

1.

Ameera woke up to the sudden sound of birds calling noisily outside her window.

The 7am light was cutting in and baking her pillow; she was going to be late for school again. Her mother used to be the one who would gently rap at her door to call her out of her dreams and softly end her snooze. But now, the knock had become a huge, sudden thump on wood that jolted her.

“Get up!” Her father’s voice would follow.

Fine, I’ll move. Her eyes were being blinded by the sunlight anyway.

She dragged herself out of the sheets and stood in front of her desk, momentarily dazed, letting the standing fan blow weakly at her while she tried to orientate herself. A sinking feeling crept in when she realised she had not completed the homework that now lay messily on her table. Her mother had always been the one who would coach her after school.

Ameera picked out the last set of clean uniform from her cupboard and slipped it on, her thin thirteen-year-old frame still barely filling the blouse. Her stomach protested in hunger as she dragged her heavy school bag that she had been too lazy to pack out of the room, only to be greeted by the sight of her overweight father slumped against the sofa seat, snoring. He was in his yellowed singlet and boxers, his face obviously unshaven since a couple of days before.

The volume of the television was low, a telling sign that it had been on the whole night through.

“Where’s my breakfast?” Ameera asked. Her father’s snoring continued, undisturbed.

“Pa,” she tried again, prodding him this time, “where's my breakfast?”

The man stirred, though his eyes remained close.

“Do it yourself. You're a big girl now,” he said in a drawl.

“But I'm already late for school.”

“So? Then just go to school!” He snapped, staring at her, as if willing her to go away.

“Are you driving your taxi today?” She asked, although she already knew the answer. At least five empty cans of beer littered the low table.

“No.”

“Then what about my pocket money.” She was almost pleading.

“Can you stop disturbing me!” He flared up and kicked the coffee table, the empty cans rattling onto the floor.

“Leave me alone,” he continued curtly, before stretching himself body-length onto the sofa, folding his arms and shutting his eyes.

“I wish Mommy was still around,” she muttered under her breath as she walked towards the front door.

“What did you say?” He bolted up. “*You say that again!*”

Ameera noticed that his voice had cracked and turned to look at her damage: his eyes were filled with rage but slightly wet with an unmistakable hint of hurt. It was the reaction she had wanted, and she went in for the kill.

“I said, I wish Mommy was still *alive!*”

She slammed the door shut as hard as she could.

2.

Everything fell apart at home when Ameera's mother died. She was not even able to see her mother for one last time; she was not allowed to see her body, as the car accident had been a violent one. She just remembered saying goodbye to her after a normal breakfast of Milo and toast, travelling to school on a normal Monday, and then receiving the most abnormal of calls at the general office during recess time.

"Come to the hospital now." It was her father.

She had never seen him cry before; hearing it for the first time over the phone was traumatising, and for the days that followed, it never seemed to stop. The nights were the worst as his sobbing would wake her up and sometimes she would wonder if she was dreaming. But eventually, like all things with time, it went away. It was perhaps for the best, as her heart had one less parent to ache for.

For this morning's bus ride to school, Ameera played her mother's favourite CD on her Discman, a collection of The Carpenters' greatest hits. *Close To You* was the first track; the bittersweet melody was a familiar and comforting memory to her.

She blinked away the tears when she noticed that people were staring, although she had long gotten used to the reaction. Her father might have stopped crying (she wondered if all the alcohol did the job), but for her, she had nothing to numb her emotions with so she would just let them overwhelm her sometimes.

The bus stopped at her school and the door hissed open. She found herself watching the blur of figures unload, most of them dressed in the same uniform as her, gradually realising that she was still glued to the seat. As the door closed with those annoyingly loud beeps, she felt her chest tighten as the bus began to trudge forward,

slowly gaining speed, her school gate eventually vanishing from view. Oddly enough, instead of guilt, she felt an instant wave of relief.

If this was how truancy felt like – the breathless excitement of doing something she knew was wrong but without anyone to stop her – she would do this every day.

Before the bus turned into the interchange, she had made up her mind on where she would be heading on this stolen day of freedom. Alighting, she slow jogged out of the compound, found herself fidgeting at the traffic light, then zigzagged her way through the rush hour crowd to the hawker centre opposite the bus interchange.

She followed her intuition and managed to find the Malay food stall that her mother would take her to on Sundays as a child. She ordered their usual – a *mee rubus* and an *epok epok* – and wolfed down the plate within minutes. Digging out the remaining coins she had in her wallet, she counted that she had just enough for a cup of *bandung*. She left her school bag at her seat, went to get that cup of drink, before returning to see an old man seated at her table, reading the newspaper. He had a *karang guni* cart with a stack of old newspapers next to him.

