

This book features 12 stories from Southeast Asia, South Asia and East Asia, written especially for young adults.

This specially curated anthology of short stories from Asia explores the human spirit and lives of the common man separated by time, space and culture, and yet united in the human spirit to overcome the difficulties that they face in life. It provides an insight into the rich and diverse landscape of Asia, as well as heritage and cultural practices. It also challenges pre-conceived notions of biases and beliefs about other cultures and opens up room for discussion on the differences that define the human race. Each story in this anthology is also accompanied by an essay from the writer, providing a rare look into the writer's mind and writing process.

A Tapestry of Colours 1 provides a platform for readers to develop global awareness of the landscape and the people of Asia.

Featuring stories by

Anitha Devi Pillai • Raymund P Reyes • Babitha Marina Justin • Sachiko Kashiwaba (Translated by Avery Fischer Udagawa) • Niduparas Erlang (Translated by Annie Tucker) • Janani Janarthanan • Asma' Jailani • Clara Mok • Maureen SY Tai • Tripat Narayanan • Charlotte Hammond • Muthusamy Pon Ramiah

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A Tapestry of Colours

1

Stories from Asia

Edited by
ANITHA DEVI PILLAI

A Tapestry of Colours 1

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Edited by
Anitha Devi Pillai

 **Marshall Cavendish**
Editions

Sample Spreads for Viewing

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Foreword

The two-volume set of *A Tapestry of Colours – Stories from Asia*, edited by Dr Anitha Devi Pillai, offers teachers a uniquely valuable resource for classrooms and an extraordinary opportunity to help students discover for themselves what the reading of literature can offer to them in delight and in their expanded understanding of human experience. Of all the literary genres, the genre of the short story seems to me most suitable for classroom use. Short stories are, by definition, fiction that can be read in what used to be called “one sitting.” I love the idea of a “sitting,” and recently saw it defined as 20 minutes to an hour. In my own years as an elementary and secondary student, 20 minutes may have been the outer limit of my capacity to sit in one place. But a good story might hold me somewhat longer, and the stories in this volume promise to hold students long enough to be read, if not always in one sitting, surely in no more than two sittings and usually well within the time typically allotted in a classroom both for reading and for discussion of what was read.

The individual stories in these two volumes, moreover, are presented in a textual setting that is likely to promote and deepen the reflection and discussion that inevitably follows classroom reading – and certainly ought to follow reading, if students are to gain the full benefit from what they have read. The setting I am referring to for these stories is the apparatus provided in these volumes for every included story, whereby each story is prefaced by a short personal note from its writer about the cultural context in which the story was written, and followed by the writer’s account of how the completed story came into being: what occasioned it, what problems it presented, what the writer was hoping to accomplish for the reader and so on. The effect of this framing

material is, first, to enhance a reader's interest in the story, based on the reader's intensified sense of personal involvement with the writer, and second, to deepen a reader's understanding of the story, by ensuring that the reader understands the cultural references or historical moment, or personal circumstances that are the context for each individual story and writer.

We must remember that short stories are not specialized technical kinds of discourse (though they can take on new and unfamiliar forms and include entirely original features), but they represent the literary genre that is most natural to all human beings in every human society. They have their anthropological origins in dreams and gossip and myths and family adventures and personal experiences that are told in everyday life and are frequently worth re-telling. Every child and adult knows from living with other human beings how to listen to and respond to such stories. As teachers of literary short stories, we must build on rather than cancel out the competence of all our students as persons with extensive experience in hearing and enjoying stories.

And, given the excellent collection of stories presented here, with their illuminating introductions and intimate accounts of their generative occasions, almost no student will be able to resist the essential dimension of literary experience – that of becoming immersed in the story itself and thereby ready for rich conversation about what happened and why we care.

Sheridan Blau, PhD

Professor of Practice in the Teaching of English
Department of Arts and Humanities
Teachers College, Columbia University;
Emeritus Professor of English and Education
University of California, Santa Barbara

Preface

The short story is a very welcoming text type as its brevity and accessibility make it an excellent platform to explore unknown topics and difficult subjects. It also gives readers an insight into other worlds and lives of people across the world within a short period of time.

In fact, short story readers were found to be more thoughtful, creative and willing to consider competing viewpoints than non-fictional essay readers by Maja Djikic, Keith Oatley and Mihnea Moldoveanu from the University of Toronto. Short story readers were also found to be open to exploring unfamiliar territories which helped to broaden their minds and engage them in honest conversations about the lives and actions of others. In other words, short stories have been found to be effective in nurturing empathetic readers who are respectful of other cultures. As the prolific author Neil Gaiman once said, "Fiction gives us empathy: it puts us inside the minds of other people, gives us the gifts of seeing the world through their eyes."

These two collections of short stories, *A Tapestry of Colours 1 & 2 – Stories from Asia*, aim to do just that by presenting stories from our neighbours in Asia and providing us with a means to understand them through narratives. This makes these collections of stories a valuable resource in the language and literature classroom as well.

Emeritus Professor Sheridan Blau, a well-renowned academic of English and Education at Teacher's College, Columbia University, illuminates the unique nature of these two books, which connects each short story to its setting and the writer and the importance of doing so. I am deeply grateful that Professor

Blau's insightful comments captured the essence of the value of short stories to readers.

