

*When A
Flower Dies*

Josephine Chia

*The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
The Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not.*

—William Wordsworth, 1806

Note from the author:

This is a work of fiction. The main village in this story, Kampong Tepi Laut, is a fictional village and it never existed though it is representative of the seaside kampongs which did. However, all the other coastal villages that are mentioned in this book and which were eventually destroyed did exist both on the east and west coasts of Singapore. The three banyan trees that are featured in the novel are the few vestigial remains of the eastern kampongs. Though based on some historical facts, the unfolding of events is purely fictional.

Note from the editors:

In this book, we made the decision not to italicise terms and references that are at home in Peranakan culture. These would include Malay names and Singlish expressions. The act of italicising words from one's own culture is also an act of dispossession, and we would like to bring your reading experience closer to life as lived by the characters in this book.

Chapter 1

What a joy it is to come across a host of daffodils here in tropical Singapore! The temperature-controlled Flower Dome at Gardens by the Bay, simulating spring, has made the phenomenon possible—a twenty-first century miracle, surely? William Wordsworth would have been amazed. He had caught sight of *his* daffodils whilst on his walks in nineteenth century England's wide-spaced and hilly Lake District in Cumbria. It was his poem which Pansy Chan has always associated with these flowers:

*I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd
A host of golden daffodils
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.*

She was taught the English poem at St Teresa of Avila's Convent on the old East Coast Road, before land reclamation from 1966 to 1976 stole part of the sea and pushed the coastline out, altering the physical shape of Singapore forever and irrevocably changing the lives of the coastal dwellers. The image of the daffodils had lived in her mind as a symbol of beauty and freedom. And when she eventually saw them for the first time in England, she was smitten, their image

instantly becoming a reality which she fell in love with. She would also associate the spring flowers with George, and their constant love for each other. And now to see them here in her own home country was nothing short of a miracle.

Since she was a pre-war baby, in her youth the country was still a British colony and many of the English schools' syllabi contained references to its rich literature. This was a time when schoolchildren read Shakespeare, Dickens, Thackeray, Keats, Tennyson, Shelley, Blake, Eliot, Frost, Auden; the Bronte sisters, Austen and many others. It never occurred to Pansy that it was odd that young Asian children should be reciting *Here we go round the mulberry bush* when nobody knew what a mulberry bush looked like. Out of school, they read *Dennis the Menace* and *Desperate Dan* comics, Postman Pat, Roald Dahl, Beatrix Potter and Enid Blyton's *Famous Five*, *Secret Seven* and *Malory Towers* series, as well as Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. Young girls dreamt about having adventures, falling in love with knights in shining armour, or being free from parental tyranny at boarding schools in the UK. To them, England was a magical country where everybody was rich and children had lots to eat and had flush toilets, where there were no cockroaches or rats running around the base of the outhouses. England was where children had store-bought clothes, toys and books. Boys imagined scaling rocky cliffs and castles, discovering secret hide-outs, being slayers of dragons, and escapades with Robin Hood, Captain Hook, Captain Flint and Tarzan. They were taught maths in pound sterling, shilling and pence, when only the Straits dollar was used here. Even more challenging was learning the use of pounds, ounces and stones when local weight measurements were in kati and tahl.

But Pansy hadn't minded, had loved it in fact; the diverse cultures did not clash, they enriched her. For a girl living in a small, isolated kampong by the sea on the East Coast of

Singapore, with little possibility of travel, it was wonderful to be exposed to a different country right across the other side of the world, to its culture, lifestyle and literature. This was the era before mobile phones, the Internet, computers or easy air travel. There was only one phone box in the entire village that was the villagers' means of communicating with the outside world. Pansy loved English poetry, especially poems that described nature and brought the English outdoors to her in Kampong Tepi Laut. The village's Malay name aptly described its position by the sea, straddled as it was between the rivers, Sungei Bedok and Sungei Ketapang, one of the many places which had fallen victim to the land reclamation project. After the reclamation, even the two rivers had been redirected from their natural flow to pour into Bedok Canal, before they were permitted to reach the sea.

Pansy enjoyed poems which painted the colour and glories of seasons absent in the tropics. They taught her to be sensitive to the nature around her, alerted her to the changing moods of the clouds and sky, opened her ears to subtler sounds. Sister Catherine was largely instrumental in showing her how carefully selected words framed in verse could transport her into exalted experiences. It was Sister Catherine's very English, Home Counties' voice, scaling the poetic metre and enunciating the words ever so properly, that converted Pansy into a life-long disciple of poetry.

"Round your 'Os' and end your words clearly, Pansy," she said. "Don't talk like the rat-tat-tat of a gun. Hear the rhythm of the verse in your inner ear. Don't rush! Linger over the meaning of a word. Experience the emotion of the word. Feel with your senses!"

Poems like William Wordsworth's 'To the Small Celandine' or John Keats's 'Ode to Autumn' offered Pansy a virtual experience she would otherwise not have had,

except for that moment which George had shared with her when they were teenagers. She loved learning the poems by heart and reciting them, resonating with their rhythm and cadence as if she were recapturing a memory of an earlier life incarnated in Britain.

