

Love begins with memory. There would be no love if I did not recall your eyes the second after you walked past, silent as air. It was that tiny, one-second memory of your eyes that made me turn around; catching a flash of your gait before you suddenly halted, slippers brown at the edges from the mud.

Then there was color. A burst of oranges cascaded from your arms, asserting its vibrancy against the background of the dull, noon-day heat.

"I'm sorry," you said, as the paper bag burst with the weight of your fruits, the wetness of which had weakened the fibres at the bottom.

"I'm sorry," you said, as the oranges rolled past my feet, along the mud and careened down the slope.

It was the most weightless apology I had ever heard.

I searched your face for you. It was our first meeting and already you were lost to me. The mud coated itself on the skin of the oranges, now rolling to a stop as the slope ended where the grass began. I picked them up, feeling the mud drip against my arms. With rapid succession you looked at the muddy fruits I picked up, then at my plastic bag, then at me.

Alarmed by your sudden movement, I blubbered "You can still wash them you know, it doesn't feel right to leave them in the mud,"

"It's okay," you said, before you gracefully took the load of dirty fruits from me.

"Thank you," you smiled, before walking away.

That's how we met. Soft memory. So quiet now in my mind that I have almost forgotten.

For a long time that was how I would remember you. Feet mud-stained from the ground, beaten soft by January rain. Quiet being; still and silent, accompanied by a burst of color.

There is no love without memory.

~

I am 55 and I have been working for the past 37 years. There was hardly a day where I was not working. It is funny how little time matters as you get older. You just let it flow like water down your legs.

My rubber slippers slap against the wet ground as I walk to where I've been working for the past 10 years. It's five in the morning and the air is cold. I slip behind the big, empty counter. The sharp smell of onions, so familiar now, still slap me in the morning. Beside my stall was the vegetable stall, you see, and the onions hung at eye level in a big basket.

I pour buckets of ice on the metal counter and hear the silent quiver of the steel as the ice sloshes into place. I spread the ice evenly with my hands, already used to how biting the cold can get during these early mornings.

"How is she?" asked the well-meaning vegetable stall *auntie* -- I don't know her name, she doesn't know mine and we don't ask -- who was now filling the basket with more onions. I wonder how long she takes to wash the smell off from her hands.

"Ok *la*. When I talk to her, she smiles sometimes. She's eating more now," I responded quietly.

“Good, good..” she said, before stuffing as much carrots as she could in between the cabbages and the radishes.

That’s all we said for the rest of the day.

As I lay the fishes across the Ice, I remember how my son used to help me when I first started. When he was 10 he manned the basket till, impressing my customers - most of them mothers - with how dexterously he could give them the right amount of change. Sometimes, sadly, a mother would distastefully say something to her own son. Something like, “See, boy, he’s so good at counting money. So good at helping his *pa*. You *ah*, still so slow in school, still so lazy.”

In a couple of years this built up resentment from the other boys would cost him his childhood. It was a small village after all. In school, they tore his books, isolated him and even kicked him in the stomach once after pushing him down.

You always took this so badly.

There was this one day, back when he was eleven years old, when you cried with him when he returned home from school, his face smeared with blood and grime. He just opened the door, dropped his bag, and then himself, to the floor. For the first time, our good boy, looked at me as if he was accusing me. No.. not accusing, our boy was too smart to accuse. He looked at me as if he was sad for me. I don’t even know why, but I withered behind that look and could not move towards him. It was intimidating. Then I felt you brush past me and soon you were cradling his face, then his body.

I think you could love our son in a way that you could never love me because he shared your sadness. These days we try a little harder to communicate, to touch and love each other. But every time I think I am beginning to cross the barrier of intimacy and inch closer to you, I hit a wall.

You're standing behind it being sad and lonely and I want to punch it, break it, raze it to the ground but it is too high, too thick and too strong and my hands and all of me is tired and bruised from trying.

Still that sadness. Still that darkness you share in common with our boy.

What is this sadness? Why am I not good enough for it?

