

## Laugh

It was a swelteringly hot Saturday morning. Then again, which day wasn't hot in this country? I couldn't help but wish I had opted to stay at home. Mom would have narrowed her eyes at me and I'd be in for a round of painful nagging later – but anything, anything just to stay at home. Away from this burning heat. Trudge, trudge, trudge. Away from what was sure to be an hour of listening to dear old Po-po<sup>1</sup> muttering under her breath about her husband. Who wasn't even alive. Trudge, trudge. Away from carrying enough groceries to last her last years. Trudge.

"Choy<sup>2</sup>! Watch your tongue!" I immediately heard Mom's voice sound inside my head, the forceful reproach followed immediately by the image of her flapping her hands, as though to frantically wave away my inauspicious mental comment. The real woman was in front of me, handbag hanging from one hand, keys in the other, clacking clapping against the jade bangle she wore. Po-po couldn't tell the front door from the TV, so Mom had to unlock the door herself.

"Hurry up. You waiting for Chinese New Year?" she snapped impatiently without looking back.

Glaring at her back, I trudged on, feeling the poorly designed supermarket plastic bags cut into my palms. Up four flights of stairs, because this particular neighbourhood of HDB<sup>3</sup> flats had been overlooked for refurbishment. Refurbishment, which might have included a new lift. The old one served only odd-numbered floors, and well, Po-po just had to live on the fourth floor, didn't she? In any case, the lift was faulty. Not that I would have enjoyed travelling in that metal box reeking of aged incontinence.

Finally. Knock knock. Mom still knocked, even though she knew no one would answer. Then, sighing, she would fit the key into the padlock that sealed shut Po-po's kingdom. And with that horrible squeaking noise, the gate would open and the door next. Today was the same. Knock knock. Sigh. Click. Squeeeak.

"Ma, I'm here", Mom said. As she did, every time. Then, depending on how my mother looked like that day, one of the following replies would come from Po-po:

- a) "Ah-Jing, come here, come here! So long since we've met!"
- b) "Ah-Xiu, good to see you. Have you eaten?"
- c) "Who are you? What are you doing in my house?"
- d) Bahasa Indonesia<sup>4</sup> words that I can't comprehend. When we brought her along one day, our Indonesian maid giggled and said it meant "stupid people, stop begging for money".

Ah-Jing was the name Po-po gave my mum. But that wasn't her real name, Ah-Jing was given as a nickname because jing meant "gold", "shiny" or "smart" in Chinese. b) happened when my mother wore too much red and had her sunglasses on. Ah-Xiu was Po-po's favourite cousin. She was incredibly rich, but had died some years ago of

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<sup>1</sup> "Po-po" comes from the Chinese character for woman "po" (pronounced "puo"/"pwo"). When repeated, it means "grandmother".

<sup>2</sup> "Choy" is a Cantonese expression usually exclaimed reproachfully after something inauspicious is mentioned.

<sup>3</sup> HDB stands for the Housing Development Board, a government agency maintaining government-owned residences (normally blocks of flats) in Singapore. Most Singaporeans live in and grow up in such flats, which are a common sight in Singapore neighbourhoods.

<sup>4</sup> "Bahasa Indonesia" refers to the official language spoken by the Indonesian people. It is similar to Malay, a language spoken in Singapore.

pneumonia. c) could happen anytime at all, and happened the most often. d) was when Mom brought me along. Somehow I reminded Po-po of beggars.

Sure enough, the moment we stepped in, an unintelligible string of Bahasa Indonesia was feebly directed at us from what looked, at first sight, to be an oddly shaped and purple-coloured batik<sup>5</sup> bag on the sofa. Looking closer, you would have seen stick-thin limbs poking out of the bag and the likeness of a face somewhere at the top of the bag. Po-po was a pitifully aged and tiny creature, having been prematurely ripped from her mother's womb, a story she was fond of recounting. A web of mustiness hung over her – an immovable, impenetrable fortress. Even while standing just a few feet from her, I felt like she was miles away, locked away in some distant memory perhaps. Much like those cracked pieces of pottery you see at the museum.

The window in the flat was always shut tight, for the simple reason that Po-po would probably shatter in the wind if the window were left open. Therefore the air was still and dead, like it was reluctant to part for anyone. Stepping into it gave no relief at all to the heat outside. It was like stepping into a furnace. Even the walls looked like they were burnt; black imprints of where old bookshelves or a table had been.

My mother repeated, "Ma, I'm here already. Ma?". As Mom shook her gently, it seemed as if Po-po was roused from some pleasant dream, her glazed-over eyes immediately snapping back to the dark, angry black of reality.

"Ah-Xiu?" she croaked, a slight smile lighting up her face.

"No, Ma, I'm Ah-Jing", said my mother resignedly. "Zhuo, take the groceries to the kitchen and then come back and sit with Po-po."

All hope was lost. Faintly, I heard the promise of a beautiful and relaxing Saturday float away like the dust in this flat. Half-formed ideas of swimming and ice-cream melted away.

Sigh. "Po-po," I mouthed almost noiselessly, hoping that she wouldn't catch it.

For someone so old, her hearing was remarkably keen. Beckoning to me, she patted the mouldy moth-eaten sofa beside her. Glancing at my watch, I made a mental note to time how long she would take today to tell the same old story.

"Good, Zhuo, be a filial grandson and keep her company," my mother smiled encouragingly from behind the mountain of groceries.