The contributing writers have captured the spirit and multiple facets of living and growing up in various parts of Asia (Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines, Indonesia, China, Korea, Japan, Bangladesh and India). The writers have to be commended for their collective willingness to share notes on their craft as they add an important perspective. I am indebted to the writers for their support and am deeply grateful to them for helping to create a meaningful conversation about the different facets of Asia.

I am also grateful to the following educators and passionate fiction lovers who have helped to provide comments on the short stories to make them very relatable and meaningful for youths: Aileen Chai, Amanda Sarah Chin, Amala Rajan, Azeena Badarudeen, Bernice Xu, Geetha Creffield, John Praveen Raj, Dr Mary Ellis, Michelle Wong, Priyanka Chakraborty, Selvarani Suppiah, Shafiq Rafi, Shalini Damodaran and Tivona Low. Special thanks to Sumi Baby Thomas, the research assistant on this project.

Last but not least, I would like to thank the publishing team from Marshall Cavendish International: Melvin Neo, Mindy Pang and Anita Teo for bringing this set of books to life and to the public.

Anitha Devi Pillai

Mirror, Mirror

Sachiko Kashiwaba

Translated by Avery Fischer Udagawa

First published in Japanese as “Kagami yo, kagami” in *Mirakuru famirii* (*Miracle Family*, Kodansha Ltd, 2010).

In Japan, gender roles are famously distinct in traditional families. Men often expect to serve as breadwinners, working long hours outside the home, while women frequently shoulder domestic responsibilities. Men and women’s comportment, parenting styles, and even speech may differ sharply as well, due to long-held expectations regarding gender. “Men of few words” and women who speak more openly are common, if far from universal, in family life.

Japan is changing, however, with more women working, more men assuming “maternal” roles, and families taking a wide array of forms. What might happen when a family’s breadwinner and domestic roles are reversed, rejected or all absorbed by one person? How might women pursue identities outside the home and men pursue rich communication with family members? What transpires when the domestic circle overlaps with a multigenerational business, also an evolving feature of traditional culture?

The bathroom at our house has two mirrors. One is the usual type that comes with the sink. The other is a super fancy, oval mirror with a wooden frame carved in a floral design. It hangs next to our sink, and I call it the Snow White mirror. Our little bathroom shouldn’t need two mirrors, and the Snow White design doesn’t exactly fit our lifestyle, given that it’s just Dad and me. But really, it’s precisely because it’s just us two that we have the mirror ...

My dad gets up every day at 6am. With an unshaven face and bedhead, still in his pyjamas, he heads to the kitchen. Ever since I was in preschool, our breakfast has been fried eggs, *natto*,¹ *miso*² soup with tofu, and pickled vegetables. As he cracks the eggs and slices the tofu, Dad also starts the washing machine. And he wakes me up:

“Jun. Get up. Up!”

He calls this exactly two times.

Routines are powerful things. When my dad calls me the second time, I really do get right up.

By the time I head to the kitchen hiking up my pyjama pants, breakfast is on the table and the washing machine has started its spin cycle, shaking and clattering.

As Dad reads the newspaper and I watch TV, we eat. We pass the soy sauce and jab our chopsticks into the crock of pickles with precision timing. Our hands manoeuvre around each other, never colliding, like robot hands in a factory. There’s no need to speak. At the end I say, “*Gochiso-sama*.”³

Then I brush my teeth in the bathroom and change for school. My dad cleans up the kitchen and hangs out the laundry.

“I’m off,” I say.

He grunts: “Oh” or “Ah”.

After I leave for school, Dad cleans the house, shaves, dresses and heads down to the shop. He’s the second-generation owner of a yarn shop. The shop sits on the ground floor, and we live right above.

About the time Dad raises the shutter, Mr Murano arrives by bicycle with his packed lunch. Mr Murano has worked in the shop since my grandfather’s time.

1 A traditional Japanese dish of fermented soybeans.

2 A fermented soybean paste.

3 Thanks for the meal.

Neither Dad nor Mr Murano act at all like salesmen. When customers arrive, the two men welcome them with “*Irasshaimase!*”⁴ And that’s it, they go quiet. I have never seen them make small talk or even smile!

How a yarn shop run by two silent men can stay afloat is one of the seven wonders of our shopping district. In fact, it’s wonder number one.

It helps that Dad and Mr Murano knit. It’s a yarn shop, so they should; but anyway. They’re good. Even now, Dad hand-knits all of my sweaters. His stuff is popular even with the girls in my class and their mums: if I wear a new design of his to school, the mums will go to the shop to buy yarn and ask for the pattern. So, I contribute to the bottom line.

From a customer’s perspective, I guess our shop offers stylish samples and useful advice; plus, you can look at yarn for ages and no one’ll bother you. I suppose that makes for a nice atmosphere. If you can ignore the two geezers knitting in the back.

When I get home from school, if it’s not a cram school⁵ day, I go buy food for our supper. Usually, I get fried meat cakes or croquettes from the butcher, dried fish from the fish seller or takeout from the ramen place.

Dad closes up shop at 7pm. I help, and depending on how hungry I am, I either eat ahead or wait and eat with him. Just like at breakfast, I end the meal with *Gochiso-sama*.