Ameera sat down directly opposite of him and moved her bag closer to herself.

“Sorry, sorry,” the old man said awkwardly, moving the newspaper nearer to himself. It looked like a really dated version of the English paper.

She ignored him and sipped thirstily on her ice cold drink, sucking it all up quickly. It was only 8am and the morning ahead suddenly seemed like it would drag on. Ameera did not expect to feel bored; playing truant was probably not the most exciting idea if she had nothing better to do or no one to hang out with. She could not really go

home either as her father looked like he would not be migrating from the couch any time today.

A low rumble in the distance signalled an impending rain, further confirming that she would be stuck here for a while.

So she did the unthinkable, and decided to take out her yet to be completed homework to do. She tried to convince herself that it was not a lame idea on a day she deliberately skipped school, and that her mother would definitely be proud of her.

At least the assignment was on one of her favourite subjects at school: history. It was a worksheet on World War II and the Japanese Occupation, and she loved to look at the old pictures of the lives of the civilians back then.

A few questions into her work she caught the old man looking across the table at her a couple of times, and then quickly returning to his newspaper whenever she took notice. Strangely, it had been almost an hour and he was still at the same page – the front page.

Ameera finally made eye contact with him long enough to indicate that she knew he was looking, and to give him the cue to say something before she would pack up and leave the table.

“Japanese. War,” he finally said, pointing at her textbook. “Me.” He pointed at himself. “War.”

“Okay,” Ameera replied tentatively. “You were in the war?”

He nodded with an acknowledging smile.

“Wow,” she mumbled to herself. She began to show interest. “How old are you, uncle?”

He replied something in what seemed like a Chinese dialect, which Ameera obviously did not understand, before saying haltingly and doing ‘7’ and ‘6’ on his fingers: “Seventy-six.”

There was a pause, then, as he was studying her.

He looked curious. “You Malay?”

Ameera smiled a little; she was used to it.

“Half-half. Half Malay, half Chinese. Father, Chinese...mother, Malay.” She hoped he did not notice her hesitance. Her heart skipped a bit whenever she mentioned her.

“You like Malay food, ah,” he said with a laugh.

I like the food that my mother liked to eat, she wanted to say. But she just nodded.

“No school today?”

“No,” she lied, looking down. “Father not feeling well.” That was partly true.

“You read English?” He pointed at her textbook again.

“Yes. Yes, of course.”

What he said next took her by surprise.

“Can teach me?” His smile was a shy one. It was tough not to say yes; so she did.

“Read newspaper?” Ameera asked. It was her turn to point at his reading material.

“Yes. Yes, of course.” He attempted to mimic her.

“Okay. But newspaper quite *cheem* ah, Uncle,” she said jokingly.

“Come, come. Sit,” he gestured to the seat next to him. “You what name?”

“Ameera.” She thought for a moment. “You? Uncle?”

“Uncle,” he nodded.

And it began. Ameera and Uncle. She scanned the version of the newspaper he was reading (or attempting to read) and realised that it was almost two years old. He must have fished it from a pile he collected from his *karang guni* trips.

She found out that he recognised letters but had trouble reading them when they were pieced together as words. He was quick to pick up the phonetics, though; hence he learned to read pretty fast. His vocabulary was still limited, but she guessed he must have had some basic foundation of the language in the past.

This morning, they learned six words Ameera randomly picked out from the paper: ‘Family’, ‘Change’, ‘Sadness’ (and root word, ‘Sad’), ‘Love’, ‘Ameera’ and, well, ‘Uncle’.

“Tomorrow? Teach me here?” He said as she stood up to leave. It was almost lunchtime and she had run out of money to eat.

She did not reply him immediately. She felt that she should not skip school again. Incidentally, she found out how unproductive it was.

Uncle looked a little disappointed at her reluctance and muttered something in Chinese, which sounded like ‘never mind’ in a dejected fashion.

“After school? 1 o'clock?” She decided to offer.

He nodded, did not smile, but she could tell that he was pleased.

“Bye bye,” he waved her off. “Go school tomorrow, okay?” It was in a half-warning tone.

“Uncle, today no school...” she wanted to lie again, but was cut off by him.

He pointed at her uniform, smiled, and wagged a finger at her. Ameera laughed, and was slightly taken aback; not by what he said, but by that emotion of hers. She had not had a genuine laugh for a while now.