Even though the poetry was from and about England, there was a universality about it that transcended race and culture and touched the human heart deeply. Another poem that moved her was 'The Tyger' by William Blake. The majesty and awe of the tiger had come alive for her in Blake's telling, and the sense of the Creative Power inspired her:

*Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?*

"Listen, listen," Sister Catherine's voice comes to Pansy again. "Pay attention to Blake's choice of words. You can almost hear the heartbeat of the tiger..."

Beloved Sister Catherine, her unfailing moral support. Pity they never met up after she left Singapore. Despite her age and failing memory, Pansy can still recite the poem in its entirety. Except that these days, she cannot find any listening ear; people nowadays are always in a hurry, too busy and too preoccupied.

"Aiyoh!" her son Anthony said when she grumbled, "Who can be bothered to sit and listen to poetry these days? We don't even teach literature in our schools lor. Do you know that ten years ago we had forty thousand students studying literature but this year only three thousand students offered it as a subject...?"

“That’s so sad...” Pansy started to say.

“That’s logical what...” Anthony’s wife, Emily, CEO of Tiger Global Investments, interrupted. “Literature very hard to score ‘A’ what. What for waste time memorising such things? Doesn’t bring any benefit or pay the bills what. Remember what LKY said when he was trying to build a nation: ‘There is no time for poetry...’”

“Are you sure he said that?” Anthony said. “Hey, don’t misquote the guy...”

LKY. Lee Kuan Yew. Now ailing and nearly ninety. The present Prime Minister’s father. Builder of modern Singapore. Gutsy. Formidable. He built a wealthy nation from a land of mudflats and swamps, without natural resources; pulled up a post-colonial struggling country up by the bootstraps to shape into a First World nation. There was much to thank him for. There were also dissenting voices who levelled barbed remarks.

It followed that none of Anthony and Emily’s three daughters studied literature in school. Emily had named all her daughters after famous film actresses, called actors these days, so as not to be sexist—Goldie, the eldest at twenty-six, followed by Winona and Andie, all two years apart from one another. Nobody speaks of it now, but Andie was the result of Anthony and Emily’s last attempt to have a boy.

“I hate my name,” Goldie used to whisper to Pansy. “Mum is obsessed with film stars. I feel ridiculous when my hair is so black and I’m so brown!”

Pansy couldn’t let on that she disapproved of Emily’s choice of names as she would have preferred more traditional ones that had reference to the family clan. At least if she had to choose modern names, why not beautiful meanings and

positive attributes rather than names of actresses? But then who was she to comment when her own mother had given her an English floral name that was non-traditional too? To console her eldest granddaughter, she merely patted Goldie's hand.

It is true that in an era when information can be downloaded instantly from iPhones and iPads, not many have the inclination to sit and listen to a whole poem being recited. Those early days when multi-ethnic neighbours used to commune in the evenings outside their kampong houses, to sit and chat, recite poetry or Malay pantun, sing songs or tell stories, are now long gone, relegated to nostalgia, purveyed as 'heritage'.

Urban life in any major city like Singapore is a rush of continual activity from morning to night, many in full-time employment, struggling to pay off hefty housing and car loans; kids to drop off and pick up from school, tuition classes and extra-curricular activities; or for singles, shopping, binges at bars, discos and night-clubs; and for the fit and active, surfing artificially generated waves in wave pools, cycling and evening strolls in manicured parks. Others watch TV programmes in High Definition on numerous cable channels, or play video games on their personal mobile devices, immersed in made-up worlds. Some people even live in virtual worlds, buying, selling, negotiating, and even falling in love with online avatars and a totally invented life.

The pressure that all these impose is subtle. To sit or stand still doing nothing would be considered peculiar. Communication is expected to be instant, with people answering text messages and calls immediately. People send photos of their meal as they eat, tweet their every move, and post selfies on Instagrams, as if the whole world must be privy to the minutiae of their daily lives, as if such affirmation

rescues their lives from ordinariness and vacuity. Somewhere from the deep recesses of her mind, Socrates' words float into Pansy's mind, "Beware the barrenness of a busy life". Indeed, Pansy thinks, it is so easy to believe one is living a fruitful life if one is constantly on the go. The irony of all these modern modes of communication is that though it will only take seconds these days for someone to send Pansy a message or photo of her grandchildren, those seconds remain unused. But then, it was as expected. Her grandchildren are young adults with their own lives to lead: Goldie is already a full-fledged accountant, Winona, studying to be a doctor, and Andie, a lawyer.



"You have to take her home when I die," George Chan had said.

"Dad, you're not going to die..." Anthony had protested weakly.