At nine in the evening, Dad finishes his bath. Then, he stands in front of the Snow White mirror and begins muttering some words. I have never really watched him do this – I’ve never wanted to watch – but I think he starts with, “Mirror, Mirror, on the wall.”

This is his ritual. And with it, he transforms ... into my mum. In summer, he’s my mum with only boxers on, but anyway ...

4 Welcome to the store!

5 Classes conducted by private schools after regular school hours to provide intensive coaching to prepare students for examinations.

“Jun, Honey, did you do your homework?”

“I got a call from your cram school teacher, Jun. She said your math scores are slipping. Don’t you think you’ve been playing video games way too much?”

“So, Akihiro’s dad says he’ll drop you off at soccer practice on Sunday. I’ve washed your uniform and put it in the chest of drawers, and your new socks are there too, so be sensible and wear them, OK?”

My mum talks and talks. Whiskers and all.

I used to think that maybe Dad should change into women’s clothing for this shtick, to make it less strange, but I’m used to it now.

“OK, what do you want to read today? It’s been forever since we read *Two Years’ Vacation* by Jules Verne. You love that book! I wish you’d take a few more titles out of the library. When I was your age, Jun, I devoured the Arsène Lupin books.”

My whiskered mum always reads to me before I sleep.

Last year, we argued and I finally got her to quit singing me lullabies. But Dad turning into Mum and Mum reading to me never changed. I guess it all serves a purpose.

My real mum – the one without facial hair – left us right after I started preschool. She left my dad and she left me.

Even though she had abandoned us, I missed her. I ached for her. I hated my dad. I had no clue why my mum had left, but I figured it must be my dad’s fault that she’d gone. I guess I’d heard the adults’ gossip: “I get that he’s a man of few words, but there’s such a thing as too quiet, right? I mean, I’m his neighbour and never hear his voice!”

The woman who runs the bookshop next door talks about Dad this way, even now.

When Mum left, I cried constantly. I ran off whenever Dad tried to hold me.

My mother was gone. With her gone, I couldn’t sleep. Night after night, I buried my head in my blanket and soaked my pillow with tears.

Then, Dad went out and bought the Snow White mirror. And he began pretending to be Mum.

“Now, stop crying. Starting today, I’ll be Mum. At night, until you can get to sleep, I’ll be Mum, so try and calm down.”

With awkward words and an earnest face, Dad became whiskered Mum. Gross! It makes me laugh to think of it now, but at the time, I was boiling mad.

“But you’re *Dad!*”

I tried throwing off my covers, but whiskered Mum pinned me down.

“I’m your mum, Honey. I’ll be Mum now. Just give me a chance.”

And stubbly Mum started singing me a lullaby in a hoarse voice. At least, I think it was a lullaby. I couldn’t make out which song it was. It was sad, like weeping, but I still fell asleep.

Each night after that, Dad would stand in front of the Snow White mirror. To transform, he seemed to need the act of muttering his “spell” in that exact spot. The mirror helped.

Gradually, I got used to Dad’s ritual. I accepted that he had two personalities. This became so normal that there were certain things I would tell him only when he was in Dad mode, and certain things I would tell him only when he was whiskered Mum. The things Dad couldn’t tell me, he too would save for when he was Mum.

“Well, your dad is your dad, isn’t he? It can’t be helped. But he loves you, Jun, and he wants the best for you, and he wants to protect you and make every day a good day for you. He just has trouble saying that out loud, I think.” This, my whiskered mum would say

without batting an eye. It was the kind of thing both parent and son might remember later with a blush, but in the moment, since I was so used to it, I'd just nod and say, "Yeah, I know."

The mirror was a prop that Dad and I needed at first, basically. But now, I think I can handle Dad okay without it. He, on the other hand, can't stop pretending to be Mum. He thinks that if he doesn't become Mum, he can't ask me about school and cram school and friends and such. Me, I could just tell him everything while I stir my *natto* or help him close up shop.

"Why should I stop being Mum at bedtime? I look forward to this, too, you know! Now, let's read."

"Come on, seriously!"

"Hush, you. Into bed."

Whiskered Mum has muscles. If I take too long, she can just toss me into bed. Can you imagine an 11-year-old boy who hasn't beaten his mum in wrestling even once? I am that boy.

Lately, I've started teasing a little, though.

"Hey, Mum? Dad still hasn't sold that one sweater he knitted in springtime, has he?"

"Which sweater, Honey?"

"The salmon pink mohair."

"Well, that's a store sample."

"But he sells the samples when the seasons change."

"Salmon pink works fine for fall!"

"What? They change everything to those 'chic' dull fall colours, except that one? It's weird!"

"It's an accent."

Whiskered Mum can be really stubborn.

Even Mr Murano has been shaking his head over the salmon pink mohair. He says that Dad doesn't want to sell that sweater,

really. If a customer seems to be checking it out, Dad will rush it to the back. Then, just when it seems he's put it away for good, he'll display it again. Mr Murano thinks he has someone special in mind for it.

"The sleeves on that sweater are different lengths, you know," whiskered Mum finally tells me.

Even I know it is time for some truth now. "Well, the piano teacher at that music store across the street played tennis when she was young," I'd say. "I heard her mention once that when she buys ready-made sweaters, the right sleeve always feels too short."

