singapore.

"You'll have an opportunity to promote our language and culture, Son."

If Grandpa Wong had been disappointed in his son, he never showed it. He himself had been of working stock, having come over from China on the *tongkang* and having to work himself out of poverty. Grandpa Wong was helping the villagers in *Kampong Asli* to repair their village just before the war ended when a bullock which ran amok crushed him underfoot. The one thing which Kum Chong persevered with was his teaching. Four years on and the situation in the country was stabilising though poverty was still widespread. One of the most significant things that had changed after the war was the attitude of the people. The people of Singapore never thought that there was ever going to be a war. People felt the British were invincible. They set up forts along the coast with machine guns to ward off the Japanese Army, naval ships plied the Straits. Instead, the Japanese walked in from Peninsular Malaya, over the Causeway. This caused the locals to mistrust the might of the British to protect them or rule them. This germ of dissension began to sprout.

"You know, people in my school are fed-up with British rule," Kum Chong had said to me one day. "They feel that the

British are unfair, not funding Chinese education. It's wrong that us Chinese-educated have no chances of getting into University of Malaya, Teachers Training College, or work in the civil service."

"When you talk like this, Chong, you show that you care for something. You have purpose," I had said to him. "It reminds me of the fire you had when we met."

But his mother's pampering had doused the fire. He began to lose his temper regularly, like a spoiled child. His mood swings became difficult to handle. He became abusive.

The night scene was tranquil and should have evoked a feeling of peace and yet, I felt only inward turmoil. As though timed to remind me that I was a breeding mare for the Wong Family, Kum Chong's warm fluid oozed out of me. I felt defiled. Invaded. So I stepped into the sea to rid myself of him. The water rushed under my *sarong* like the sure hands of a considerate lover. The kind that I imagined my soul-mate to be, the man who would complete me, and I, him. Our life together would be a sharing, a loving. In my longing, fuelled by my unfulfilled desires, I used my fingers to simulate the probing and thrusts of my imaginary lover. Ahh!! What pleasure.

The water swirled around my body like a thousand caresses, puckering my nipples, the salt spray in my face became kisses. As the sand ebbed and flowed beneath my feet, I was sucked into a dizzying world. The sounds of the wind and waves were like urgent moans. I was lost in the sea, the moon and the stars and the sky.

"Brazen hussy!"

I spun round in fright. My *sarong* had slipped its knot and was floating about my waist, buoyed up by the waves.

Kum Chong stood framed at the doorway, his arms akimbo. He was bare-chested, his drawstring striped pyjama bottoms

fastened under his pregnant belly, a grotesque caricature of a man. Totally in reflex, I hastily pulled up my wet *sarong* and covered myself.

"You mad or what?"

"I was feeling a bit warm..." I mumbled the excuse, wondering how long he had been standing there, what he had seen.

"Huh! What if the servants see you?"

"No lah. There's nobody about."

"Shameless whore!"

What power there was in words, so casually uttered but so painfully received. Who supplied the potency of its thrust, the giver or the receiver?

"Come out here for what?"

Sometimes Kum Chong spoke English as he would Chinese. How ludicrous it was that he and I had to communicate in English, a foreign tongue; he did not speak my native Teochew or Malay and I did not speak Cantonese or Mandarin. When his mother was present, we managed with Hokkien. What emotional chasms we create with such discrepancy!

"You know I don't like sleeping by myself," he sulked.

His voice was less strident, the note of fear having dissipated at his discovery that I had not left him. It was a phobia with him, yet not one that I could use effectively for my own benefit. Indeed, coupled with this basic insecurity was another greater need, one in which he must be seen a man. Especially by his mother.

"Sorry. I had a headache and could not sleep."

I was a hypocrite and a coward.

Though I voiced meekness, I was churning so much inside

that in reality I wanted to scream at him for making me feel so wrong about everything I did. But the knowledge of his temper and heavy hand made me bite the inside of my cheek. There were many women like me who stayed even when their husbands were abusive. Like me, many women blamed themselves, or were too ashamed to seek help, or had no choice to leave because they had children or had no income. This sort of helplessness might change in the future for women, but for us now, in 1949, it was our fate.

“Come back to bed.”

He issued the order and turned on his heels, expecting me to follow, arrogant in his assumption. Sometimes I wondered how he would react if I did not obey. He waddled from side to side, padding ahead, another of his mannerisms which had become a maddening irritation.

I stole time, wringing the water from my wet *sarong*. Then with deliberate slowness, I shut the doors and followed Kum Chong, my shoulders sagging. When I entered the room, he was half-sitting up in bed, his arms folded across his chest, watching me as I stripped. The cool breeze, passing over my wet skin made my nipples grow taut and Chong pulled me to him. The unwelcome warmth of his body in the humidity pervaded like that of a gross animal in heat. His physical closeness suffocated me. Long ago, I had interpreted his possessiveness as love but now, I saw it as a kind of mental illness that had no resemblance to true love.

“It’s all right,” I said, reaching out to brush his hair from his sweating brow in a gesture of love I did not feel, hating myself for the hypocrisy. “Go to sleep. I’m here.”

“I love you,” he said.

