



*Each story glimmers like a tiny ball of coloured glass on a pair of beaded slippers, beautifully wrought and fashioned by a master.*

After **Kebaya Tales** and **Sarong Secrets** comes **Manek Mischiefs**, a rich, gutsy collection of short stories immersing the reader into the vivid, multi-hued world of the Peranakans. Here, the babas take centre stage: masculine perspectives, voices and protagonists are put under the spotlight, even as fiery and headstrong heroines pursue their passions in the face of powerful obstacles. The cast of characters seek to forge individual identities within a unique cultural heritage facing the challenges of modern times.



The stories are accented with photographs peppered throughout – of exquisite beadwork, bejewelled adornments, gilded artefacts from private collections, personal belongings of the babas, and of course, twinkling, manek-encrusted accessories.

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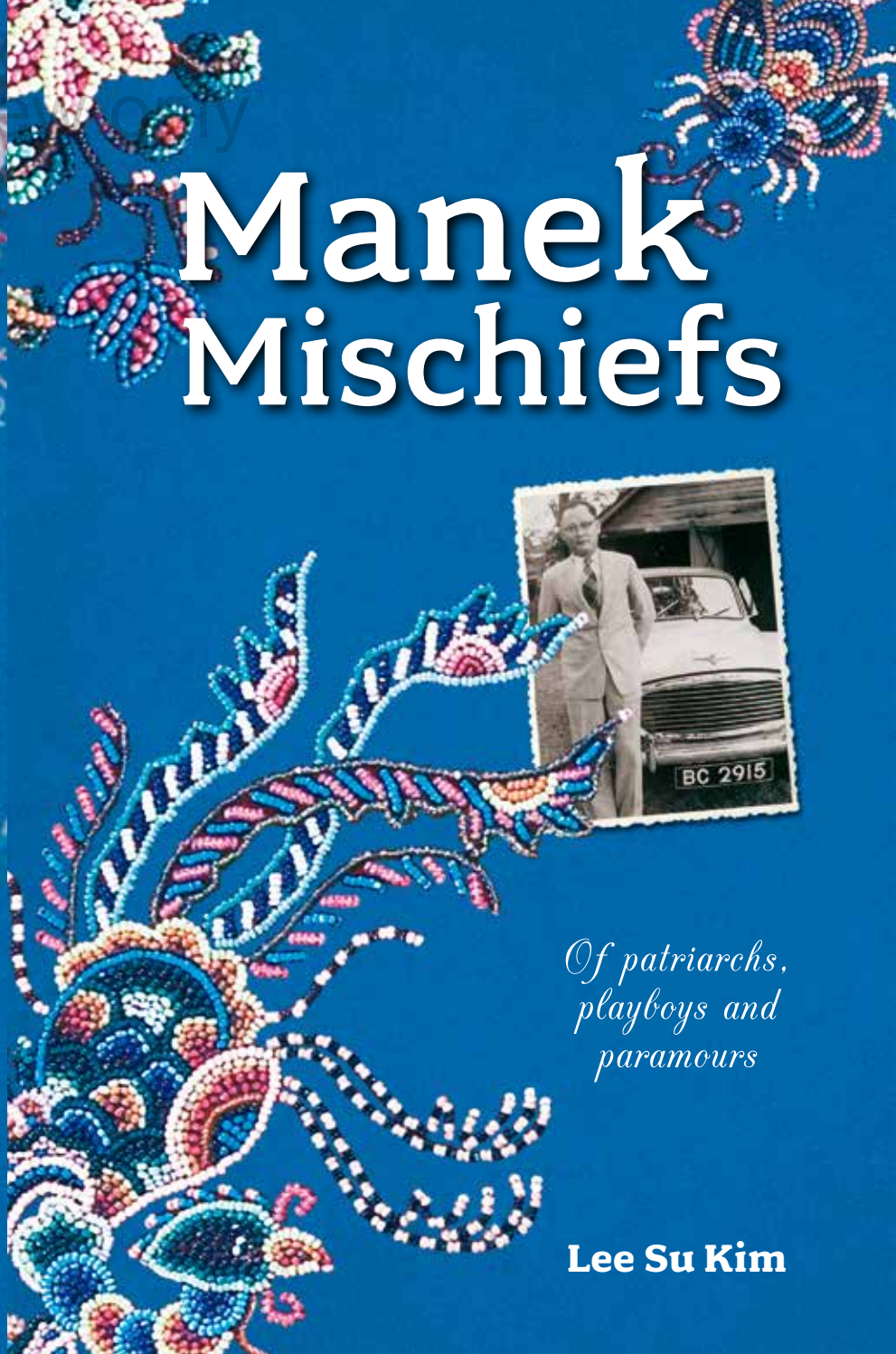
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Lee Su Kim

Manek Mischiefs

Marshall Cavendish Editions **mc**



# Manek Mischiefs



*Of patriarchs, playboys and paramours*

**Lee Su Kim**

For Review only

## *Praise for Manek Mischiefs*

In *Manek Mischiefs*, Lee Su Kim captures diverse aspects of the Baba Nyonya culture with gentle humour and a sharp eye. Her talent for voice and dialogue will have you chuckling even as your heart is breaking for her characters, whom she treats with unfailing sensitivity and generosity. These stories were very obviously written by someone with a deep but nuanced love for the culture.