I rolled my eyes at her, and then readied myself, as a soldier readies himself against the onslaught of the inevitable.

"When I was just a young girl in Jakarta..." That was odd. Po-po had never related the story of her childhood in Indonesia. It was either "My husband, that accursed mongrel, that infidel, that..." or just Bahasa Indonesia stream-of-consciousness complaints about everything in Singapore, from the heat to the food. It was with interest that I continued listening to this old woman in a purple batik dress that hung off her like an elephant's skin.

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<sup>5</sup> Batik is an Indonesian Javanese technique of dying cloth that involves using wax to delineate the designs before applying dyes.

A small, pretty girl, probably not older than seven, stood in the middle of an equally beautiful garden. Orchids, ixoras and spider lilies dotted the cool green grass of the garden like brilliant splashes of paint on an emerald canvas. The evening sunlight softly beamed on the little blur of purple, as the girl twirled around the garden.

"Pulang<sup>6</sup>, Wan Li. Dinner's almost ready," called a voice from within the grand manor that towered behind the garden.

Happily, the little girl skipped back to the house, sure that her favourite beef rendang<sup>7</sup> was waiting for her. And she wasn't disappointed. The smell reached her quite before the sight, the rich aroma of spices and coconut milk leading her towards the large rosewood table, where among a dozen other mouth-watering dishes stood a pot of piping hot rendang.

As though already predicting what would happen, her mother called out from within the kitchen, "Don't touch the rendang, Wan Li". "Yes, ibu<sup>8</sup>", but in the next second, she immediately scooped up a spoonful of the stew. Ah...heavenly. The tender meat melted in her mouth, followed by the heart-warming sensation that comes only from homemade food.

After dinner, the little girl played Bengawan Solo<sup>9</sup> on her grand piano, her small hands dancing carefully over the keys. She looked around, and saw her mother smile indulgently while singing softly and clapping to the beat. Then, a long bath, a cup of hot wedang serbat<sup>10</sup>, and the little girl would be tucked into bed by her parents, sleeping with a smile on her face, knowing tomorrow would be yet another happy day, without worries – wonderful, perfect.

"Selamat tidur<sup>11</sup>, sayang<sup>12</sup>," they would say.

"Selamat tidur, ibu. Selamat tidur, pak<sup>13</sup>," she would reply.

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I had never seen Zhuo so attentive before. I unpacked the groceries, went to see if the laundry was done, swept the kitchen floor and came back. He was still sitting there. No drooping head, or mechanical nodding. Unable to help myself, I smiled. Everyday, I nagged at him: "can you be more caring towards Po-po?", "talk more to Po-po!", "go sit beside Po-po". I knew he thought it was pointless to talk to an old woman, stricken with dementia, barely knowing to whom she was talking. How do you pull your child away from his teenage Paradise of Wii, PS3, and iWhatever?

When Pa was still alive, he and Ma would bring Zhuo to the kindergarten. They were so happy then, Pa driving the old Suzuki lorry and Ma beside him balancing Zhuo on her lap, laughing all the way to school. All differences between the two set aside, just for their grandson. But that was before Pa passed away. Then Ma grieved for so long, I was worried every day. She wouldn't eat. She grew depressed, angry at the world, angry at everything. Angry that she had come to Singapore. Angry with Pa, whom she

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<sup>6</sup> "Pulang" is an Indonesian word, used to call someone back home.

<sup>7</sup> "Rendang" is a Sumatran dish of stewed beef or mutton in a sauce of spices and coconut milk.

<sup>8</sup> "Ibu" is the Indonesian word for "mother", but can also be used out of respect for a female elder.

<sup>9</sup> "Bengawan Solo" is a popular Javanese folksong written by Gesang Martohartono. The title translates to "Solo River", referring to the longest river running through Java.

<sup>10</sup> "Wedang serbat" is a hot drink made from cardamom, tamarind, galangal, star anise, and sugar

<sup>11</sup> "Selamat tidur" is a greeting to someone before they sleep, similar to "good night".

<sup>12</sup> "Sayang" is a term of endearment, similar to "darling" or "dear".

<sup>13</sup> "Pak" is the shortened form of "bapak", the word for "father".

cursed for tricking her. Tricking her to leave family and home in Jakarta, leave her only to come to this stifling – “neraka<sup>14</sup>”, she called it. Her mind broke. I have never seen her smile since.

And yet today, she is smiling, Zhuo is smiling. My son is not looking at his watch impatiently, he is not sighing or making faces. Today, I see what my heart has wished for so long.

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Last week, I would have sat up, stretched, given a great sigh of relief and then bid farewell cheerfully. Today, however, I saw Po-po in a different light. I saw past the sagging skin, the old, mouldy dress. I saw deep into the eyes, found in them a little girl in a purple dress smiling back at me, and I felt an unfamiliar feeling. I think it was guilt. I had been so convinced that my ideal world was all just about me, and nobody else. Now, I could feel, almost see, the boundaries of that world stretching, making space for Po-po and Mom.

“Po-po, I didn’t know you had such a happy childhood.”

Po-po’s laugh carried into the kitchen. My mother poked her surprised face out, and laughed too.

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At the unfamiliar sound of the family laughing, the little girl in the purple dress nudges Po-po through that web of musty memories, and for the first time, Po-po turns her back on her to embrace Zhuo and his mother.

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<sup>14</sup> “Neraka” is an Indonesian term originating from and having the same meaning as the Sanskrit word naraka, “Hell”, or a similarly miserable place of suffering.