Anthony had flown to England with his family when he was told that his father had advanced prostate cancer. George was seventy-nine, three years older than Pansy. Anthony and Emily were surprised to find him at home and not in hospital. George wanted to die in his own home, a home which Pansy had made for them in the countryside where he had set up his own practice after moving out of Singapore. Initially, the locals had been surprised to encounter a Chinese Singaporean doctor when they turned up at the surgery but they were respectful, and gradually respect and acceptance turned into admiration. Anthony was mildly shocked to see his father's gaunt face, his hair grown white. The deterioration had been swift. Of all the grandchildren, Goldie had seemed the most distraught. She projected a hard exterior with her

short-cropped hair and manly clothes unlike her uber-feminine sisters, yet Pansy suspected she had a soft centre.

“I’m a doctor, son,” said George. “No need to pretend with me. Even physicians cannot out-beat the grim reaper. We think we know so much but in effect we know so little. Yet, I can die happy only if I know your mother is going to be taken care of. I think she has the onset of some form of dementia, perhaps Alzheimer’s. We don’t know which yet. No point her living here in England all by herself. You take her home. I was going to do it once I realised that my cancer was terminal, but it looks like I might be too late. So we’ll see a solicitor today and sign over the power of attorney to you, so you can handle all our affairs, take charge of all the money. It might not be long before she won’t be capable of managing these things. Promise me, you’ll take care of your mother...”

Anthony was their only child.

“I promise, dad.”

“Maybe you can have her live with you...?”

“Oh, that will not be possible lah,” Emily rushed in quickly. “With our three girls, the live-in helper, and another to cook and clean, our apartment is already quite crowded...”

George had been too weak to argue. He wished that Anthony had interjected, but he didn’t. It appeared that Anthony’s voice had begun to slowly diminish as his marriage trudged on. In the old days, it was the woman who lost her voice and her identity when she married. But today, a woman has economic freedom, so she can assert herself; her earning power is sometimes greater than her husband’s, resulting in a new breed of men. Fortunately, Pansy did not hear the exchange. She was busy in the kitchen preparing roast beef with all the trimmings, especially Yorkshire pudding, which

she knew Anthony loved to lace with a deluge of gravy, quite apart from his predilection for Peranakan cuisine and Singapore hawker food. Goldie was taking a walk along the pebbled beach whilst her sisters were busy updating their Facebook and other social networking accounts on their iPads.

“Grandma, this place is heaven!” Goldie enthused when she returned. “I don’t know why but lately I’ve come to love the sea more and more. The sea here is so wild, so alive!”

Pansy did not have the presence of mind to pay much attention to Goldie then as her mind was on cooking for George. But later, she was to regret not taking the opportunity to tell Goldie about her own love for her village by the sea on the East Coast of Singapore.

Anthony had been eleven when they migrated to the UK, after George was disillusioned with the Singapore authorities. George had found a place by the sea, which reminded them of their old home in coastal Bedok in Eastern Singapore, the home that was destroyed. George had bought a house in Bracklesham Bay, on the south coast in West Sussex. This was ten miles from the Roman walled city of Chichester that has a canal that runs to the sea. Bracklesham was near the area where the Roman army had landed in the south to invade Britain in 43 AD, giving rise to the eponymous name, Roman Landing.

George had fallen in love with the English countryside and nature, and so had Pansy. It resonated with her homeopathy, treating people with medicinal plants, flowers and herbs. In the wild forests, fields and hedgerows of England, she could find many healing plants—dandelion for the urinary system, hawthorn for improving blood circulation, burdock to treat skin problems and hundreds

more. She was a qualified staff nurse, but when they moved to the UK, she decided to resurrect the skill she had inherited from her mother, Kim Guek, whose name meant 'golden moon' in Teochew, one half of their ancestry. The other half was assimilated and borrowed from Malay culture, creating their unique Peranakan heritage. Kim Guek had been good at cooking, especially her nasi ulam. She was also famed for her bunga rampay and knowledge about jamu, the Indonesian art of healing with spices and herbs. These gifts, Pansy had inherited like a treasured heirloom.

"Kalau nak jaga diri, mesti pakay jamu," Kim Guek had said in their Peranakan patois, with her usual wisdom. "To care for your body, use jamu. Herbs and spices use the body's innate capacity to heal itself. They're not as intrusive as manufactured chemicals."

George and Pansy had taken long walks in the woods, on coastal paths and hills, enjoying the outdoors and the fresh air. They felt alive when they felt themselves at one with nature. Pansy would cook some mee goreng, nasi goreng or nasi lemak to carry in their backpacks and they would picnic in the highly scented bluebell woods, amidst wild heather in the hills, or on rugged cliffs studded with yellow buttercups and white daisies overlooking the sea. In England, you can lie down safely on the grass, baring your face to the sky, blue clouds, and sunshine. This might be a bit iffy in the tropics, where you probably need to watch out for grass snakes, or red ants with their piercing and long-lasting bites. England soothed them after their tussle with bureaucrats in Singapore when their home and village were destroyed. England was a balm to their spirit and soul.