~

The year we were married, and when I was still a young man, I started working as a teacher. A job I enjoyed but was never good at. I taught mostly Mathematics to secondary school students. Sometimes I taught English. My memories from that time are only fragmented images. The dust of the chalk when it hits the board, the wooden chairs and tables, the dirty concrete floor, the grey ennui of the classroom and the heat at the back of my neck during the afternoon lessons. I could tell the students never really regarded me as a real, whole person. To them I was just a face who came into class silently to teach them trigonometry.

I guess I was never like the other teachers. I could never toughen myself enough to rebuke them, demand respect through fear and truly imprint my presence in their minds. I never used the cane or struck any of the children. I wasn't that much older than them when I started teaching, you see. My arms were still carrying the reminder of what school was like when the laughter was sucked out and the fear blew in. I was a teacher for 10 years. It felt like I was never a teacher at all.

The day I remember most from those ten years as a teacher was my last day on the job. My neighbor burst into my empty class as I was packing to leave. His hair was sticking to his forehead and his bare feet was dirty from running through mud. The pond in front of my house was drying up

during that time, leaving only a thin layer of water and mud. I must have assumed he had been with my father.

“Your father,” he wheezed, clutching the side of his stomach with one hand, and the side of the door frame with the other.

What happened next was swallowed in giddy light. I remember running out from the school, my shoes kicking up the dust on the long path leading to home. The *lalang* field on my right and the thick of the forest on my left blurring as I ran. My papers struggling to stay pressed in my arms and my shirt sticking to my skin. I ran across the muddy pond and the sudden drop made my papers burst away from my arms. I ran past the floating papers, my arms pushing them aside. Then the burst of the door, the flood of light, and the drop of my knees on the wooden floor. I regained balance and stood up. My mind spinning and my head sweating.

“Ah, you’re here. Come here, come, sit beside me. Haven’t seen you for so long,” he said weakly, in his rough sandpaper voice that sounded so honeyed and loving at the same time. He slowly lifted his arm and gave me a slow, trembling wave.

“Pa, is it very painful? Let me look at your head. Did Hakim call for help?” I was speaking so fast and fussing about, unsure of how much I could touch my father without hurting him.

“Don’t worry. I’ve felt worse. This isn’t painful at all,” he said, slowly lifting up a hand to make the gesture of a dismissive wave. It ended up looking like he was waving goodbye since he moved so slowly. A dusty ray of sun lit his sea-worn skin and the burns on his palms. A fisherman’s palm.

“Your mother says, you should take the Grouper for your wife and boy,” he smiled, pointing to the empty kitchen table.

I remember the quiet that came after that. The quiet punctuated by the soft thumping of the wooden window shutters moved by the breeze. The teal paint on it already worn and peeling.

“Thank you pa,” I whispered, my voice a quiver.

Then a sigh, his last peaceful look and my whimper.

That night you held my frame as I withered. That night the bed felt like a coffin, with your hand the only thing keeping me grounded in the world. The next day we buried my father next to my mother’s grave.

I left my job as a teacher and took my father’s boat, nets and lures and became a fisherman. I was a fisherman for the next 17 years. Nothing much really changed except the nature of my loneliness. But the loneliness of being alone with the water while being constantly preoccupied with the net and fishes was a lot more tolerable than the loneliness of standing in a room full of students who treated the knowledge I loved as a burden. I’ve always felt like a fisherman. I was always waiting for something. And the moment I had something in my hands, they would always begin to disappear. The fishes die, but everything else disappears.

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Love is sustained by memory. Would I love you if I was not enamored with the nectar of your lips and the dignity of your hips that are parentheses to your small frame? Would I love you if I had not remembered the flowers that you always took from me with a smile, before placing them in a jug and when wilted you would press between the pages of books? You would crush their petals between your hands sometimes while you were reading. In your hands even death was poetic. I’m not a poet, you know. I am a fisherman. Ah no, I am not a fisherman anymore. I just sell them now.

I am a fishmonger. Whatever I am, I am not enough. Still dealing with dead fishes. I am afraid to touch you sometimes. My hands don't smell good.