“Bye bye, Uncle. I need to go home already. My father is waiting,” she found herself saying and instantly dreading.

She left the old man, took the same bus home, took a little longer than usual to unlock the front gate, but found that surprisingly, the house was void of the fifty-year-old drunkard.

She did find a trace of him on her study table, though, a note that read: “School called. Don't skip again.” Beneath the yellow, handwritten Post-It was her pocket money for the week.

Ameera pocketed the \$30, collapsed onto her bed, plugged in her Discman, and fell into a restless afternoon nap.

3.

The next morning, when Ameera woke up (in time for school), her father had already left the house. His black leather shoes that he usually wore while driving his taxi was missing from the shoe rack. There was a cup of Milo and a plate of toast on the dining table, both left cold. A few ants were already making their way into the layer of *kaya* but she did not mind; at least there was breakfast today.

She took the bus and alighted at the correct stop this time, together with her fellow schoolmates. She handed in her history assignment, apologised to Mrs Gan for

missing school, and pretty much breezed through the rest of her school periods in a normal fashion.

Mrs Gan, her form teacher, asked if she would like to stay back after school for another session of counselling, but Ameera politely declined, explaining that she had been feeling better for a while now and that she had somewhere to go, before making her way to the hawker centre to look for Uncle.

Right on cue at 1pm, he turned up at her table, lugging with him his stack of newspapers and his *barang* that dangled from the handles of his cart. There was the iconic black horn, a red plastic bag with a biscuit tin, and a bright orange water tumbler.

“*A-minah*,” he greeted her hesitantly, perhaps realising that he had botched her name.

She chuckled. “Ameera lah, Uncle!” Not that ‘a minah’ was incorrect, though.

From the top of the stack, he picked out one newspaper and laid it on the table; it turned out to be the same one as yesterday’s. The words they learned the day before were highlighted in yellow. However, she noticed that there were additional words underlined in red, too.

“Red colour, I want learn,” Uncle told her.

He must have done his homework, Ameera thought. She obliged and took him through, teaching him how they were spelt, pronounced and what they meant. It was definitely difficult trying to explain the meanings to him, seeing that she spoke almost zero Mandarin; she had chosen *Bahasa Melayu* as her Mother Tongue since primary one. Fortunately enough, the words were fairly simple to illustrate in layman English, and he did seem like he understood them.

“You want *makan*? Uncle *belanja* you. *Epok epok*?”

It was 3pm and Ameera was more or less done with the words.

“It’s okay Uncle, I’m not hungry.” She should probably get going if she intended to get any of her own homework done at all.

He waved off her reply dismissively and was already on the way to the stall halfway through her answer. He did not even pay attention to her when she shouted her “*Just one, ah, Uncle!*” suggestion.

He came back with a plate of five of the curry pastries. They looked fresh out of the oil, golden and glistening.

“Buy four get one free,” he said. “Eat.” He commanded.

Ameera was never one to pass on a good snack so she tucked in with pleasure.

“But,” Ameera said, in between bites, “I have to go home soon. Later my father come home see me not there, he’ll scold.”

Uncle just munched on the puffs, silent, but listening. He washed it down with a swig of his black coffee; it must have been cold by now.

“How long your mother...?” He made a hooked gesture with his index finger to complete his sentence, symbolising death.

Ameera nearly choked. She did not even have the time to feel the usual pang in her heart whenever someone mentioned her mother. She was just shocked he knew.

“You say you half-half. Father, Chinese; mother, Malay,” he explained himself, seeing the speechless expression on Ameera’s face. “You *suka* Malay food. But always only say ‘my father this, my father that’. No say your mother.”

There was softness in his eyes. “Uncle know.”

He reached out and patted her hand lightly.

Ameera realised she had never had physical contact with someone this old before and was slightly taken aback by the coarseness of his skin. It mirrored the lines she saw on his face.

“Uncle, you very smart ah.” She tried to mask the tears with a little laugh but it did not come out well.

“It’s okay, *A-minah, sayang*. Cry never mind.”

Ameera sniffed and quickly wiped her face. She was not going to cry in front of a relative stranger, and an old man at that. She was quite embarrassed by it.

“About one year already,” Ameera finally addressed his question and decided to leave it at that.

“Your father... not easy, you know?”

She nodded. She knew what he meant.

“Uncle got children?” She did not know where that came out from and regretted it almost immediately.

But he just shook his head. He really did not seem to mind.

“Your father, not easy,” he repeated himself. “Uncle wife... die *three-zero*. Thirty years. She young. But I no love her.”