Anthony had seemed happy enough to scuttle about, trying to catch butterflies and dragonflies, chasing seagulls, crows and magpies to coerce them into taking flight. He

often busied himself with taking things apart and then putting them back together, searching for their inherent form and design, from dandelions and daisies to Meccano and Lego sets. He could be an engineer but his artistic side persuaded him otherwise. The varied buildings of Great Britain, fashioned from local materials which were available a horse ride away in days of limited conveyance, made him conscious that architectural designs had to express the flavour of its locality.

Pansy had been overjoyed when she learnt that Felpham, the thatched village where the prophetic William Blake had seen his visions, was only the next village on their arc of shingled coast, and that Rudyard Kipling had lived just a little further along in East Sussex. Buoyed by the same joy when in Hampstead, she had walked the high-walled, narrow dirt path past John Keats's home, strolling on the beautiful heath which he had walked on. Pansy loved poetry though she had no talent to write it herself. To be able to live in a country where her favourite poets had lived and penned their memorable poems was her dream come true. It was better to have the opportunity to rub shoulders with their spirit and ghost than not at all.

Anthony, however, became less enamoured with his adopted country as he got older. He felt his complexion and features set him apart and he seemed estranged from his ang moh schoolmates. In West Sussex, there were just a few Asian classmates, mostly children of those who owned the Indian, Chinese or fish-and-chips restaurants, or convenience stores. He felt he stood out in an uncomfortable way.

So he was glad, when he was eighteen, to escape to Singapore to serve his compulsory military service. National Service (NS) was a requirement that he had to fulfil to retain his citizenship. To his delight, he discovered he felt more at

home there. He loved the bustling city, its efficient transport system, its cleanliness, and most of all, its sense of safety and security. Also, its culture and roots called out to him. It seemed that having been away from his native land made him the fonder of it. So he decided to return there in 1975 after NS to study architecture at the University of Singapore.

“Mum, dad, it’s much more fun for me back home lah!” he had told them on his return from his stint with the army. “I have so many cousins, uncles, aunts and grandparents. In England, you’re the only family...”

It was Anthony who at least partially repaired the estranged relationships between them and George’s parents, locating them in Singapore, searching for his maternal great-great-grandparents in Malacca, tracing his roots and putting the family tree together. His interest in heritage became an obsession which Emily put a stop to. Anthony returned to Singapore and embraced its culture readily. So, George and Pansy had to let him go.

When Anthony made his move, George considered if it was time that they too should return to their home country, but George wasn’t sure if he was ready. He heard that laws had become stricter since they left. He had become used to the liberal way of living in the UK and could not see himself coping with all the restrictions in Singapore. George decided that it would probably make better sense for them to return when he had retired, perhaps when he was toothless, so that his bite would no longer be potent. Perhaps the powers that be would have forgotten his short burst of rebellion.

After all, when Anthony did his NS, they were only in their thirties, still active, and England offered them beautiful walks, woods, hills, rivers, lakes, open spaces and seasons, which were lacking in Singapore. Pansy could take herself

off to the Lake District whenever she desired, and visit Wordsworth's former home in Hawkshead. So, they stayed on.

Subsequently, Anthony had met Emily Yip, a fellow undergraduate, studying Finance and Business, and they had fallen in love. George and Pansy had returned for the graduation and wedding. As Anthony now had his own life and commitments, they felt it was fine for them to stay on in England, although Pansy had initially wanted to return when their grandchildren were born.

In retrospect, George felt he should have bought a small apartment for them to retire to in Singapore. Property prices were not as astronomical as they had become lately. But the apartments had all looked so cramped and tiny, unlike their beautiful house in Bracklesham Bay, with its front and back garden, and a lovely glass conservatory where they could sit under the weak, wintry sunlight, and yet be warmed by the electric radiators. Their conservatory had French windows which opened out to their back garden with its low hedge, affording them a glorious view of the bay and the expanse of clear sea, horizon and sky which stretched all the way to France. There was something spiritually uplifting about large, open space unadulterated by any buildings. At night, the moon and stars became intensely bright twinkling jewels against a dark canopy of sky. When the January tides were high, the giant roiling white waves would rain pebbles onto the beach, and the rattling sound they made gave them great pleasure. Pansy would definitely miss all of that.

"Find her a nice apartment that's not too far from you in Newton so that you can drop in regularly, yes? There's enough money to provide her with a maid to care for her, if her condition should worsen," George said weakly, concerned that he himself was not going to be around to take care of his

beloved wife. “Get her one of those ground-floor apartments in a luxurious condo, where there is a small garden or patio. You know how she loves her garden. Maybe one with a water feature as well, as she’s going to miss the sea. I know that it’ll be too costly to buy an apartment by the sea in Singapore...”

“Don’t worry, dad. I’ll see to it,” Anthony had vowed.