"Hmm, really?"

"Mm-hmm. I bet Dad heard her say it, too. She always buys navy and grey yarn from us, but I think salmon pink would look great on her."

I go to the trouble of saying all that, and yet whiskered Mum still changes the subject.

"Well. How about *Robinson Crusoe* tonight?"

I guess we'll need the Snow White mirror a bit longer, until my dad can just open up as Dad.

Author's Note

I originally wrote "Mirror, Mirror" as part of a series of stories with folktale motifs for *Onigashima Tsūshin*, a journal that I put together with several other authors in Japan. "Mirror, Mirror" was later published in the short story collection *Miracle Family*.

Daily life in a father-son family, even if it appears barren, will overflow with small expressions of affection. How might a father and son who rarely speak, nonetheless understand one another? I also wanted to write about a woman who needs to have feelings put into words.

Some parents and children can communicate without words, but there are those like the absent mother in “Mirror, Mirror” who do need them. To create the happy families we all desire, I think we can put in effort to observe those around us and do what supports them.

I write my stories with pleasure, and when I finish writing a story, I think, *Ah, that was fun*. I truly enjoy writing. I will be content if readers of this story come to the end and say, “Ah, that was fun!”

Translator’s Note

I enjoy translating fiction that opens a window on Japan while exploring universal themes, such as loving a parental figure despite – or perhaps because of – that person’s quirks. The son in “Mirror, Mirror” by Sachiko Kashiwaba adores a father who feels he can only converse with his son when in the guise of a woman.

How was this challenging to translate? Well, the Japanese language features distinct male and female speech patterns that English lacks, so I had to puzzle out different ways to make the father sound male at times, and female at other times. Two tools I used only when he was speaking as Mum were italics for emphasis and a pet name for Jun: Honey.

A key technique for translating dialogue (conversation in literature) is reading it aloud again and again, in both the original and the translation, to see if characters “sound like themselves” in the new language. Acting and moving around like the characters helps, too!

By the way, check out how the main characters in “Mirror, Mirror” read fiction in translation (from English and French) – as you have just done – and organise parts

of their lives around a German fairy tale. Discovering how stories travel across borders, into people’s lives and even into new stories is one of the great delights of being a translator!

Mummee Kuah

Asma' Jailani

Hari Raya Aidilfitri, also known as Eid al-Fitr, is a religious holiday celebrated worldwide by Muslims. It marks the end of Ramadan, a holy month where Muslims practice the religious obligation of fasting from dawn to sunset for the whole month. In Malaysia, it is customary for Muslims to seek forgiveness from others on the day of Eid, as a way of strengthening bonds and letting bygones be bygones. Naturally, it is a joyous occasion that brings people together, as it is also customary to visit the homes of friends and family to celebrate. Like any other traditional holiday, much of the excitement revolves around food. On the night before Eid, many families busy themselves with cleaning up their houses and preparing a feast for the guests who will visit the next day after the Eid prayers.

“How’s *Abah*?”¹

“Same as always. He eats, sleeps, watches TV.”

“Does he talk to you?”

“He grunts a little whenever I ask him anything. At this point, I think that’s as good as it’s gonna get.”

Alya sighs. “Don’t say that, Dina. It’ll just ... take some time.”

“It’s been a *year*, *Kakak*.”²

“He’s hurting.”

“And we’re not.” Irdina’s voice is as brittle as it is cutting. A shaky sigh follows, strained and tinny over the phone. “Sorry, it’s not your fault. I just ...”

“I know.” Alya understands. Really, she does.

“Not a day goes by where I don’t miss her,” Irdina says in a quiet voice.

Alya wishes she could cross the kilometres between them to hug her tight. “Me too, Dina. I miss her all the time, too.”

There’s a beat of silence, a gap filled by their mutual heartbreak.

Alya gathers herself. “I know it’s hard Dina, to see *Abah* like that, but we just have to be ... patient.”

“Yeah.” The bitter edge is still there in Irdina’s voice, but it’s softened somewhat. “Yeah, I know. Anyway, how did the job interview go?”

“I think it went well. But we’ll see if they call me back.”

“Hm.” Irdina makes a non-committal sound, like she doesn’t know how to feel about it.

Alya doesn’t either, to be fair. A high-paying job at an established law firm in Singapore. It doesn’t get much better than that, especially for the likes of an early 20-something who is just starting out in the field. And yet ...

“Come back already, will you?” Irdina says. “It’s bad enough that *Abang*³ doesn’t even stay in KL anymore.”

“It’s just two more days. You’ll be alright.”

“But I’m lonely.”

Alya huffs a fond laugh. “You have Mok and *Abah* to keep you company.”

“Ah yes, one *chonky*⁴ cat and a man who’s practically glued to his armchair 24/7. I can just imagine the *sparkling conversations* we’ll have.”

“That’s the spirit.”

Irdina scoffs. “I gotta go make dinner, talk to you later, *Kakak*. Bye.”

“Bye.”

Alya sags into her older brother’s worn-out couch as the call ends. Outside, the sky is tinged orange, not quite sunset yet but getting there.

1 Father in Malay.

2 Sister in Malay.

3 Brother in Malay.

4 slang for “chunky” or overweight.

The couch dips as a heavy weight settles into the other end.

