

For Review Only

JOSEPHINE CHIA

*Big Tree in a Small Pot*

Marshall Cavendish Editions

But Eric is also angry at himself, tormented by the fact that he never gave his grandmother much thought until now. What kind of person is he? ... Surely he should have made more effort to find out about his grandmother? How stupid and heartless is he that never once in his sixteen years did he think to ask about her?

Privileged, sensitive and smart, Eric Teo learns by accident that he has a Peranakan grandmother – a woman with a dark past who isn't allowed to see him. Curiosity, together with simmering tensions at home, drives him to go on a search for her to unearth the truth.

Rajah – thoughtful, unflappable and visually impaired – lives modestly with his music-loving family, who do their best to help him live a normal life.

When the two boys meet, each brings with him something the other must learn, and a friendship is forged that will change them both. Then, a tragic event occurs, and their newfound bond is put to the test. Set in modern-day Singapore, *Big Tree in a Small Pot* explores the meanings of friendship, family, loss and the values we live by.

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# Big Tree in a Small Pot

**JOSEPHINE CHIA**  
WINNER OF THE SINGAPORE LITERATURE PRIZE



## One

Eric Teo is angry. Not at anyone or anything in particular. That's part of the problem. If he only knew what he is angry *about*. It's just that there's this feeling gnawing at his insides and he doesn't really know what to do about it or how to act. Sometimes, the feeling of wanting to strike out at something or someone is so overwhelming it frightens him. He's not sure he can trust himself these days, which makes him angrier.

Little things have the capacity to rouse his ire. Take the spots on his face, for example. They are red and raw against the pale landscape of his skin. If he were brown like his dad, they will probably not be so obvious. But he has his mother's complexion. Whenever he catches people staring at him, he is acutely embarrassed, as if his pimples are oversized and prominent.

"It's your imagination," his father, Benson, says. "Nobody notices."

"Can you buy me some concealer make-up, Mum?"

“That’s more stupid! They’ll aggravate the pimples more. Let them run their course and they’ll soon be gone.”

His mother, Clara, has an unfortunate shrill in her voice. It makes her sound as if she’s constantly on the verge of hysteria. Eric wonders if she modulates her tone in the office, where she is financial adviser at Mackenzie Mercantile Bank. Thanks to daily workouts in a five-star gym after work to maintain her size six figure and make-up always perfectly in place, Clara is constantly chic and glamorous.

Growing up, Eric hardly saw her in the weekdays as she left for the office before sunrise to avoid the ERP and returned after he had gone to bed. In a country where just the licence to buy a car costs more than seventy thousand dollars, her Porsche made the kind of statement she wanted. Her mothering role was relegated to a series of maids: Indonesian, Filipino, Thai, Myanmar, Sri Lankan – the whole South East Asian gamut. Clara was easy to displease.

“I’ve got high standards,” she said to Eric. “I want only the best for you.”

She did not know how difficult it was for Eric to adjust to yet another new maid, each having to decipher his cries and needs until he could talk and express his wishes. Clara left everything to the maids, now called domestic helpers, and yet felt upset when Eric got too attached to any of them. They might *mother* him but are not his

mothers, she emphasised. To her credit, Clara does try to make weekends family time, hauling him and his dad around shopping malls on Saturdays – there are plenty to choose from in Singapore. She is fixated on shoes, Jimmy Choos, mostly.

“One has to support a Malaysian designer,” she likes to say, as if that was a good enough reason.

Family time also means going to church on Sundays. A devout Catholic, Clara never misses Sunday Mass, Holy Communion and Feast Days. She sticks religiously to the faith’s many tenets and rules, convinced that God was a kind of divine Justice of Peace, meting out rewards and punishment.

“Better go to Confession,” she would insist to him and his dad.

Devout as she is, she still wears miniskirts to Mass and scans her mobile phone throughout the service, responding to text messages intermittently. She is not the only one; others too steal glances at their devices. Because it is a mortal sin not to attend Sunday Mass, people bring their bodies to church but didn’t seem to bring either their minds or presence. Eric is irked by this, his faith in the religion wavering.

For the sake of appeasing his mother, even when Eric has nothing to confess, he enters the confessional box and invents some venial sins. That is better than being subjected to his mother’s scolding and sour looks on Sundays. He has confessed to things like pulling the cat’s

tail when they didn't own a cat, tipping the neighbour's rubbish bin when they live in a condominium with a refuse chute, splashing paint on people's front doors, peeing in the swimming pool. Only the latter has some grain of truth. He suspects that his father is as inventive. Anything for peace in the home. Eric notices that his father hardly offers any opinion these days. Benson has developed a way of bubble-wrapping himself. He used to stand tall but now, his upper spine is curved in as if he is cowering into himself prematurely.

"Eric! Don't touch your face all the time! You'll make it worse," Clara nags.

"It itches," he complains.