*Preeta Samarasan,*  
*author of Evening is the Whole Day*

The eagerly awaited sequel to *Kebaya Tales* and *Sarong Secrets* is now here. *Manek Mischiefs* is another feast of intriguing tales based on the Peranakan community – family intrigue and rivalries, secrets of the bedroom, long-lost love re-discovered – all set against the rich fabric of this unique culture. Yet the cultural specificity also offers us universal themes to ponder. All as complex as the manek beadwork of the title.

*Professor Alan Maley, O.B.E.*

It is always a great pleasure to read Su Kim's fascinating Peranakan inspired stories. She has a great talent and ability to entertain and at the same time of being very informative about the various traditions and lives of the Peranakans. Personally, I have learnt a great deal and have had a most enjoyable time in so doing.

*Dato' Jeremy Diamond,*  
*author of An Exceptional Life*

# For Review only

Su Kim's stories are embroidered with humour and empathy. As she draws us deeper into a many-layered Peranakan world, she enfolds us within the colours and richness of the bead work, furniture and myriad artefacts that have remained an integral part of their culture.

*Cheah Hwei-Fe'n,*  
*author of Phoenix Rising: Narratives in*  
*Nyonya Beadwork from the Straits Settlements*

This book is definitely a must-read for those who love the Peranakan culture or have a passion for reading. (Lee Su Kim's) great sense of humour seasons the stories and the messages are delivered in such a witty way! She has ... not only preserved her Peranakan heritage but also enriched the culture tremendously, as reflected in all her stories which include all aspects of being Peranakan.

*Udaya Halim,*  
*President of Peranakan Indonesia PERTIWI*  
*and founder of Benteng Heritage Museum*

## *Praise for Sarong Secrets*

Su Kim invites us into a powder room where gossip, sisterly sharing and heartfelt confession remind us that nyonya women living in a baba world had to have extra pluck to transgress those social mores. In *Sarong Secrets*, she divulges the nyonyas' colourful idiosyncrasies and guilty secrets with ever so much wit and sympathy.

*Khoo Salma Nasution,*  
*President, Penang Heritage Truste*

The sarong remains embedded in the collective consciousness of people across Southeast Asia, not just in memories related to clothing and fashion, but also to tradition, family heritage, loved ones and sexuality. There are also powerful resonances with regard to pattern, texture and scent. Su Kim magically suffuses her narratives with all these sensations, while confronting them with the paradoxes, imperfections and the often uncomfortable realities of contemporary life.

*Peter Lee,*  
*Co-author of The Straits Chinese House and*  
*Honorary Curator, NUS Baba House*

## *Praise for Kebaya Tales*

Like the generations of babas and nyonyas who traverse these stories, this book is a succulent mixture of colours, kebayas, *kerosang* and conversations, of scents, spicy food and feisty families. Su Kim brings her sharp eye, her love of stories, and her keen sense of the verbal and visual to this delightful book which gives us a chance to savour the richness and diversity of Peranakan lives.

*Professor Alastair Pennycook,*  
*University of Technology, Sydney*

If there were such a word as 'nyonyanness', this feminine book would epitomise that quality. These bitter-sweet stories have the diaphanous delicacy of an embroidered, lace-trimmed Swiss voile kebaya blouse, the dark richness of the *buah keluak* - that Peranakan rival to the French truffle - combined with the piquant zest of a freshly pounded *sambal belacan*.

*Ilsa Sharp,*  
*Off the Edge*

For Review only



*Footstool cover in glass and metal bead embroidery*

*Image courtesy Ken Yap. First published in Phoenix Rising: Narratives in Nyonya Beadwork from the Straits Settlements by Cheah Hwei-Fe'n. Singapore: NUS Press, 2010. Photography by Sok Lin from Studio DL.*

# Manek Mischiefs

*Of Patriarchs, Playboys  
and Paramours*

**Lee Su Kim**

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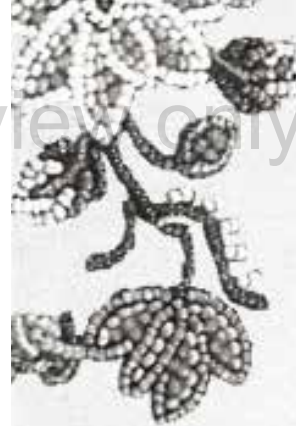
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*Dedicated to*

*Stephen J Hall  
and Lee Jan Ming  
with love*

*and to the memory of my parents,  
Mr and Mrs Lee Koon Liang*



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## *Preface*

*Manek Mischiefs* completes the trilogy of stories of the unusual and unique Peranakan community.