“I didn’t even hear you come back,” Alya says.

Her brother shrugs back at her. “You were pretty engrossed in your conversation with Dina,” he says, as Alya shifts over to make room for him. “How was the job interview?”

“It went pretty well, actually. I think I have a good shot.”

“Yeah? That’s great!”

But in a heartbeat, his expression goes from joy to concern.

“You don’t look very excited,” he observes. “Or relieved.”

“I am!” Alya doesn’t know what to do with her hands, so she opts to grab a stray cushion to hug. “I am, but ...”

“But?”

“Well, let’s say the firm does accept me ...”

“Which they will.”

“I’m glad you have so much faith in me, but listen for a sec. Say they accept me. Then, logically, I’d have to move to Singapore for the job, right?”

“Right,” Hakim nods, looking like he’s still trying to grasp what she is getting at.

“That would mean leaving Dina alone to take care of *Abah*.”

Hakim’s brow furrows as the reality hits. “Dina’s a responsible kid,” he says. “She’ll be alright.” But even he doesn’t look convinced at his own words.

“I can’t do that to her, Kim.” Alya hugs the cushion tighter to her chest. “It wouldn’t be fair.”

There is silence as her brother slumps against the cushions, deep in thought. “That’s real honourable of you, Alya,” he says, finally. “But I think you should give this a little more thought. You’ve been dreaming of something like this for so long, after all.”

“I mean, yeah, but ...”

Alya doesn’t bother finishing her sentence. She doesn’t need to. They both know what’s been left unsaid.

Before, she would have been over the moon about acing her job interview, ecstatic over the possibility of learning from top lawyers at such a prestigious law firm.

But then Mama passed away. And Alya’s father was never the same after that.

* * *

The next day finds Alya and Hakim at their aunt’s house. She’d invited them over to *buka puasa*⁵ with her family.

Before the actual dinner, Muslim families break their day-long fast once it’s time for the *maghrib* prayer,⁶ with a few dates and some water. They perform their prayers together, and only then do they dine.

Dinners with Alya’s relatives are always a grand affair. Known for her culinary prowess, her aunt never fails to go all out, dishing out dish after sumptuous dish. Prawns laden with spicy *sambal*,⁷ stingray in steaming bowls of *asam pedas*,⁸ an assortment of stir-fried vegetables and more fill the table as they all crowd around to dig in.

Sometime after dinner, after everyone has eaten and the dirty dishes have been dealt with, Alya finds her cousins convening in the middle of the living room.

Her cousin, Salamah, beckons her over. “Check this out,” she says. “We were clearing out some stuff earlier today and found this box full of old books and photo albums.” Alya plonks herself onto the carpet to join them. She picks up an album to flip through the pages, flicking through faded snapshots of days gone by.

⁵ To break the day’s fasting.

⁶ The sunset prayer, one of the five mandatory daily prayers for Muslims.

⁷ A spice paste made with chillies, garlic, shallots and other ingredients.

⁸ A sour and spicy stewed dish.

Among them are pictures of her aunt and her mother in their youth. Her mother in tears as a toddler, mucus dripping from her nose. Her mother and Aunt Sham as young girls, clinging to the back of their father's legs as they grinned at the camera with matching toothy grins. Another where they're seated on a wooden swing, this time as beautiful young women in their prime. Alya pauses as she catches sight of another picture.

It's a picture of her parents on their wedding day. Her mother is beaming at the camera, looking resplendent in a simple white dress with lace trimming. Alya's father, however, dressed in a white *baju melayu*⁹ and matching *sampin*,¹⁰ isn't looking at the camera. Instead, he's turned towards her mother, a small smile on his face. Although his smile is slight, it's there regardless, clear as day, reflecting an unbearable fondness. Like he couldn't look away from her, even if he tried. The sight of it evokes in Alya's heart a pang of something bittersweet.

What she would give to see both of their smiles again.

"That takes me back," a voice says. Alya looks up as her aunt settles beside her on the carpet. "Wasn't my sister pretty?"

"Very," Alya agrees with a smile, passing the photo album to her. Her aunt looks over the photograph with warm nostalgia.

"How are things at home?" She asks, flipping over to the next page.

"Same as always," Alya says. "Dina says she's lonely since I've been away, though." She doesn't bother going into details, since her cousins are still around. But Aunt Sham would get it. She knows about Alya's father after all, being the first of their relatives to offer her support after Alya's mother passed on.

"I see." A wan smile crosses her aunt's face. She sets down the

⁹ Traditional clothing worn by Malay men.

¹⁰ An embroidered cloth that is wrapped around the waist and usually worn together with *baju melayu* or other traditional clothing.

album in favour of a hardcover notebook, loose papers bursting between its pages. Her face is thoughtful.

A year ago, on the day before Hari Raya Aidilfitri, Alya had sat by her mother's bedside as she held her mother's frail hand between her shaking palms. Dina had sat beside her, shedding silent tears as she held onto their mother's other hand. Behind the two sisters stood Hakim, silent and grave as he rested a hand on each of their shoulders. His mouth was a grim line.

Their father had sat on the bed, right by their mother's side. A single hand stroked their mother's hair back gently; one last tender touch as a parting gift. They didn't want to acknowledge it, but deep down, they knew that this was goodbye.