"We'll go to the pharmacy afterwards and get you some FreeDerm, Clearasil or something. Come on, get ready to go out for lunch. It's Salimah's day off," she says. "I've made reservations at Manis-Manis, a fine dining Peranakan restaurant at Seaview Tower. Your father can get his fix of *buah keluak*. And I know you will love the *nangka lemak* – it has made it onto the Makansutra list."

Like an old-fashioned woman, Clara finds that the best way to a man's heart is through his stomach. Only, unlike the women in the old days, Clara does not cook. Instead, she sources for the best places for the food that her husband and son desire. For someone who does not eat much, she takes pleasure in watching others eat – a kind of vicarious diet. She trawls through the newspapers and Internet for culinary offerings in Singapore and even

Malaysia, and is always watching food programmes on TV. Tireless in her pursuit of good food, she directs them to stalls that have been given some mention in the media: white *bee hoon* in Sembawang, Punggol *nasi lemak* in Katong, *mala* hotpot in Geylang, *chye tow kway* in Bedok, pasta at Turf City, hamburgers at Vivo City – the list is endless. Sometimes they even spend the weekend driving up to Malacca just to eat a good *itek tim* or *chendol*, or to Kuala Lumpur for the best satay or Johor for seafood in a *kelong*.

The one thing Clara does not permit is anything spicy or with garlic to be cooked and eaten at home.

“I don’t want this luxurious apartment to smell like a curry house,” she always says.

Their duplex condominium apartment, located in the posh District 10, is the envy of many. A magnificent, wrought-iron staircase spirals up to the bedrooms; downstairs, a Zen-style garden extends from the high-ceilinged living room. It is beautifully landscaped with smooth pebbles and a decorative wooden bridge over a pond filled with Koi carp. Property agents often pester them and their neighbours – many are foreign diplomats – to sell, but Clara does not take the bait. In land-starved Singapore, she is aware that she is sitting on a gold mine, and unless someone makes her an extremely good offer, she isn’t going to budge.

“You’re right, Mum. This *nangka lemak* is so good,” Eric says now in the bustling restaurant. The queue

outside the restaurant snakes down the corridor. The smell of warm coconut milk from the restaurant's signature *nangka lemak* mingles in the air with the tangy aroma of *asam pedas*.

Eric gazes out the restaurant to take in the panoramic view of Gardens by the Bay, two mega-sized temperature-regulated domes housing flowers from different seasons and climates and a miniature mountain, complete with alpine flora, cascading waterfall and swirling mist. He takes in the ArtScience Museum and Marina Bay Sands. The whole of Marina Bay Sands was an engineering feat, created by forcing the sea back and reclaiming the land. Eric often wonders if he was created from nothing too. Who is he if he is not Eric Teo?

"Yes. This *nangka lemak* is really good," Benson agrees, diligently paying his compliments to Clara to ensure his easy passage through the weekend. "You really did your research well, honey. And this *buah keluak* is the absolute best I've eaten. The quality of the *buah keluak* sauce depends so much on how well and how long the fruit has been soaked. Managed wrongly, the fruit can be poisonous..."

"Wow, Dad. How come you know so much about Peranakan food?"

"I'm a Peranakan, what. And you are half. That's why we have an affinity towards this kind of food."

"I thought Peranakans were just Chinese people dressed up as Malays."

“What a travesty! Our culture is reduced to a fashion statement,” Benson moans.

“I didn’t even know you’re a Peranakan. You never spoke of it before. I thought we were all Chinese.”

“That’s because...” Benson starts to say, then suddenly changes track, as if aware that he is treading on dangerous ground. “We’re Malacca Peranakans as opposed to Penang Peranakans. Our ancestry is Chinese, but mixed with Malay. And some Dutch and Portuguese. I’ll take you to the Peranakan Museum. It’s time for you to learn about your culture.”

The atmosphere at the table immediately mutates. Only a few minutes ago, it had been peppered with a certain gaiety, Clara luxuriating with satisfaction from the praises she was receiving for her choice of restaurant. But now an intangible something has crept in to make her pucker her mouth as if she has eaten a fruit that is too sour.

“Aiyah, what’s so important about being Peranakan? Peranakan is just *chap cheng*. Mixed blood,” Clara pronounces. “More important to be able to afford a roof over your head and enough to eat. And why do you want to claim to be part of a culture that’s dead? Only dead things are in museums. Anyway to date, no scholar or historian can prove if someone is a true blue, genuine Peranakan or not. Better to just be Chinese. We have thousands of years of history. Surely there’s more potential to attach yourself to an ancient civilisation? In



the twenty-first century, China has become an important economy. It will be good for us to relate to them, be one of them, and able to do business with them, rather than strive to belong to some half-past-six culture that should be assigned to history books.”

“But surely you can’t approve of China’s behaviour towards Tibet and now their ruthless attempt to dominate the South China Sea...?” Benson says softly.