After writing two collections of short stories, *Kebaya Tales* and *Sarong Secrets*, I thought the series was completed, only to be coaxed and cajoled to write another collection. I decided to take up the challenge, this time focusing on the stories of the babas. Just as *Kebaya Tales* was inspired by my mother's stories, this book is inspired by a baba I loved very much and still do. He was my father, Mr Lee Koon Liang, a baba from Malacca who could not speak a word of Chinese but had an excellent command of English and Baba Malay. He was a wonderful and loving father, a man of integrity and courage with a great sense of humour. Unlike my mother, he was a man of few words, but when he spoke, his words always meant a lot. He enjoyed taking photos with his Brownie camera. I asked my Pa once why he took so many photos and his reply was, "To be remembered." One of these photos I remember well is of my mother in her sarong kebaya and her favourite pair of kasut manek.

The word manek ('beads' in Malay) is used to describe the minuscule glass beads from Bohemia and Czechoslovakia, brought over to this region by traders. In the past, beaded shoes or kasut manek and beaded items with intricate designs were made solely for weddings and for ornamental purposes. From the mid-19th century onwards, wealthy baba families tried to ensure their nyonya daughters were skilled in the domestic arts including beading and embroidery in



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order to become good wives and homemakers. A test of a well brought-up nyonya was her skill and patience reflected in the refinement and creativity of the beadwork items she made for the prenuptial exchange of gifts ceremony. Beaded items included kasut manek slippers for the bridegroom, pillow and bolster ends, decorations for the bridal bed, table mats and runners, covers for tables, mirrors, beds and footstools, cases for watches, magnifying glasses and spectacles, boxes for hairpins or jewellery, panels for door and window lintels and many more.

I grew up in an extended family setting and remember a home full of delicious, spicy and piquant aromas as my nyonya mother loved to cook, but do not remember either Grandma or my mother ever doing any kind of embroidery or beading. They told me they just did not have the patience or the inclination. However, watching them dress up for a formal event in their elegant sarong kebayas always meant watching them slip on, as the final touch, those gorgeous, colourful kasut manek, a necessary accessory to complete their graceful outfits. I have decided to name this book after the vibrant and brilliantly-coloured manek, the last book in this collection of stories about a beautiful heritage culture and community. It has been a wonderful journey through the images and words involving sarongs, kebayas and now manek. I have learnt a lot and enjoyed writing these stories. I'm pleased this trilogy is complete.

*Lee Su Kim*  
*February 2017*

## *Acknowledgements*

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I am deeply indebted to Ken Yap who generously availed to me photographs of items from his collection of Peranakan artefacts, including exquisite manek items. A big thank you to Cheah Hwei-Fe'n, author of *Phoenix Rising: Narratives in Nyonya Beadwork from the Straits Settlements*, for your kind assistance. I'd like to thank Jackie Yoong, curator of The Peranakan Museum, for your interest in my book



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and assistance, and the Peranakan Museum of Singapore for allowing me to feature several items from the museum. My gratitude extends to Mr and Mrs Tye Soon Ping for allowing me to photograph items from their kasut manek collection. My thanks go to baba Peter Wee of Katong Antique House, Singapore and author of *A Peranakan Legacy: The Heritage of the Straits Chinese* for his kind assistance. My thanks also go to baba Peter Lee, author of *Sarong Kebaya: Peranakan Fashion in an Interconnected World* for his inspiring work and words.

I've enjoyed working with the team at MCIA: thank you Lee Mei Lin and She-reen Wong for being such a pleasure to work with. To Violet Oon, thank you for getting me started on this trilogy and Leslie Lim who hinted a long time ago. My thanks go to my son, Lee Jan Ming, for taking many of the photographs in this book and for your interest in my stories. Finally, thank you dearest Stephen Hall for reading every word, for your encouragement, ideas and guidance and for all the time you've given me. It's your love and keen appreciation of my culture and heritage that sustain and inspire me in my writing endeavours.