I imagine another man who has softer hands. Kinder hands. I imagine how he would touch you. I told you about this once and you laughed, but I've seen the way the white men look at you. Exotic woman of the east, skin burnt to a golden shine and polite eyes they misconstrue as submissive. Then they look at me with my bloody nails, my unkept hair and they flirt with you. Right in front of me. They must think I am stupid. They must think I don't deserve a lady like you. Maybe I will agree with that.

Maybe all I want is to hold you with better hands.

But my hands, so used to rough things, was always shy around you. Your softness. Your kindness. I know it is a foreign thing to you; the knowledge of how totally pain can reflect itself on skin.

The sea has not been kind to me, you see. I remember hauling heavy loads onto my boat. Pulling and pulling with the rope taut in my hands. The ropes would burn their mark on my skin. I turn my palms towards the sun sometimes and see the sunlight filling a little track that the ropes have created in my palms. When you touch me the warmth is not a burn, but a sigh. I am not used to it.

There is a long scar on my forearm. You often stare at it when you think I do not notice. I pretend not to notice because when you look at me during those times I forget that a scar is an ugly thing.

Turn your gaze towards me again. Help me forget.

Help me forget how on a blistering hot noon the sharp end from a broken wood dragged itself along the length of my forearm. How I stumbled as a veil of piercing white fell on my mind's eye as I curled at the bottom of the boat in pain, looking at the salty seawater slowly mix with my

blood. These days you touch it in the dark. You tell me it is how you know it is my right arm that you are touching. My scars have become markers on the map of my body.

Turn your gaze towards me again.

You tell me I am gentle despite the violence on my skin. I try to believe you. But when I look in the mirror I cannot understand how softness can be translated from the scars and callousness. Remember when I touched you for the first time? My finger pushed away a lost grain of rice kissing your cheek. You looked at me the way one looks at a sad thing.

Turn your gaze towards me again. Help me forget.

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If I lose the dark parts of me, I will lose what fuels the light. I need to always remember that for the most part, we were a happy family. I need to remember to be grateful for that. We were not perfect, but we loved each other. If I go back to a time when we were truly happy, I can remember your smile, always balanced, half-lit by the orange glow of the kerosene lamps. A night out slowly moving through the throng of noisy families. Noisy hawkers on our right and left. The rough, almost angry and screechy sound of the spatula scratching against the wok ringing in the air, peppered with the call of the cook. The damp of the night cooling us from the stuffy heat of the stove fires and bright bulbs at the top of each stall. Walking past a cloud of steam as a hand opens a pot of freshly made buns. Feeling our pores open after we pass through the damp, hot cloud with the smell of flour. Our little boy bouncing between us, each of his clammy hands holding one of ours, the tug of our arms when he gets excited and tries to drag us to a stall of his choice.

When the night has deepened I would carry our boy and hear his breathing on my shoulder and feel the slight swing of his legs, long for his age, as they swung at my sides. You would laugh at



his cocked head and open mouth, adjust his sandals that threatened to fall from his small feet and remark about how he no longer needs my help with his math sums. I think I remember a sense of pride but also a sombre disquiet. I remember those nights as we sat across each other on the kitchen table. The soft light of the last lamp illuminating his homework. One night, he furrowed his eyebrows and told me there was a shorter way to solve a sum. Of course I was proud that he was getting smarter, I knew he was intelligent. All parents want their children to be intelligent. But I was hoping he would be intelligent in a way I could understand.

After the years have rolled by, we would sit by the coast; our boy quieter and holding an empty styrofoam cup between his teeth while he searched for something in his bag. You looking on amusingly. The two of you would speak about his feelings with regards to his friends or a book he read. Then you two would discuss the finer points of Colonialism. I thought he was too young to talk about such things, but you always treated him like an adult during such times.