The recently opened Gardens by the Bay is a godsend. If Pansy had returned from England earlier, before the gardens were opened, maybe she would have been more disillusioned with Singapore’s frenetic city life, a complete contrast to the countryside where she had spent so much of her adulthood. One of the first things she did upon her return was to visit the Botanic Gardens so that she can see old tembusu and kapok trees, familiar flowers and plants. She was pleased to discover that they had a section called the Healing Garden, reminiscent of the one she and her mother had cultivated in their seaside kampong with common kitchen herbs, roots and vegetables that could be used for healing: lemongrass, ginger, galangal, garlic, onions, pepper, pandan and many others. She had stood in their midst, breathing in their different fragrances and recalled standing in their garden by the sea, with butterflies flitting all around her, the Painted Jezebel with its lovely colours being her favourite. She imagined Kim Guek smiling at her, beautiful as ever in her sarong kebaya, eternally youthful. She never even reached fifty.

The Singapore Pansy returned to was not even remotely like the Singapore she had left. The old attap-thatched villages had been expunged; huge tracts of forest and fields had been uprooted and cleared, concrete and more concrete poured in their place.

As it is, she has already missed a whole spring in England which makes her edgy, as if something is missing; she somehow feels unfulfilled, waiting for something to happen which doesn't—and cannot. Much as she loves the local flowers, bougainvillea, bunga santan, chempaka, bunga melor, orchids and other species, their continual sameness of presence all year round doesn't create the same sense of urgency or delight as that of a flower which has a transient, short-lived life. There is a kind of magic to watch a bud pushing to burst forth, folded leaves starting to unfurl, a bare tree with bare branches suddenly acquiring a crown of foliage like in a time-accelerated photo sequel. This movement in nature seems less obvious here.



Anthony had brought her back soon after her accident.

“I want to stay here,” Pansy had said tearfully after George’s funeral in England, resisting Anthony’s initial suggestion to go back with him. “This is where the memory of your father is for me. This was where we spent nearly fifty years of our lives together. Every piece of furniture we bought together, every plant that is in the garden has his touch!”

“Mum, you can’t live here on your own lah!” Anthony had said. “You’re nearly eighty. If anything happens to you, I’m too far away to deal with it immediately. It’s not a hop in a taxi to get here, you know. It will take almost a whole day of air travel before I can even see you! And then it’s another two hours from Heathrow...”

“Why is your mother being so difficult? Really stubborn leh!” Emily said.

“Honey...”

Later, Goldie said to her, “I’d love for you to be in Singapore, grandma, so we can see more of each other. But I know it will be a wrench for you to leave this place. Because of grandpa and because there can never be a house in Singapore to replace this glorious view and idyllic setting.”

Despite her turmoil, Pansy could hear the concern in Goldie’s voice. And she was grateful. She was so fortunate to have a granddaughter who was so understanding. The girl dressed in a masculine way and acted tough but Pansy could sense her softness and her femininity. Her sisters wouldn’t even think of expressing such meaningful sentiment to Pansy.



For Pansy, the Gardens by the Bay is a treasure trove, a plethora of plants and trees from many different countries and climes, evoking lovely memories. They are her connection to her mother and also to George. Every flower and plant she sees reminds her of George and their happy times together in England, Europe, the USA, Canada and South America, including a gnarled and ancient olive tree that reminds her of their holiday in Roberto in Italy. Without modern technology, the Gardens could not have been created so swiftly. This was LKY’s *pièce de résistance*. His tribute to nature. He wanted his people to experience and live in nature despite the necessity for a modern metropolis of concrete, steel and glass. Pansy learnt that fully-grown trees, like the olive trees, bottle trees and cacti, were transported from their native lands and craned into place.

Pansy goes to the Flower Dome to enjoy the cool air; the seasonal changes in its floral displays help her to make the transition from summer, then autumn, and into spring. In a

country with a consistent climate, which affords no respite from the intense heat and humidity, the conservatories, particularly the Cloud Forest with its mock mountain of alpine flora, complete with artificial waterfall and swirling mists, has a delicious coolness which she loves. She smiles to herself when she sees locals who visit the domes, wearing jumpers, cardigans and hooded jackets, shivering. Using her annual Senior Card, which gives her unlimited entry, she sits for hours, savouring the sound of the cascading water or sitting on a seat under a pergola in the Flower Dome, breathing in the fragrance of the huge display of scented hyacinths, some pink, some blue, and imagines she is back in her own garden in England. If she closes her eyes, their lovely fragrance will carry her back to Bracklesham Bay. Any minute now, George might come out to the conservatory where she is seated, carrying a tray, covered with a white lace doily, the dainty china teacups filled with piping hot Earl Grey, some toasted teacakes, English muffins or scones on the side, with one of her homemade jams—strawberry, blackberry, apricot or quince.

“Tea for my lady?” he would say, acting the butler.

She would lift her face to look at him and the corner of his eyes would crinkle in joy and her heart would turn over. The memory of George both delights and grieves her. She is afraid of forgetting him, yet the memory of their love is tinged with the pain of their separation.



“I thought you were going to get me an apartment with a patio garden?” Pansy had said to Anthony when she was shown into her new home, after he brought her back to Singapore. He looked sheepish, glanced at Emily, then cast

his eyes down, wordlessly. Pansy continued, “This place is... so... small. There’s nowhere here to plant my flowers and my vegetables.”