“What? You don’t love her?”

“We – together...” He put his two index fingers side by side, probably to signify marriage. “No plan. No love.”

She nodded. “Arranged marriage.”

“She no give me children, then she...” The crooked index finger again.

“Uncle... you didn’t feel sad?”

“Yes, will sad. Your father... sad.”

Her father’s sobs over the phone at the general office came rushing back into her mind. She shook it off.

“Uncle never marry again?”

“Uncle one person. *Four-five* years. I *karang guni*. I happy.”

Logically, she should feel bad for him. But somehow, Ameera was convinced that he really was contented being who he was.

“Then why Uncle learn to read?” She pointed at the newspaper.

For an instant, it seemed like he was searching for the words to say, suddenly clutching his cart beside him. However, a word of “*Ai-yah!*” and his now trademark dismissive wave shut her up.

Both of them finished the rest of the snacks in a relatively comfortable silence before she bade him farewell, with the same promise of a 1pm meeting time the next day.

The words of the day were ‘Sorry’, ‘Leave’, ‘Forget’, ‘Promise’, and ‘Happiness’, with root word ‘Happy’ thrown in.

4.

There was something about these reading sessions with Uncle that were somehow more effective in helping Ameera heal than the counselling ones with Mrs Gan. The school’s standard practice were always filled with the same questions that frustrated her to no end.

“How are you feeling now?”

“Can you tell me why you feel this way?”

“Has something happened at home?”

“Ameera, why are you so quiet?”

I’m still the same.

I’m still broken.

No, nothing has happened at home.

I’m quiet because you asked me the same things last week, Mrs Gan.

But with Uncle, every day was different. It was a different set of words, learning new things about each other, and him telling stories or dishing out advice (over *epok epok*) in his broken English, which Ameera enjoyed and in fact very much looked forward to as her after-school activity.

Perhaps she just needed someone to talk to like a normal person, like a friend.

Although, Ameera still could not figure out why this friend had the impulse to learn to read this late in his life. The words had gotten increasingly specific as the days drew on, prompting her to wonder if there was any hidden connection among them that she did not quite catch.

Perhaps she would find out today, she thought, seeing that familiar figure slowly make his way to her table, his signature *karang guni* cart conspicuously missing from his tow. Instead, he was carrying just one bag of items, which Ameera recognised as the biscuit tin that usually dangled off his cart.

“Uncle, you’re late.” By fifteen minutes to be precise, the second thing against the norm that day besides his missing cart.

“Sorry, teacher.”

He took out the tin and set it down onto the table, its items rattling inside.

Gingerly, he opened it and picked out an envelope and placed it in front of her.

“My exam,” he said with a nervous chuckle.

Ameera observed it curiously. It was an old, off-white envelope with faded penmanship on it. She could barely make out the words on the cover, but when Uncle opened it up and pulled out the paper from within, the letter was completely legible with beautiful handwriting on it, albeit a little yellow with age.

“Is that a love letter?” Ameera asked, getting slightly excited.

He nodded, visibly anxious.

“From your wife?” Ameera smiled.

“No.” Uncle smiled.

Ameera frowned. “Then from who?”

“Jane,” he said, somewhat shyly.

He flipped the paper to the back to reveal a date: *December, 1945*.

“Who is Jane?”

“She my number one love.” His index finger was up.

“Your... first love?”

Uncle nodded so vigorously he was almost bouncing in his chair.

“During Japanese War, we in love. Uncle *two-one*. Twenty-one. She *one-eight*. Eighteen.” He was gesturing pretty hard with his trembling fingers. “I bring newspaper to her father office. Every day.”

“That's very sweet, Uncle,” Ameera said, her eyes fixed onto his.

“But war no more; she go home.”

Ameera gaped. “Go home? To where?”

“Japan,” he replied. “Jane like you, half-half. But she half Japanese, half English.”

“We in love,” he repeated.

“Why can’t she stay in Singapore?”

“Her father businessman, got money. Uncle no money. Uncle only newspaper boy.”

“That’s not fair,” Ameera said quietly.

“Last time Uncle newspaper boy. Now I *karang guni* Uncle,” he told her self-deprecatingly.

Ameera just shook her head.

“She very beautiful. Her eyes, blue. She only talk to me in English. I talk to her in *Teochew*. I only understand small bit. She only understand small bit. But... enough.”

There was a sense of distance in his gaze when he told his story, his mind probably going back to a simpler time. Ameera tried to imagine Uncle as a young man, perhaps filled with even more energy and curiosity about life than he had now. He must have been one handsome chap.