His father used to have a robust, commanding voice but these days, it is almost like a pathetic squeak. Eric doesn’t know why this should annoy him.

“Mum, sometimes you can be so...” Eric trailed off.

“What? What? What?” Clara demands. “Being Chinese is no good for you, is it?”

“Mum! We’re in a restaurant...”

“Like I said,” Benson tries to steer the mood into calmer waters. “This *ayam buah keluak* is excellent. Almost as good as –”

He stops abruptly, seeing Clara glare at him. There is a moment of silence.

“As good as what, Dad?” Eric asks.

He looks at his parents. There is obviously some kind of subtext between the two of them that he is missing. Oh, how infuriating it is to be a teenager! His father, sparkling only a moment ago, suddenly looks as if his polish has been rubbed off.

“As good as what, Dad?” Eric repeats, now more piercing, as if he is refusing to be shut off any more.

Amazingly, as if an old part of him is resurrected, Benson stretches upwards and tosses a defiant look at Clara.

“As good as my mother used to make it,” Benson says, almost with a sense of pride.

“Benson,” Clara says, in a warning tone.

“Mum, will you let up?” Eric says, that unnameable irritation starting to stir in him again. “For goodness’ sake! You’re not in your office, you know. Dad and I are trying to have a normal conversation.”

“Yes,” Benson says and, as if a flood gate has been released in him and he can finally say what has been stored inside him for years, he continues, “My mother used to make the best *ayam buah keluak* this side of Malacca.”

“Really? I wish I had tasted it! You’ve never told me anything about my Grandma before. Was she a good cook? How did she die? When did she die?”

“What made you think she’s dead?” Benson spills the words out before he has time to think. Then the enormity of his revelation sinks in and he sits back, like a deflated balloon.

“Now you’ve really done it,” Clara says, chucking her napkin onto the table.

“Wait, wait, wait!” Eric says. “Am I hearing this right? Your mother is not dead? You mean I have a grandmother who is alive and I don’t know about her? Why haven’t I met her? Why doesn’t she visit us? Is she crippled? Or is she suffering from dementia? Is she in a nursing home or

mental institution? Have you quarrelled? Is she in prison and you're ashamed to tell me? Or is she in some kind of coma? I'm sixteen years old and this is the first time I hear that I've a paternal grandmother? What's the matter with you two?" Eric can hear his voice rising, warm, like magma moving up the shaft of a volcano.

"You wouldn't like her," Clara says. "She was not a good mother to your dad."

"I'm old enough to decide who I can or cannot like. In any case, that's beside the point. It's my heritage we're talking about. She might not mean anything to you but I should have the option to decide. She's still my grandmother. I have a right to know my own grandmother!"

"Aiyah! You already have one grandmother. Nai Nai is so good to you. What's so important about having another one? What purpose does an extra grandmother fulfil? After all, you have a mother who is here for you. Have I not done everything a perfect mother could do? Why is there a need to know someone who couldn't care less about her own son and abandoned him? What use is that kind of woman to you? Plus, she deserted the faith! She's not even a Catholic anymore."

Other people in the restaurant turn to look at them.

"She didn't abandon me. Don't stretch the truth," Benson says, so weakly that no one hears him.

"Dad! Have you nothing to say in defence of your own mother? Where does Grandma live? In Singapore?

Or elsewhere? How often do you visit her? How come you never take me?"

Eric's questions come fast and loose. Benson's lips press into a straight seam and his features seem to crumple. His crestfallen face tells Eric everything.

"Don't tell me," Eric says disbelieving. "You don't even visit her? Your own birth mother? What has she done to you that you can be so judgemental? Even criminals in prison get visitors. I thought the whole idea about being Catholics is our ability to forgive?"

Eric can't understand why his father is being so spineless. Benson is a world-renowned microbiologist. Yet in front of his wife, he's a quivering wreck. At that moment, Eric's respect for his father evaporates. The anger that he has been trying to contain threatens to overtake him. He feels it swelling in his body, like helium pumping up his muscles, the seams of his shirt bursting. Standing up abruptly, he pushes his chair back roughly, making it screech on the Peranakan tiled floor like a piece of chalk drawn across an old-fashioned blackboard.

"Eric! Sit down! I insist that you sit down this minute!" Clara commands.

This is the last straw, his mother acting so self-righteously.

"Sometimes you should hear yourself."

Then he too chucks his napkin onto the table and walks out of the restaurant. Clara's jaw drops open and

she gapes like a fish out of water. Then, recovering, she points a finger at Benson and glares at him.

“See! See what you’ve done! This is all your fault. Totally useless! You’ve spoilt everything. Ruined my Sunday.”

Heads turn in the direction of her loud voice. Benson closes his eyes and lets out a huge sigh. He knows he is in trouble.

Again.