Alya's mother had been sick for a while. But the illness that had taken root in her was one that was without symptoms in its early stages, leaving them unaware of the sickness festering beneath her skin. By the time they realised what was happening, it was too late. Despite the constant treatment and care, nothing seemed to work. Surgery wasn't an option, due to the extensive spread of the disease within her mother's body over time.

There were periods of time when she seemed to get better, only to relapse weeks later. Eventually, the period of weeks turned into days. Regular doctor visits turned into an extended hospital stay.

Finally, when things seemed most bleak and the prognosis was far from favourable, Alya's mother made the arrangements to move out of the hospital and back home. She'd decided: if she was facing her final days, then she'd spend them in a place of love, rather than within cold hospital walls.

While everyone else prepared to celebrate Hari Raya Aidilfitri and commemorate the previous month of abstinence and heightened piety, Alya watched the rise and fall of her mother's chest as she took each shallow breath. Instead of spending the

night sweeping floors and hanging decorations for the next day's festivities, Alya listened to her mother rasp the *shahadah*¹¹ one final time, a contented smile on her face as she declared her faith to her Creator once more.

And then she was gone. Here one second and gone the next, like she had simply slipped into a peaceful slumber. If there were silver linings to be found, then it would be the fact that her mother had passed away within the most holy month of the year, something that many Muslims fervently hope and pray will happen to themselves once it is their time to go.

But there was no place for silver linings amidst fresh grief. Not as the sound of her sister's sobbing echoed around the room nor as Alya's own tears which finally spilled down her cheeks. Not as her brother's hand trembled where it rested on her shoulder. Not as her father continued to stroke their mother's hair back, like the motion would ease her journey into the faraway place souls drifted off to after leaving their bodies.

Needless to say, they didn't celebrate Raya that year.

A year later, and the grief is still there. Alya doesn't think it will ever leave. She doesn't expect it to. But at the very least, the pain of her mother's passing was no longer a gaping, ugly wound, stinging from a mere brush of air. It was still there, occupying the space that it had carved out in the cavity of her chest in the early days of her pain, when even breathing felt like too much and her heart constantly frayed, ripping into two. But now it simply settled, leaving a dull ache that made itself known during the bad days. Alya is still getting used to that feeling. But then again, she has plenty of time. The thing that people don't tell you about pain is that you never stop carrying it around with you. You simply get used to it.

¹¹ The Muslim declaration of faith and one of the Five Pillars of Islam.

"Oh," her aunt says as she flips through the notebook. "It's my old recipe book! I was wondering where I had put it." Then, she frowns. "It's been damaged by water, though."

"Oh no, how bad is it?" Alya asks.

"A good half of the recipes are ruined," her aunt laments. "What a shame." She perks up the slightest bit, flashing Alya a triumphant look. "Thankfully, I have them all up here," she says, tapping her forehead. "Recipes from my mother, recipes from my mother's mother, and even ..."

She flips through the recipe book and stops at a page. The page is filled with cursive writing, in a penmanship that almost seems ... familiar. The writing fades off halfway down the page, the rest reduced to blooms of water-damaged ink across the paper.

"This is your mum's *mee kuah*¹² recipe," Auntie Sham says. "Or at least, what's left of it."

Alya turns to her aunt, jaw dropping. "Really?"

"Really." Her aunt grins, passing the book to her. Alya presses her fingers to the familiar scrawl almost reverently.

For as long as she can remember, she's associated Hari Raya with several things: Raya prayers and rushing to the mosque; taking turns with her siblings to kiss their parents' hands, asking for forgiveness for any previous misdoings; greeting all her relatives who came to visit (and maybe solicit a money packet or two from particularly generous aunts and uncles); and of course, *mee kuah*.

Sure, there were the Raya classics to look forward to, like spicy beef *rendang*¹³ or sticky rice *pulut*¹⁴ and all manner of cookies and *kuih*¹⁵ to look forward to. But there was nothing quite like her

¹² A popular noodle soup made with shrimp and beef stock.

¹³ A slow-cooked, spicy meat stew.

¹⁴ Glutinous rice.

¹⁵ Traditional bite-sized cakes and snacks.

mother's signature dish of noodle soup that really made Raya feel like Raya for Alya.

"But it isn't actually her recipe," her aunt says.

"What do you mean?"

Aunty Sham flashes her a conspiratorial grin. "Let me tell you something, *Sayang*.¹⁶ Your mother's recipe is actually from your father's mother. Apparently, she found out that your grandmother's *mee kuah* was your father's favourite dish. And naturally, *Kakak* asked your grandmother for her recipe. Because it was so good, I asked your mother to pass it to me, too."

"Those were really tasty noodles," Alya agrees, nodding. "Wait, did you say that *mee kuah* was *Abah's* favourite?"

"You didn't know?"

"Not at all." Alya weighs this new piece of information in her mind. Her father wasn't really a man of words, preferring to let his actions speak for themselves instead. Which meant that he also didn't share much about himself with his children. Go figure.

Sure, she knew that her father liked her mother's *mee kuah* (everyone did), but she hadn't expected it to be his *favourite*.

"After your grandmother passed away before you were born, *Kakak* started making *mee kuah* for Raya every year," her aunt continues. "Partly for your father, and partly because she just thought it'd be a fun tradition to have."