## *About the Babas and Nyonyas*

### **Origins**

The babas and nyonyas of Malaysia and Singapore are a unique ethnic group which originated 700 years ago when Chinese traders arrived in Malacca, the centre of the Malacca Sultanate. The traders sojourned in Malacca for around six months, waiting for the monsoons to change direction and take them home to Fujian, on China's southeastern coast. They did not bring their womenfolk along and many intermarried with the local women. It was from these crosscultural unions that the babas and nyonyas evolved. Inter-marriage between the babas and the local women eventually ceased, and for hundreds of years past, the babas married exclusively amongst their own people, becoming an endogamous and elite group.

Another interesting theory as to the origins of the babas and nyonyas is the legend of the Chinese princess, Hang Li Po, sent to marry the Sultan of Malacca to boost diplomatic ties between Malacca and China. The *Malay Annals* describes vividly the arrival of the Chinese princess Hang Li Po in Malacca with an entourage of five hundred ladies and courtiers. The princess and her retinue settled down at a



place called Bukit China. The Sultan of Malacca, Sultan Mansur Shah, ordered a well dug at the foot of Bukit China for his Chinese bride. Both the well, Perigi Hang Li Po, and Bukit China are still in existence in Malacca today.

The babas and nyonyas are also known as the Peranakan, the Straits Chinese and Straits-born Chinese. The word 'Peranakan' is derived from the Malay word '*anak*' which means 'child'. The term refers to local-born as well as the offspring of foreigner-native union. Baba is an honorific from northern India for 'man', nyonya is an honorific for 'woman' in Malay adopted from the Portuguese word for grandmother.

## Culture

The Baba nyonya culture is a rare and beautiful blend of many cultures – Chinese and Malay, mixed with elements from Javanese, Sumatran, Thai, Burmese, Balinese, Indian, Portuguese, Dutch and English cultures. The influence of European elements was because Malacca was conquered by three colonial powers successively: the Portuguese in 1511, the Dutch in 1641 and the British in 1825.

The culture is very much localised in essence, and proudly Chinese in form. The babas kept to their patriarchal culture, with male offsprings bearing the family name, while the mother culture was maintained by the womenfolk. In Malacca and Singapore, the Peranakan spoke Baba Malay, a patois of the Malay language with many loan words from

Hokkien and English. In Penang, Hokkien was spoken instead of Baba Malay. The customs were heavily Chinese in form, as the babas and nyonyas clung loyally to their Chinese identity. Filial piety was very important and ancestral worship was core to the culture.

The lifestyle of the nyonyas was a unique balance between Chinese and Malay world traditions. The traditional nyonya costume was the *baju panjang* which can be traced to Javanese origins. It consisted of a long, loose calf-length top with long sleeves worn over a batik sarong. The collar is Chinese and the dress is fastened by a set of *kerosang* (three brooches linked by a gold chain).

By the end of the 1920s, young nyonyas abandoned the austere *baju panjang* for the more attractive nyonya kebaya. The short kebaya was more flattering and shapely, with intricate embroidery at the neckline, sleeves and hem. Nyonyas preferred the Pekalongan batik sarongs from Java because of their vibrant colours and motifs of birds, flowers and animals.

Nyonya food is a wonderful combination of Malay and Chinese cuisine with Southeast Asian and European influences. Using a variety of ingredients and cooking methods, herbs and spices and occasionally, Western influences such as Worcester sauce, the nyonyas concocted a unique cuisine – the original fusion food with predominantly hot, spicy and piquant flavours. Peranakan cuisine is labour intensive and considered an art. Condiments are important on the nyonya's dining table especially the ubiquitous *sambal*

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*belachan*. A nyonya's cooking ability could be assessed, in the olden days, from the rhythms of the way she pounded the *sambal belachan*.

## The babas and nyonyas today

Today, the baba and nyonya community still survives with its strongholds in Malacca, Penang and Singapore. Many younger generations of Peranakan have moved to live and work in Kuala Lumpur. (There are also Peranakan communities in Kelantan and Terengganu on the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia; Phuket, Thailand; Indonesia; Myanmar; Laos and Vietnam.) With globalisation and further migration, the Peranakans have settled all over the world with large communities in Melbourne, Sydney, Perth and London.

Both the old historic Quarters of Georgetown and Malacca, where Peranakan enclaves are located with its unique architecture and lifestyles, were declared World Heritage Sites by UNESCO in 2009.



### **PANTUN SATU KERETAR DUA LEMBU**

*Bungah Rose harum wangi,  
Kerumun banyak tabuan lebar,  
Carik perompuan siang pagi,  
Gila urat betol si Inche Babal!*

*Dalam rumah laki kita,  
Bila luar jangan cemburu,  
Perkara ini orang kata  
Satu keretar dua lembu!*

Sweet smelling is the rose,  
Bees & wasps surround it,  
Day & night chasing skirts,  
The Baba is a flirt indeed!