But her voice is frail, defeated by the loss of George.

“Very cheap to buy vegetables from NTUC what. What for plant?” Emily said in her CEO voice. “Here, you have the condo garden what. This way you can enjoy the garden without all the hard work. At your age, you should just relax. What for dig and dig? Do you know what kind of crazy prices they charge here in Singapore for apartments with gardens? All the girls need their own room now so we have to upgrade to a bigger condo. Where to find more money for an apartment with a garden huh? Do you know how many square feet that will be? It’s more than a thousand dollars per square feet in this area, you know...”

People who don’t work with the soil, planting seeds or seedlings and watching them grow, would not know the intense pleasure and joy of gardening. Pansy loves being in the fresh air, loves the digging, the planting, the caring, and even the weeding. There is a deep connection to the rhythm of life when one’s fingers touch the earth and living things. To see something you have seeded and nurtured bloom into a thing that is alive and beautiful is akin to a small miracle. It’s almost like bringing forth a child.

To know how to select and grow flowering shrubs that bring the butterflies or the bees is a delight; to understand the crucial moments to plant seeds before the ground is covered by frost, for them to sprout at the precise season, is a skill. Maybe her mother, Kim Guek, had foresight when she gave Pansy her floral name. Her mother who was not even articulate in English! One of the nuns at the Catholic convent had mentioned that a pansy was a flower in England with a

happy face, and Kim Guek had seized on it for her daughter's name. She had gifted her daughter with green fingers too.

Gardening was also George's way of relaxing when the weather was kind and the light was still good when he got home from the surgery. He would don his gardening clothes to mow the lawn or trim the hedges. Other times, they would work together in their garden, loving being outdoors. They would chat and discuss what was to be done, which plants needed immediate attention or compost, which needed trimming, which were plagued by snails or moles. But sometimes they would simply work in companionable silence. They would squat by the flower beds with their spades, forks and shears, deadheading wilted flowers and leaves, or just refreshing the earth by tilling it, so it would re-oxygenate. Occasionally she would turn to look at him whilst he was unaware, and felt that her cup truly runneth over.

“Wah! Straight from plant to wok,” George used to exclaim. The courgettes, runner beans, carrots, potatoes, or tomatoes she had plucked or picked just before their meal could be prepared simply because of its freshness, sautéed lightly with butter and crushed garlic and maybe a touch of light soya sauce. “So delicious. Can't get fresher than this man!”

Occasionally, just for the fun of it or to remind themselves of their former home, they slipped into playful Singlish. They may have been away for years but in their hearts, Singapore was still home. For dessert, Pansy would serve him strawberries from their own patch or blackberries she had picked from the brambles in the countryside hedges, laced with Dorset cream, crème fraiche or ice-cream. They had their own miniature cooking-apple tree and she would combine the sliced apples with the tart blackberries to bake into a crusty pie. George would invariably comment on the

delicious aroma wafting through the house when something was baking in the oven.

“Oh, the fragrance! The fragrance!” he would enthuse. “Wangi sekali! My mouth waters! This is the epitome of homeliness.”

Usually, George’s eyes would light up and he would express his joy as equably, wrapping his arms around her from the back if she was busy at the sink or busy cooking, nuzzling her neck. How she longed for his touch again, his breath on her neck.

He was her soul mate, and now he is gone.



Pansy goes up close to the daffodils that are planted on raised banks in the Flower Dome. She wants to smell them, as if in smelling their gentle scent she can be transported back to England, to her life with George. Smells are such profound triggers of emotional memories, taking one back to one’s childhood or adult experience. Like the scent of the bunga rampay, the Peranakan and Malay floral potpourri always reminded her of Kim Guek, though the Malays called it bunga rampai. Or the tiny creamy bunga melor which Kim Guek used to thread into her sanggul for special outings. Pansy remembered watching her mother comb her long hair, then twist it into a chignon, inserting the string of bud-like flowers to complete her ensemble with the elegant sarong kebaya. So many things link Pansy back to her past. Is this what it is like to be old? To recollect the past as if it has only just happened and yet forget what you did minutes ago? The two people she had loved so strongly are appearing in her daydreams more and more until she sometimes feel as if they

had not died. It is still an uphill task to disassociate herself from the memory of George. There were so many more flowers that made her think of him. He never failed to buy her flowers for her birthday—long-stemmed roses and irises, tiger lilies, stocks and camellias.

“Darling, look!” George had said on one of their outings in England, pointing in the direction of the water’s edge, under the chestnut trees.

They had gone to the lake on their regular walk the last spring they shared, though she hadn’t known then that it would be their last one together. If we knew that something was going to be our last, how differently would we have done things? Would we treasure the moment with greater intensity? Pansy tried to bottle up the precious memory, though she was becoming aware that it was already slipping from her. It is this that distresses her the most. That she might forget George, the shape and texture of him. Now she sets out with steadfast purpose to recall the memory so that she can stitch it into her decrepit brain.