"I see." Alya lets herself linger over the ruined recipe for a little longer. "Can I ... can I have this recipe? Please?"

"Of course, you can!" Her aunt sounds astonished, like she doesn't understand why she's even asking. "But, I don't think I have your mother's recipe memorised. I guess I never saw a need to make it since she made it every year," she admits with a frown.

¹⁶ Love in Malay, also used as a term of endearment.

"Oh." Well, that was unfortunate. Alya ponders this as her eyes flit back to the recipe notebook. Despite what her aunt had just said, the beginnings of a plan were already starting to form in her head.

* * *

She tells Hakim about it before she returns to KL.

"You want to remake *Ibu's*¹⁷ *mee kuah* for *Abah*?" He asks. The fork full of scrambled eggs in his hand stops halfway to his mouth.

"Yep."

"With only half a recipe?"

"I'll manage, somehow."

"Alya." Her brother scrutinises her with an unimpressed look. "You can't cook."

"Rude."

"Have you ever touched a knife? Or made anything more elaborate than a bowl of instant noodles? How do you expect to recreate *Ibu's* recipe?"

"Oh, ye of little faith," Alya sniffs. When her brother continues to level the same stare at her, she feels flustered. "I'll ask Dina for help!"

"Please do," he huffs, seconds before a genuine grin emerges. "But I'll admit, it's a nice idea. It'll be great if we can cheer up *Abah* somehow. Plus, I get to eat *Ibu's mee kuah* during Raya again when I come back to KL. It's a win-win for all."

* * *

So, remaking her mother's recipe isn't as easy as Alya had expected.

She's sitting at the kitchen counter with her phone in front of her, looking at a snapshot of the ruined recipe in her aunt's recipe notebook. She doesn't have a clue where to start.

¹⁷ *Ibu* is mother in Malay.

“I guess the obvious answer would be the soup,” she muses to herself. But what is the base? Shrimp stock? Beef stock?

“You good?” Dina materialises beside her to peer down at her phone’s screen. She’s already aware of Alya’s plan, and is mildly sceptical about it even working out. But Alya’s always been her family’s token optimist. At the very least, Dina has agreed to help her out, only because she was worried about Alya burning down the kitchen if left unsupervised.

Dina pulls out her own phone. “Let’s try comparing with other recipes first. There’s only so many ways you can make *mee kuah*.”

Many a night is then spent poring over *mee kuah* recipes online and comparing them with the original recipe. Sometimes, Alya would call up her aunt just to pick her brain about the possible ingredients to add into the soup, or if there was any specific way of cooking it.

“Stop trying to make it complicated!” Her aunt would berate Alya when she started going off on a tangent. “Good cooking isn’t about fancy techniques, it needs plenty of love and care and time. Your mother knew this, too.”

After the research comes the testing of the recipe. Sometimes they get carried away and cook late into the night, as that is the only time they are able to taste the soup due to the day-time fasting. After those nights, waking up for *sabur*¹⁸ becomes even more of a struggle than it already is. Alya catches herself nodding into her pre-dawn meal more than once, while Dina stifles numerous yawns as they eat.

Hakim helps them foot the bill for all their experimentation (bones for stock and the other ingredients needed don’t just grow on trees, after all). Sometimes while they cook, they’ll call him up so he can look on, their brother tossing in unhelpful comments on occasion, *oob-ing* and *aah-ing* whenever the results of their cooking

look promising. Sometimes even after they are done cooking, they’d remain in the kitchen to chat, Dina updating her older siblings about university while Hakim dishes out gossip about his workplace. On those nights, the lonely air that had settled around their home is lifted, coloured by shared laughter and warmth.

All too soon, the final day of Ramadan arrives, bringing with it the familiar confusing mix of emotions that would rest in the hearts of all Muslims. While the passing of Ramadan is never not a sorrowful affair, there’s also undoubtedly the excitement that comes with the promise of the following day.

Raya morning finds Alya and Dina clattering in the kitchen, hard at work as they prepare the noodles and toppings that would go with the soup. The batch of soup that’s bubbling away on the stove has been deemed their best effort, the closest to what they hope is their mother’s signature flavour.

Hakim appears in the kitchen moments later, just as Alya is slicing beef and shrimp. He’d returned to KL two days ago to help them out and stick around for the Raya festivities.

“Look at you, actually touching a knife,” he teases.

“Quiet, you. Be useful and go set the table,” she sniffs, turning back to the cutting board. Dina had left to fulfil the task of *somehow* getting their father downstairs to the dining table. Whether she’d be successful or not is a question that is very much up in the air.

“So demanding,” Hakim gripes. Yet, he moves over to the tableware cupboard, procuring the necessary placemats and cutlery.

As Alya slices the ingredients, a torrent of thoughts swirl in her head. *What if Abah doesn’t come down from his room? What if he doesn’t like the mee kuah? What if this is all for nothing?*

What if he never comes back to us?

There are times when Alya walks past her father’s bedroom and glances in, seeing the man who had raised her stare at the

¹⁸ The early morning meal consumed by Muslims before fasting commences for the day.

TV listlessly from the armchair that has practically moulded itself to him.

And every single time, her heart turns into deadweight, in her chest.