Within the walls my husband,  
No jealousy when he's away,  
This is what Nyonyas say,  
One bullock cart two cows!

Pantun for Manek Mischiefs  
by Baba Chan Eng Thai,  
14 February 2017



*Macam udang kena air panas  
(Like shrimps being boiled)  
Meaning: Girls getting excited*

*Nangis air mata darah pun tak guna lagi  
(Crying blood tears now is hopeless)  
Meaning: Once the deed is done,  
even if you shed tears of blood, it is useless.*



*Wedding bed for the bridal bedchamber*



*Butterfly wedding  
bed hangings*



*Cushion covers*



*Beaded tray cover*

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*A pair of metallic beaded  
wedding knee pads*



*Embroidered collar of wedding  
attire for a pageboy or pagegirl*



*Bridal bed tie hangings*



*All images above courtesy Ken Yap*

*The Stump in the Hole  
under the Casuarina Tree in  
the Garden of the Mansion  
by the Sea*

The sea breeze is the first thing that assails your senses when you walk into Sherwood Villa. Its coolness lifts your spirits, its playfulness brings a smile to your lips as it dishevels your hair. The familiar salty tang of sea spray and the mewing cries of the seagulls sing to me I have come home.

Sherwood Villa. My family home and the most precious place in the world to me. I was born here in this palatial mansion by the sea, in the master bedroom upstairs with the view of the garden blazing with bougainvillea and hibiscus. My grandfather, Lim Beng Yam, bought this bungalow in 1912 from a movie tycoon from Hong Kong. The eldest son of a rich family, my grandpa, through hard work, grit and perseverance, built an even bigger empire in rubber, tin mining, trade and plantations. He had that Midas touch, succeeding in many business ventures. He became a renowned philanthropist, donating large sums to schools, hospitals, infrastructure and the underprivileged. He

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invested in property and owned several houses in Malacca and Singapore but it was this magnificent estate he loved the most.

“Ouch,” I stumbled over a crack in the driveway leading up to the grand country home.

“Never happened before... humph, cracks everywhere,” I grumbled as I picked myself up with a bruised left knee.

I limped up to the entrance, placed my getaway duffel bag on the marble bench and pressed the doorbell. Several times. No one appeared.

“Hellooo, Ko Ko,” I yelled, calling for my elder brother.

Strange. Usually Ah Yeng, our amah, would come running out to the front, wiping her hands on her *samfoo* top, beaming with joy.

“Wah, Ah Nui, nei fam lei lah!” she’d bellow, grinning from ear to ear, her kindly eyes disappearing into her cheeks, baggy, black pants flapping crazily as the sea breeze caught playfully onto her.

She called me *Ah Nui* which means ‘daughter’ in Cantonese, even though she was unmarried and sworn to a life of celibacy. She had served my family for as long as I could remember, already employed here before I was born. She was always the first person to welcome me whenever I could escape from my job in the tough advertising industry in Singapore.

“Ah Yeng, Ah Yeng-ah? Ko Ko... anybody home?” I called again.

I sat on the cool marble and waited. The verandah was

spacious with columns, three arches and a trough, which I remember, overflowed with marigolds and lantanas. There used to be a rattan table and wicker chairs. Grandma occasionally entertained her friends to scones, sandwiches and afternoon tea at this elegant space. Every evening, Grandpa had his ‘sundowners’ here – two *stengahs* of the best Johnny Walker Black Label whisky and soda water although the *stengah* or so-called ‘halves’ tended to veer towards whisky most of the time.

It was on this very bench, I reminisced, more than twenty years ago, Grandpa told me why he had named his mansion, Sherwood Villa.

“My father was a very pragmatic man. He decided straightaway that as we were a British colony the way to succeed was to learn the way of the British. When I was sixteen, he put me on the steamer, this mighty ship run by the P and O and sent me to England to study. I was petrified. I was brought up an ordinary baba boy and had never ever met an ‘ang mo’ before. This ship was full of foreign devils, all going home to Mother England, and I was the only Asian on board! At dinner time, the men dressed in formal dinner jackets and the women wore evening gowns and sparkled with jewellery. Can you imagine my terror when I sat down to dinner the first time and there were all these instruments laid out in two rows to my right and left... a whole array of knives, forks and spoons! What was I to do? All my life, I ate with my fingers at home! Luckily Pa had lectured me, ‘When in Rome, do as the Romans do’, so I watched closely

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and copied everything they did.

But the worst was yet to come. For the main course, the waiter placed a spring chicken on my plate! I mean a whole chicken, imagine that! My mother always served chicken in bite-sized pieces whether it was chicken curry or ayam pong teh or ayam buah keluak. I'd never seen an entire chook before, bluish pupils eyeing me through half-closed lids, its legs trussed up against its bump. I watched the lady to my right and to my left and proceeded to carve my chicken. The bloody chicken sprung out of my plate! It waltzed giddily around on the floor and stopped near a greenish gown. I wanted to crawl under the table in shame.