Then the explosion of light above, the two of you bursting with the same energy in response, amazed and grateful for such an abundant proof of man-made beauty. I would look at the rippled fireworks in the water and pluck the styrofoam cup from the ground, afraid to rebuke our boy for littering. By this time he seemed to have started to shy away from me. You would smile and ask me if I was hungry and if I wanted to head home. We would brush the sand off our legs and flick the ants off our ankles. You would hook one arm around mine and another around our boy's and we would walk home. You, our centre linking us together. Our anchor.

When night came, we would sleep. I would feel you drifting away even as we were lying beside each other. You always seemed somewhere else in sleep. But you'd hold my hand sometimes, and keep me linked to you. Like sea otters who hold each other in sleep, on the sea of our bed, during those times, I knew at least we were not drifting away. During those moments, I feel like maybe, instead of looking towards the water like I've always done, I could bring myself to look up towards the sky the way you two always could.

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It was during your birthday last year. You were peeling potatoes at the kitchen sink, letting the potato peels amass at the bottom in a pile. We were waiting for our son and future daughter-in-law to come over. I was nervous. I was switching through the channels of the television - that clunky big box that doesn't entertain me at all - to calm myself down. We had not seen our boy in a while even though he phoned a lot. I should say he phoned you a lot. He hadn't been speaking to me after he overheard me lightly deriding his fiancée a few months before that.

"She's not exactly very bright .. he's such a smart boy. Too smart for her," I had remarked. In reply you only furrowed her eyebrows and continued making my coffee. I remember the spoon clanking against the tin cup.

"He met her in school some more. *Eh*, you know I was asking her what her favorite fishes were. Said I could bring back her favorite fish fresh from my stall. She didn't even know any! Said her maid does all the cooking," I said. I think I even scoffed a little.

Anyone could read the implication of my words. He was about to marry a rich man's daughter. I was a fisherman. He was smart, yes, but he was also my son.

The night went on and we sat waiting at the kitchen table, talking sometimes, looking at the food longingly and watching as the steam rose until it rose no longer. We sat two hours and they did not come. The door was open and they could have just walked in. You called him. He said he heard. They both heard.

But he had to come for your birthday. So you bought a bag of potatoes and decided to make potato salad for his vegetarian fiancée and told me with a look both heavy and warm that I ought to be

nicer this time. It made me sad because I wasn't a bad person but I felt like it. It felt like I was being punished for believing that my boy deserved better.

When they came the atmosphere was awkward. But we sat together and for a while it seemed as if the night could go well. Then he told us he wanted to work overseas. He said he was offered a good job and the girl will follow him.

"What about your mother?" I asked.

"What about me? He's an adult he can leave when he wants to leave," you said amusingly, before congratulating him excitedly.

I asked him who offered him the job and he was nervous. Her father did.

I want you to know that I did try to be balanced. I want you to know that I wish I wasn't angry but I can't help how I felt. Even angry is not the word. It all felt unfair. I felt inadequate. All those years of dead speech had collected itself in my body like wicks and that moment had set everything on fire. He thought I was angry and I thought he was angry but I know now we were pained and had to scream at each other because we had grown so far apart that no loudness could cover the distance. There is no language loud enough to touch all corners of the sadness.

He asked you to choose.

"Are you asking me to leave your father alone?" you said. For the first time since he was a child, you looked angry. I thought I was going to lose you.

But you chose me.

You held my hand after they left. You said you wished the screaming happened earlier, when the distance would not have made healing impossible.

~

It's not easy to sit beside you. I have to be alright with your stubborn silence; just staring at something beyond me, beyond the space that is our room, beyond anything that seems to exist in this material reality. I don't know what you're looking at what you get like this. I asked you about this once, about what you were looking at. You just sighed very deeply, slowly shut your eyes, looked at me and said "Myself."

"What do you see?" I asked, even though I thought you were being ridiculous.

"Nothing."

Another sigh, then. Then another. Sometimes you would have a small smile and I wondered if in your mind you were looking at our boy's little feet dangling behind me and remembering what it felt like to have him as our centre and pulling us forward.

Then you looked at me, and again, like that January afternoon when I picked up those oranges for you, you were lost to me.

(3838 words)