How those words bound me to him! I no longer wanted to hear them. It was ironic that the more he tried to prove himself a man to the world, the less of one he became in my eyes. With my loss of respect for him, so too went the love I had once felt for him.

“You love me too, right? Right?”

He repeated the question in the face of my stubborn silence. He shook me violently.

“Right?”

Even in the moonlight, I could see his eyes widen and bulge as though reason had fled momentarily, as though some wandering spirit had entered him.

“Of course,” I stammered. What lies we utter when provoked by fear.

Satisfied, he sighed and snuggled up closer to me. Like a child soothed, Kum Chong traversed easily into the world of sleep. But every part of me yearned to be free. Unshackled. A terrible feeling of despair welled up in me. Was I wrong to wish for a different kind of life? One where I, as a woman, was allowed opinions, my identity not merely subsumed by my husband’s, making a statement of my own rather than being part of his?

If only he had understood my need to live, to do different things, to experience. I thought he felt the same when we met, he had such dreams to do great things, be somebody. But it turned out that he had neither the tenacity nor the courage, clouded by a successful father, mollycoddled by his domineering mother. He allowed her to mould his mind, the way she moulded his body, encouraging him to eat huge meals and have naps in the afternoon. He had been tall and handsome, his body solid and tough from weightlifting, but like his indolent mind, it had

deteriorated and turned into blubber. The latter saved him from the Japanese soldiers who rounded up healthy young men to become their enforced labourers.

“Your English education has made you full of opinions!” Mother-In-Law had scolded me. “Too bold! Not like a proper woman should be.”

“Yes,” Kum Chong agreed. “Why can’t you be a more docile and obedient wife? Cast your eyes down when you speak! Don’t act so brazenly!”

For the sake of peace, I wished my nature would allow me to be what he wanted me to be. But I rebelled. Perhaps it was my own restlessness which was making me more and more intolerant of Kum Chong. So many women of my time were forced to be at the beck and call of a husband, to only express a husband’s opinion.

I had a dream that one day, Asian women would make their own choices in the way they wished to live. But this was 1949. Perhaps it would take a few more years before liberation could come to women. Yet, I have watched European women walking about freely, free from the inhibitions imposed by fathers, brothers or husbands. It is said that they sometimes went out with men who were not their husbands – boyfriends they were called. What freedom! How I envied them. Sometimes, I wanted to laugh and talk openly, urged by the bubbling emotions within me. But I know, I would be chastised for my lack of propriety.

“It’s a woman’s lot,” my mother had said when Pak used to beat her.

Well, it was my lot now, but I was not as compliant as my mother. Men simply should not be allowed to perpetrate this sort of behaviour, treating women like chattels. Huh! I dared to

speak like this only in thoughts. I was as bound to convention as my sister-sufferers.

More than once, I almost summoned enough courage to leave Kum Chong, take my daughters away from him and teach them to live more meaningful lives. Then practical issues crowded out my valour. Where would I take them? How would I feed them? I had no money of my own, no talent. After all, I was more privileged than some of the children from my village. The missionaries had given me an education. Why didn’t I make something of myself?

Sometimes I felt that it would be much easier to walk into the sea and not look back. But only the thought of leaving my children without their mother stopped me. How selfish depression made me. If Mak could bear it all till Pak’s death, there must be some part of her in me to see my life through with greater fortitude?

Kum Chong’s body heat suffocated me.

In the drowsiness of half-sleep, I heard the first cock crow and the floorboards creak as the servants raised themselves from their platform-beds. Soon a muffled buzz of activity came from the kitchen. The day had begun with salutations to the kitchen god, offerings of food placed on the altar in front of its brightly-painted image. The rice was now on the clay stoves to be boiled until it became a soft porridge. Later, it would be eaten with salted eggs and fresh fish. Though the fragrance of the fish being fried made me salivate, my lids were heavy. Just as they were about to close, I heard the lusty cry of Mei Mei, my three-month-old, who had awakened for her morning feed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Josephine Chia is a Peranakan author who is published internationally in both fiction and non-fiction. She has lived in the United Kingdom for thirty years but has recently returned to her homeland Singapore to live. This second edition of Josephine's first novel is her eighth book. Josephine was also awarded the National Art Council's Arts Creation Fund in 2011



Photo by Makeover Inc

and the book that resulted, *Kampong Spirit, Gotong Royong/ Life in Potong Pasir 1955-1965*, was published with the NAC's Publishing Grant. The book is published by Marshall Cavendish Asia and released in March 2013.

Josephine's short stories were published in *SINGA*, a Singapore literary journal, before she migrated to UK. But her big literary break came when she became one of the winners of UK's prestigious Ian St. James awards for short fiction in 1992. Her short story was published together with the other winners by Harper Collins in an anthology, *Blood, Sweat And Tears*. Josephine has other winning short stories published in

anthologies. Full details of Josephine's books can be found on her website: www.josephinechia.com.

Josephine has an M.A. in Creative Writing and has run Creative Writing workshops in United Kingdom and Singapore. In Singapore, her courses were for the Ministry of Education (MOE), National Library Board, National Book Development Council and National Arts Council. She also mentors aspiring young writers under MOE's Creative Arts Programme. A yoga teacher trained by the British Wheel Of Yoga, Josephine also writes about yoga for health and cookery books.

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