Both George and she knew that the secret of enjoying the outdoors was to dress appropriately for the weather. The wind was still bracing, so George and Pansy had worn their down anoraks and thick gloves, their necks covered with woolly scarfs. If you were born in the equatorial belt, you never get used to the bone-chilling English cold. The trees were starting to come alive, fresh green buds unfurling from their branches. In the distance they could hear the bleating of the sheep birthing spring lambs. Everywhere in the animal and plant kingdom was evidence of new beginnings and cycles. It was such a thrill to be part of it all.

People who have lived only in the tropics cannot know the anticipatory feeling that fills the heart when the long,

grey winter is over, and the arrival of spring and all the new life it heralds is in the air. It is simply magical to see the first crocuses push their colourful heads out from the frosty ground; the dainty snowdrops, appearing shyly, small, white and bud-like, clustered against fresh, verdant green.

“Oh, daffodils!” Pansy had clapped her hands in delight when she followed George’s pointing finger. His smile was broad. He was the glass-half-full type, always managing to see something positive in everything. He had the kind of manner most suited for a doctor, hardly ever losing his cool. The only time that Pansy could remember him getting angry was when he thought the fishermen in their seaside village in Bedok were unfairly treated. He raised hell with the authorities.

“How do you expect people who spent a lifetime by the sea to cope with living in high-rise HDB flats?” he challenged. “How are these fishermen going to earn their livelihood? What? You expect them to dangle fishing lines from their tenth floor?”

“George, George!” the Medical Registrar had said. “This is 1970s Singapore. A period of great change. You have to learn to go with the flow if you want to survive. Don’t talk so loud. Walls have ears. Just calm down. Why are you getting involved? It’s not as if you have any relatives who are fishermen...”

George. Her George would not simply toe the line. He couldn’t be apathetic, unconcerned. Was he foolish? Still, it was too late to matter now. Every spring, no matter how many times Pansy had chanced upon a host of daffodils on their walks, she was filled with the same unadulterated joy as if it were a first encounter. Flowers had this effect on her, wild ones particularly, strewn across the woods or beautiful English meadows, bluebells, forget-me-nots, foxgloves, even

dandelions and cow parsley. English people thought she was a bit loopy, hiding their smiles at her, picking cow parsley and dandelions to put in vases indoors when she first came to England. How could Pansy explain that she loved the delicate white tracery of the cow parsley, even if it was a path and roadside plant, considered a weed and fodder for cows? And that the golden dandelions reminded her of the golden marigolds that grew wild in her youth in Singapore? Any display of nature's abundance made her deliriously happy, made her feel connected to life. But the English were right. It was no good trying to put weeds indoors, as they needed the fresh outdoor air and suffocated indoors, dying rapidly as soon as they were picked.

“I wandered lonely as a cloud...” George started to recite and they both completed the poem together, holding hands and swinging them as they walked, as if they were still young lovers. Although George was largely pragmatic, he had an artistic side too, and loved poetry as much as Pansy.

In the Flower Dome, Pansy walks slowly, in search of more daffodils. Her hips and knees ache; age and the harsh English winters had exacted their price, chilling bones and weakening cartilages. If her mother was still alive, she'd probably prescribe a dose of jamu beras kencur—a pounded mixture of a special type of galangal, rice, rock sugar, salt and tamarind, made into a drink, which was Kim Guek's antidote for rheumatism, sore muscles and joints. Pansy herself had found that some of the Asian herbal drinks were too pahit or bitter, so in her work in England, she had treated patients with local homeopathic cures and flower essences like Bach Flower Remedies. Jamu would have been too foreign for the English. Homeopathy and alternative therapies became popular in the UK only in the late 80s and 90s, fuelled by

the New Agers. In medieval times, women who used herbs as remedies were often accused of witchcraft and burned at the stake. Now, women happily declare themselves as witches and practise Wicca. Seen in this light, perhaps Kim Guek was a White Witch too because she had been so capable of healing others. Whatever magic she wielded was always for the good of others.

There the daffodils are, and their small cousin, the narcissi, planted in pots, on banks and in the flower beds, scattered under the arched, giant glass sky of the Flower Dome. To piece this brittle, curved jigsaw together must have been an engineering feat. Opposite to the Eden Project in Cornwall, the purpose of the conservatory here is to keep the hot air out and the cool air in. The energy for the cool air-conditioning and the lighting comes from burning lopped branches, shrubs, leaves and grass; the whole system is eco-friendly, with a giant chimney hidden in one of the 'supertree' structures, steel conduits with a frame that house real plants and exude changing coloured lights at nightfall. These structures have now become an iconic feature of Singapore's new city seafront landscape as much as the lotus-shaped ArtScience Museum and the three pillared Marina Bay Sands hotel. Spread across the grounds of the Flower Dome are yellow daffodils, some sienna coloured, others white. There are single-tiered and double-tiered varieties, ordinary ones and tiny ones in clusters, like bright stars. She loves them all and can pretend she is in an English country meadow. Except that she can no longer share them with George.