Seeing her father turn into a shell of his former self was painful. It was as if when her mother had left them, she'd taken the part of him that could keep functioning with her.

She's jarred out of her thoughts when Hakim rushes back into the kitchen. "He's coming!" He hisses with wide eyes, as if he can't believe it himself. Alya rushes to bring the soup to the dining room as her brother grabs the rest of the toppings, setting everything on the dining table.

Footsteps sound on the staircase, and soon enough, their father appears downstairs, flanked by an anxious-looking Dina. He looks tired, the way he always does these days, dressed in a ratty T-shirt and a worn out *kain pelikat*.¹⁹

He takes in the sight of the dining table and his children waiting for him.

"Selamat Hari Raya, *Abah*," Alya says finally, smiling gingerly. "Raya wouldn't be Raya without *mee kuah*, and we heard that it was your favourite so ... we made some. Just for you."

Her father looks at her for a long minute. His forehead wrinkles.

"Come on *Abah*, try some," Dina coaxes, as she gently guides him to take his usual seat at the head of the table. Once he does, the rest of them take their respective seats. Alya fixes her father a bowl of *mee kuah* before setting it in front of him.

Her father picks up his cutlery wordlessly; dipping his spoon into his bowl. All this while, Alya's acutely aware of the sound of her heartbeat thundering in her ears. Finally, her father sets his spoon down.

19 A chequered cloth that is worn around the waist by Malay men.

And pushes it away from him.

Alya's heart crashes into the pit of her stomach.

She watches as her father brings a hand up to cover his face. He sighs. It's long and heavy, and seems to hang in the air.

When he pulls his hand away to expose his face, his eyes are tearful.

She hears Hakim's sharp inhalation beside her. Across the table, Dina looks frozen, like she doesn't know what to do. Alya feels just as lost as she is.

Tears. She doesn't think she's ever seen her father cry. Not even when her mother died. Or at least, not in front of her. Yet here he is, his eyes filling as he exhales another sigh, this one shakier than the first. He clears his throat.

"It ..." His voice comes out rough, gravelly from lack of use. "It tastes just like your mother's."

Relief floods Alya's chest, so much so that she feels like she would burst. Dina beats her to it, bursting into tears as their father jerks towards her in alarm. Alya feels her own happy sob bubble up in her throat at the sight of her sister. She struggles to push it back down. Beside her, Hakim breaks into a relieved smile.

Their father is back. Whether for good or not, it doesn't matter. The important thing is that he is here with them now.

"Selamat Hari Raya, *Abah*," Dina burbles as she reaches over to clutch their father's hands, bringing them to her lips in a *salam*.²⁰ Alya and Hakim rise from their seats to come to their father's side.

"Selamat Hari Raya, *Abah*," they say, joining Dina as they take turns to *salam* their father's hand. "*Maaf zahir dan batin*."²¹

Their father smiles. It's a sad smile, small and watery. But it's tinged with fondness all the same.

20 A gesture of respect or affection, usually initiated by younger people towards their elders.

21 A common greeting during Eid in Malaysia, to ask others for forgiveness for any physical and emotional wrongdoings that one has committed.

“I’m the one who should be apologising for leaving you for an entire year,” he says. “Selamat Hari Raya, my children, *maaf zahir dan batin*. Please forgive this negligent father of yours.”

This time, Alya doesn’t bother fighting back her tears. “We’re just glad you’re back, *Abah*,” she sniffles, dashing her sleeve across her eyes. Hakim laughs at the sight, only to wince when he gets swatted by her.

There is so much left to address. So much left under the proverbial rug that they have to settle. As magic as their mother’s *mee kuah* is, it isn’t magic enough to resolve all their underlying issues with just a single taste.

But maybe for now, they can content themselves with this moment; with the sight of their father’s slight smile as he watches his children over his bowl of *mee kuah*, Hakim laughing at his sisters as he passes them tissues so they can dry their tears and blow their noses.

There is so much left to be said, so much left to discuss. But that can wait. After all, Hari Raya is only just beginning.

Author’s Note

As a child, and even now, Hari Raya Aidilfitri has always been a time I associate with some of my happiest moments. The dressing up, the food and the people. I wanted to convey the joy of coming together and surrounding yourself with the people you love and, of course, to honour my own mother’s *mee kuah*, which is something I look forward to every single year.

While working on this story, I consulted family and friends for insight and proofreading, to see if my writing was able to convey the emotions that I wanted it to. Dialogue is particularly important, as it allows readers to notice nuances

in the relationships of the characters: the dotting way that Alya speaks to her sister, her brother Hakim’s joking demeanour. Rather than describing how the characters feel, I describe their gestures and actions instead. Alya clutching the cushion out of anxiety is one example. The use of short sentences during scenes of heightened emotions helps to create tension and a sense of urgency.

Above all, I wanted to convey the message of not only family, but of love and the different ways that it is conveyed. Among the ways I have tried to convey this is through the use of imagery and flashback. I have also tried to show this through several instances in the story: the snapshot of Alya’s parents at their wedding, the tireless way that she and her sister try to piece together the recipe, and even the grief that hangs over their father after their mother’s passing. It’s the idea that love is capable of breaking hearts, yet it is also able to mend them and make the family whole once more. For it is love that cripples Alya’s family, but it is also love that brings them back together again.