But here is where I take off my hat to the English. In typical stiff upper lip fashion, they pretended not to notice. The woman seated on my right... must be a duchess what with her tiara and white gloves, dripping with diamonds, commented, 'Lovely evening, isn't it?'

I went down on my knees, searched for my chicken, picked it up and put it back on my plate. I managed to cut a sliver of thigh and chewed sheepishly on it. No one said anything nor raised an eyebrow, they all continued to make polite conversation. Only the distinguished, old gentleman sitting opposite remarked as he gave me a wink, 'Jolly good, ol' chap! It does say spring chicken on the menu,' before he downed his glass of champagne.

From that moment on, I knew I'd be alright. Wherever I was going, if these people had this kind of sense of humour, I would survive. And I did. That's why I love a lot of things

English... can't think of a nicer name for this house than the forest where Robin Hood lived. I wanted to call it Camelot but your grandma said that was too much, we are not royalty."



I chuckled as I pictured Grandpa crawling on his knees under the table on a mighty ocean liner, gingerly lifting one slinky gown after another looking for his dinner. I glanced around the verandah. It had an air of weariness now, the table legs chewed up, the wicker chairs frayed around the edges. Dead leaves cluttered the long curving driveway. The flower trough was completely smothered in weeds. This verandah was the last place I saw Grandpa, waving farewell in his white t-shirt and old sarong. His last words to me were, "Come home soon, *sayang*. This is your home, remember that. Sherwood Villa will always be here. Bye!"

When I learnt he had a deadly stroke, I rushed home on the first flight I could get out of Singapore but I was too late, he had passed away. I was too late to say goodbye.

The grating noise of bolts and padlocks and then the huge teak door opened. My brother, Seong, stood there, red-eyed, unshaven, the beginnings of a paunch round his once trim waist.

"Hi Sis, I guessed it was you. Why didn't you call first?" he grumbled in a hoarse voice.

"I did. Several times but no reply. Did you just wake

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up? It's almost noon... what a cushy life you lead, Ko Ko!" I teased him, always happy to see Seong again.

"Where's Ah Yeng?" I asked as I stepped into the cavernous main hall, imposing with its formal portraits of family members and silk scrolls from China on the walls. A bevel-edged marble top table stood in the centre, ringed by six stools and alongside the walls, blackwood benches studded with mother of pearl inlay.

"Ah Yeng? Oh, she's left. It's a long story. C'mon in, you can have the main guest room. I'm going back to sleep, I had a late night."

I wanted an explanation on Ah Yeng's absence. Before I could say a word, he grumbled, "I made a lot of money last night, Sis. At the final round, I threw in everything, can't go wrong, I was having such fantastic luck! *Celaka*, guess what? I lost it all. Everything. Bloody hell!"

He stomped sulkily up the majestic winding staircase designed by Grandpa, inspired by grand heritage houses in England, and slammed the bedroom door shut.



I sank down on a marble stool in despair. Great wealth lasts for only three generations, the Chinese say. My brother Lim Gan Seong looked like he certainly was the last. He had inherited this magnificent property which Grandpa and Pa had looked after so lovingly. In its entirety. My two sisters and I did not get even a slimmest

share. Seong lived alone like the lord of a country estate after our parents passed away, with a staff of servants, cooks and driver. The staff size diminished every time I returned. I was in the unfortunate position of watching the favoured son squander the family inheritance away.

From a young age, Seong, a cute precocious child, was spoilt by his mother, both grandmothers and everyone around. My parents desperately wanted a boy; after two daughters, the arrival of a son brought much joy and celebration. Seong was treated like a little emperor, whatever he desire, his wish was granted. While daughters were expected to do household chores, Seong, the only son, was exempted from having to lift a finger. No matter what he did, he was never wrong nor punished.

The pampering and over-indulgence took its toll. He grew up, self-centred and arrogant, used to getting his way all the time. Endowed with an immense fortune, he lived a dissipated lifestyle, philandering, squandering money, night-clubbing, changing girlfriends like underwear and gambling.

Anxious old aunts in hush-hushed phone calls tried to persuade me to talk to him.

*Get him married quickly.*

*Make him settle down.*

*Dia mia perempuan suma gold diggers... his girlfriends only see dollar sign... whole of Malacca gossiping! Sampeh Singapore. Malu sia! Shameful.*

*Apa ni Si-Seong kejair kejair perempuan all over town? Ta malu-eh?! Chasing everything in skirts, no shame-ah?*

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I was born a year after Seong. It was hard for me to scold or lecture my older brother. Besides, I loved and adored my brother – we were very close, playmates in our growing-up years. But at every visit home recently, I stumbled upon worrying signs.