Presently, he went back to looking intently at the paper he was clutching in his wrinkled hands.

“Uncle find the letter in my cupboard one year ago,” he continued. “I forgot for so many years. When she already home, in Japan, then she send me this letter. But...”

“Uncle don’t know how to read?” Ameera finished his sentence.

He shook his head slowly. “I sad. I never know what she say.”

It was the first time Ameera noticed tears in his eyes.

“Uncle, you think you can read now?” She paused. “You want me to read for you?”

He flinched and drew the letter close to his chest.

“I read. I want read. I want read for fifty-five years already.”

“Yes. Yes, of course,” Ameera said with the softest smile.

He had a look of newfound determination.

“Uncle, you ready?”

He nodded, holding the letter in front of him, his hands unsteady.

Ameera readied herself, too, for some reason. She wondered what message it would carry: a note from a woman he loved, a woman who loved him, from more than five decades ago, a little story that was told so long before, but now only reaching its intended recipient.

What would it say?

“*My Dear,*” he began, his hoarse voice quivering. He cleared his throat and swallowed. Ameera patted his arm and egged him on.

“I’m sorry for leaving you so soon.

You’ve made my time here unforgettable – I am happiest when I’m with you.

If only we could have more time together.

I love you with all my heart.

Promise me you’ll take care of yourself, okay?”

He stopped, not because the tears were streaming down his face, which they were, but because Ameera had began sobbing uncontrollably. The more he read, the more she cried.

“Promise me you won't forget me.

Someday, somewhere, I'm sure we'll meet again.”

And that was the end.

Uncle sniffed and used the base of his shirt to wipe off the tears. He stayed quiet as Ameera cried; a long, hard and babyish kind of cry that would make your heart ache.

Uncle silently folded up the paper, put it back in the envelope and handed it to Ameera. She stopped and looked straight at him.

“Uncle...?” Her voice was slightly coarse by now.

“Uncle give you.”

She shook her head, choking back tears.

“Jane wrote this for you. You see? She love you. She's your first love.”

His face twitched a bit. Then he also shook his head.

“So many years already,” he said. “This letter... no more use for me.”

Ameera started to calm down by now, but her face was still flushed, her head still heavy.

“I'm sorry,” she said. “I don't know... I don't know what happened.”

“You miss Mommy,” Uncle replied her plainly.

Her heart lurched painfully against her chest.

Yes, I miss her more than ever before.

I miss her face, I miss her voice, I miss her words, I miss her company.

“It’s... it’s a beautiful letter, Uncle.” She tried to skirt the subject, also attempting to ignore the fact that she was full on bawling in a hawker centre in front of an old man.

“Did Jane give a return address?”

Uncle pointed at the faded ink at the back of the envelope.

“Did you write to her?” Ameera asked expectantly.

“No. I dunno how to write. And last time I still angry, I sad Jane leave me. I also think like you, no fair. I think one day she will come back.”

But she never did.

“After long time, you really forget,” he continued. “Now, I also no chance already.”

“So I give you, *A-minah, terima kasih*, thank you. Now, I know how to read.” He slid the letter towards her. “Uncle no need this. You need this.”

But she declined.

“I cannot, Uncle. Your first love.”

“*Ai-yah*. Now I also dunno if she die already or not,” he joked. Or perhaps he was not joking.

“Take. You no take, Uncle angry ah.”

Ameera held it in her hands. She felt a sudden kind of warmth she had not felt for a very long time.

Uncle stood up, left the table for a while, and sure enough, returned with a plate of *epok epok*, which they ate in silence till it was finally time to go home.

“I got pass the exam?” Uncle asked.

“Yes. 100 upon 100,” Ameera was smiling ear to ear. “But...” she caught herself saying, “to move to next level, you cannot stop your class, okay?”

Uncle nodded and laughed really happily.

On the bus ride home, Ameera read and reread the letter numerous times, feeling warmer and warmer on the inside. It was as if her heart had been cold for almost a year, and it had only begun to thaw now.

She came home to an empty house but thought it was for the best. She made her way into her father's room – her parents' room – picked out a Post-It and wrote a little note to stick on the letter Uncle had given her.

She left it on the desk for her father.

“Pa, this is for you. Someone gave this to us today.”

Ameera then went back to her room, plugged in her Discman and fell into a restful sleep, dreaming about a woman with moon dust in her hair of gold and starlight in her eyes of blue.

(Word count: 4,569)