A year after George's death, she had fallen in the woods and broken her hip.

"You see," Anthony, who was now an eminent architect in his late fifties, complained. "I had to rush all the way from Singapore. I was in the middle of an important project.

Told you, you should have come home straightaway after the funeral, as dad had suggested. But you're so stubborn lor..."

Curious, the way married people have the propensity to echo their partner and even morph into each other.

On that fateful day, Pansy had walked the usual trail through the beech woods that she and George had taken often. The slim, tall trunks of the trees with their silver bark were like friendly sentinels, so she did not feel lonely. There is an energy in trees that revitalises the heart, mind and body. Ancient druids whose names came from the oak tree, paid homage to their spirit. Like them, Pansy was a tree hugger, putting her arms around the trunks to absorb their life force, or sitting on the ground, resting her back against the tree. In Singapore, as a teenager, she had leant against the banyan and tembusu trees. She had two favourite banyan trees which used to grow near her seaside village. What names did she give them? She struggled but couldn't dredge their names from her teenage years. After she had arrived in England, she resonated with the tall oak tree and loved hugging it and leaning her back against it. She had thought of Sister Catherine the first time she saw an oak tree because it was Sister Catherine who had first told her about it in her letters from England.

All of nature offered its healing vibrations for free. Her mother and Sister Catherine had taught her that. Whenever she felt lonely, Pansy would go into the woods. She also wanted and needed to walk the familiar trail so that she could recall George's presence, the way his breath would come out in cloudy swirls, or the manner in which his coat or hip sometimes brushed hers as they walked, his hand clasping hers tightly as if he could not bear to let her go. She loved the pressure of his hand, its shape, just as she loved the presence of the length of his warm body next to hers in their cold bed.

“Oh, George, why did you have to go before me?”

The loss was still so raw. The tears ran unbidden.

Fortunately it was not a particularly isolated spot, as it was within the National Trust's commons. Historically, the royalty owned huge tracts of land in the UK for their hunting and their pleasure, so it had been decreed that some land should be set aside for the common people to enjoy. The National Trust had taken over the care for such places, besides heritage homes and buildings. Within National Trust ground, rangers were likely to be out and about, so Pansy had not worried about being alone. The sprawling English countryside still offered a sense of safety and trust that so far had not been violated.

A pheasant had called out in its distinctive creaky-gate call so Pansy had followed the sound, hoping to catch sight of a male with its plume of colours, unlike the dowdy brown of the female. Sighting a butterfly, bird or animal in the wild was still a delightful treasure. Her stout boots crushed the undergrowth and inevitably alerted the pheasant. In fright, it had flown up from its hiding place—it was a male pheasant. But its large wings flapping, so close to her, had startled and disoriented her, and she had tripped over a fallen tree. She had lain there on a blanket of damp moss in the woods for hours, knowing that she had broken something, unable to get up. If she still had Rusty, their golden-haired collie, he could have barked and alerted someone. But Rusty had succumbed to old age even before she and George had.

Of course, Pansy had not remembered to carry her mobile phone. Luckily, as was her habit, she had a vial of Bach's Rescue Remedy in her rucksack—it was perfect for dealing with shock and fear. Edward Bach, an English homeopath, had believed that dew found on flower petals absorbed the healing properties of the flowers. Kim Guek

would have been delighted to know about this as she had often harvested flowers for their healing capacity. Alas, Pansy could no longer tell her. Pansy squirted a few drops of the potion on her tongue to calm herself, closed her eyes and allowed the surrounding environment to relax her. She imagined George standing by and looking after her. She simply lay there till help arrived.

“You look so peaceful there, I would be tempted to think you’re lying down there on purpose,” said an Englishman, with typical English humour.

If he had not been walking his dog, who knows what would have happened. The incident persuaded Pansy that it would be wise for her to return home to the small island of Singapore, where every place was within reach and medical facilities and family were within easy call. Without George by her side, she didn’t find it as easy to do the things they had loved to do together. Especially at her age. Her decision made practical sense—but her heart had bled.

The daffodils in Flower Dome stand almost upright with their green stems, though many are bending over as if bowing in humility. Modern technology and new scientific expertise have made it possible for these flowers to be birthed in tropical Singapore. But still, it would be lovely to see them in their full expression of joy, fluttering and dancing in the breeze outdoors. Suddenly out from nowhere comes a light wind. Is it possible for this to happen in an enclosed dome? Pansy is puzzled. She looks around as if trying to see where it might have surfaced from.

Other people in the dome give her side-long looks as she frowns, looking this way and that, this woman—slightly stooped, with grey hair, looking a bit lost. The breeze caresses the back of Pansy’s neck and it raises goose bumps on her arms. For a wild moment, it feels like George’s breath. He

WHEN A FLOWER DIES

had a habit of blowing into her nape whenever he was in an amorous mood. Had he come to console her?

But alas, he is nowhere near. She is standing alone.