When I returned last year for Cheng Beng, an annual ritual held in remembrance of our ancestors, I was astonished to see two dazzling new cars – a Mercedes and a Jaguar parked along the driveway. I knew Seong, crazy about cars and a speed freak, already owned a BMW coupe. With his newfound wealth, I suppose he wanted to indulge further but this was excessive.

Another time, I came home to Sherwood Villa for the death anniversary of my father. Seong was out that evening at his usual jaunts, the cabarets and clubs at Sultanah Road. I was upstairs on the balcony enjoying the view of the shimmering sea on a moonlit night and the sound of the rustling trees. I felt an intense loneliness, recalling the days when the mansion was filled with people, laughter and music, the clack-clack of mahjong tiles, but now only this lonesome silence except for the waves and the wind.

I decided to go for a walk on the beach – it was beautiful in the moonlight. Walking across the extensive grounds, I heard an unfamiliar sound – giggly laughter interspersed with shrieks. Two figures emerged, weaving in and out of the coconut palms near the sea wall. It looked like a scene from a Bollywood movie except they were half-naked, my brother staggering about half-drunk, chasing a slip of a girl

screaming in mock terror. I turned abruptly back to my room.

More indiscretions awaited. On a recent visit, in the formal dining room, once the focus of magnificent *tok panjang* banquets, I chanced upon a skimpy red cloth on the dining table. I thought the maids had forgotten to put the cloth away after polishing the silver. Then, I realised it was womens' panties and threw it in the trash bin in disgust.

Worse, a pair of silk stockings was draped carelessly over the altar table in the ancestral hall. These women Seong brought home had no respect for the family! This was the *thia abu*, the most sacred part of the house, where we honoured our ancestors in daily rituals and elaborate ceremonies. Here we knelt with joss sticks and made food offerings on important occasions. A portrait of my grandfather, the patriarch of the Lim clan, dressed in a dapper western suit and tie, hung above the altar table. Portraits of Grandma in *baju panjang*, my parents and other deceased family members lined the walls in a montage. What would our ancestors think of us?

When I confronted Seong over this, his reply was, "Oh shut up, little sister. Thank your lucky stars it wasn't a condom."



My aunts were right, I had to intervene. I traced my finger along the serrated patterns of the Carrera marble table, imagining towering pinnacles and plunging waterfalls and



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felt resentful. Why me? Why is it always me of all people to rein him in? I am just a daughter, an outsider once I married into another family, while my brother Seong was the pride of the Lim clan, the male offspring tasked to perpetuate the family line.

Big brother's beauty sleep was taking a long time. I felt peckish. No more Ah Yeng and no servants with trays of coffee, *kueh* and snacks. As I headed for the kitchen through a covered walkway, I did a double take and strode back into the house – to the second hall. Something was missing. I could swear it wasn't an empty space before. There used to be something against that wall.

Where was the dresser? It was no longer there! The one with the ornate canopy, wood spires and mirrors. My favourite, as it was so over the top! It even had a coat of arms with a unicorn and a lion carved in wood. As a child, I imagined I was a princess whenever I gazed into the mirror, framed with cut-glass stars. Grandma preened and powdered here. She kept a jar of *bedak sejuk* in this dresser. She would grind the tiny granules of rice powder into a paste with a bit of water and slather it on her face. Then, she would call us and dab the rest of it all over us amidst our protests. I used to loathe that *bedak sejuk* paste as it gripped my face in a tight mask making it impossible to smile. Grandma told me I would inherit her dresser one day.

There were more things missing. I remember the two beautiful *almeiras*, Dutch cupboards where my mother kept the linen, crystal and silverware. They were gone too. I was

furious – how could he? How dare Seong give away the contents of our family home?



“Where's Grandma's dresser gone? The one with the *bedak sejuk*!” I screamed at Seong before he even got halfway down the staircase, rubbing his forehead, nursing a hangover.

“Whoa... *Garang betul*... why so fierce? What dresser?”

“Stop pretending. You know very well what I mean. The dresser in the second hall is gone. So are the antique cupboards!”

“Oh, those bulky things. I'm sick of them! *Benci sekali*.”

“You could have at least asked us first! You have three sisters, remember? It's not for you to simply give our things away.”

“Eh listen, Eldest Sister and Second Sister have emigrated to God-knows-where and you, little sister, live in a tiny flat in tiny Singapore. What the hell do you want the stuff for?”

“They're not stuff! They belong to the family. Stop swearing.”

“There's tons more. Every damn thing here is antique, including you, Sis, if you don't get a man soon. What a freaking grump!”

“When you inherited this place, I didn't hear you complain!”

“You're jealous you didn't get this place, aren't you? I

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got it all. Hahaha.”

“How dare you discard our family possessions! As if they don’t mean a thing.”

“They don’t. And I didn’t give them away. I sold them.”

“This is our family home, our *rumah abu*, you were entrusted to look after it.”

“Do the ancestors care? They’re all dead. Kaput. Those urns for the ashes will fetch a lot of money.”

“Don’t you dare sell those, you moron!” I blasted him.

“Stop nagging or you can leave right now!”

I grabbed my bag and stormed out of the house, spitting my words at him, “Well goodbye then!”

I could hear my brother shouting at the entrance, trying to use his charm to entice me to stay over.

“Hey, Sis come back. Come back *lah*. I was just joking. How are you going back to Singapore?”



I did not talk to Seong for several months after that incident. One evening, exhausted from a tough day at the office, I was foraging for leftovers in my fridge when I got a phone call from Seong.

“Hello, Sis. Can you come up to Malacca this weekend? It’s the grand opening of my brand new restaurant.”

This news startled me. Finally, he was doing something! Actually working for a change.

“That’s great news. What kind of restaurant?”

“Nyonya. My business partner and I are going to open a nyonya restaurant. Big crowd puller you know, nyonya cuisine!”

“Nyonya food? That’s difficult commercially and too labour intensive.”

“Easy *lah*. Just make the same old dishes but name everything ‘nyonya’. Nyonya assam fish, nyonya fried prawns, nyonya chicken. *Taruh saja lah*. If you say it is ‘nyonya’, then it is.”

“It won’t work.”

“These dumb tourists won’t know.”

“People aren’t that stupid. Who are your chefs?”

“I’m bringing in some cheap foreign workers.”

“Oh my goodness.”

“Can *lah*. Just look at some recipe books.”

“It’s not as simple as that.”

“Ahh, it will be okay. Have I ever failed?”

“I wouldn’t know. You’ve never been put to the test.”

“Anyway, nite nite. Got to go – I’ve a hot date with sexy Fei Fei. She’s gorgeous. You really should get a boyfriend, Sis, you’re such a grouch. See you this weekend.”

“I can’t make it, it’s too short notice. Please be careful, Ko.”

“Of what?”

“I don’t know. Just don’t rush into things.”

“Don’t worry *lah*, I’m born lucky. Bye bye.”



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My brother performing the seroja ceremony with our maternal Grandpa during Chinese New Year. My mother is in sarong kebaya.



My sister and I serving tea to Grandpa.



We spent many happy times at the Harrisons and Crosfield chalets at Third Mile Port Dickson.



My favourite pair of manek shoes made by a skilled shoemaker. His skilled craftsmanship won him an UNESCO Award of Excellence for Handicrafts.

## About the Author

Lee Su Kim is a Malaysian writer whose creative, literary and cultural activist endeavours and scholarly works have received considerable attention in Southeast Asia and internationally. Her light touches of humour, dry wit, sharp observations and fluid prose can be enjoyed in her three bestsellers – *Malaysian Flavours: Insights into Things Malaysian*, *Manglish: Malaysian English at its Wackiest* and *A Nyonya In Texas: Insights of a Straits Chinese Woman in the Lone Star State*.

Her first collection of short stories, *Kebaya Tales: Of Matriarchs, Maidens, Mistresses and Matchmakers*, is another bestseller and has been reprinted several times. In 2011, it was awarded the national Popular-Star Readers' Choice Awards (Fiction). Her second collection of stories, *Sarong Secrets: Of Love, Loss and Longing*, was published in 2014. *Manek Mischiefs: Of Patriarchs, Playboys and Paramours* completes her trilogy of short stories.

She was born in Kuala Lumpur to a baba from Malacca and a nyonya from Penang. Educated at the Bukit Bintang Girls' School, Kuala Lumpur, Su Kim holds a Bachelor of Arts in English, a Diploma and Masters in Education from the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur.



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She lived in the US for four years and earned a Doctorate in Education from the University of Houston in 2001. Formerly Associate Professor at the School of Language Studies & Linguistics, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, where she lectured and researched on language, culture and identity, she is now a full-time writer, educationist and language consultant.

She is the founding President of the Peranakan Baba Nyonya Association of Kuala Lumpur & Selangor, formed in 2008. She enjoys and shares cultural complexity beyond cuisine, *sarong kebaya* and *kasut manik* as a frequent presenter of the rich diversity of being nyonya. Her website is at [www.leesukim.net](http://www.leesukim.net). Follow her at [www.facebook.com/LeeSuKimAuthor](http://www.facebook.com/LeeSuKimAuthor).



Also by the author:

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