

The Chinese woman was missing her big toe. The Malay woman had lost her left leg, up to her knee.

The young Chinese woman lay in bed, staring at her own bandaged foot. The operation was done several hours ago. The sweet metallic taste of anaesthesia was still in her mouth.

"How long you here already?" the Malay woman said.

The Chinese woman looked at the bed directly opposite her own. A fifty year-old Malay woman was pushing herself up to a sitting position.

"They *potong* what?" the Chinese woman said.

"This lor," the Malay woman lifted the stump of her knee. "*Mati* better. Don't know how to live now."

"What your name?"

"Zubaidah. Can call me Zu. You?"

"Qianqian."

"Haha. Sound like 'owe money'."

"How come you know Chinese?"

"Last time send my son for Chinese tuition. Lee Kuan Yew say China very important. But my son *bodoh* lah. Now even Malay class also *poteng*."

"Your leg like that pain or not?"

Zubaidah sighed. "First few days pain all the time. At night *lagi* worse. But now better. Just itchy. Doctor say must *potong* because of diabetes. What happened your leg?"

"Traffic accident. Car banged me."

Qianqian looked at her right foot and moved her remaining toes. They peaked out from under the beige crepe bandage, as if they were saying hello. Next to them, there was an unfamiliar absence, a new space where her big toe had been. Before she realized it, she had started crying.

Two Pilipino nurses were standing at the nurses' counter chatting, about where to go for lunch.

"Don't worry lah. The *ang moh* physiotherapist quite solid one. Handsome also. You wait a few days, then can walk already," said Zu.

At the hospital's rooftop garden, Qianqian hobbled as she pushed Zu on a wheelchair. Her neck was sticky with sweat and she wiped it with the collar of her blue hospital *baju*. Qianqian pointed the wheelchair at a glass-railing, and then sat down on a wooden bench. The setting Yishun sun cast an orange glow on the waters of the artificial lake next to the hospital. There were people jogging around the edge of the lake, which used to be an abandoned prawn farm.

"Eh, you got strength to throw me over the railing or not?" Zu said.

Qianqian said nothing. She moved her right foot around. The dirty, un-furled end of the bandage flapped around in the breeze, like a child who would not let go of her.

Zu let out a sigh, which was as thin as a wisp of a cloud so it was not visible. It escaped her pink lips and drifted up into the air.

"You got family or not?" Zu said.

Qianqian shook her head. "I'm from Vietnam."

"Wah really ah. You sound very Singaporean. I thought you from Ang Mo Kio."

"Here two years. Going to get PR already."

"I told the physio he ang moh, so must live in Ang Mo Kio. He don't understand."

Two weeks ago during the election campaign, some Minister mistook Qianqian for a Singaporean and had taken a few photographs with her.

She was eating breakfast on her own at Joo Chiat market. She had just finished work and her muscles ached. Her jaw was sore. She chewed on the carrot cake slowly, using her tongue to flatten the salty, crumbled turnip against the roof of her mouth.

The Minister's minders had grabbed her from the back, lifting her up to her feet. Then suddenly ten people appeared behind her, and the Minister in his gold-rimmed glasses was next to her, shaking her hand. "Good to see young people up so early in the morning on a Sunday. We need hardworking Singaporeans like you."

She did not know how to respond, and just nodded her head.

Someone said, "Okay, one-two smile."

Then they all left.

The photograph appeared in the Joo Chiat Constituency Newsletter a week later. It was a small one, on the second page.

It was the first time she had seen a photograph of herself in two years.

At the *KTV* lounge, the *Mamasan* laughed, as she crumpled the newsletter and threw it into a pink, plastic rubbish bin. "*Aiyoh*, Angel ah. You tell him if he takes photo here with us, we all vote for him!"

After the *Mamasan* left the bar counter, Qianqian picked up the newsletter from the bin. She smoothed it out on the black marble counter top. She looked at her own photograph closely, under the light of the white neon 'Heineken' sign. Her facial expression was exactly like the one in her fake Spanish passport—blank.

The *Mamasan* called from the back. "Angel, got customer want you in room seven."

Qianqian left the newsletter on the bar-counter and walked towards the back. The muffled sounds of a Jay Chou song escaped the closed door. She pushed the wooden door and entered. There were three smiling men seated on the battered PVC sofa. One of them was singing, and another was drinking a mug of beer. They looked up at her. Her friend Hahn was straddling the third. Qianqian took off her top before the door had fully closed.

"Your son is quite good. Always come and visit you," Qianqian said.

"Yah lah. His father died long time ago. Just me and him." Zu wheeled herself closer to the glass railing. "You know what widow means?"

Qianqian looked at Zu from the side.

Zu said, "It means 'empty'. Someone told me it comes from a Sanskrit word."

Qianqian touched her own womb, without meaning to.

She had been smuggled into Spain before coming to Singapore. Five thousand U.S. dollars. She had saved every one of those dollars after university, so that she could get out of Vietnam. But all that paid for was six months of work in an airless underground clothing factory in Barcelona, before the Immigration police caught and deported her.

On the airplane back to Vietnam, she caressed her own abdomen, wondering how beautiful her child would be. He—or she—would be half a Spanish human-smuggler, and half a Vietnamese woman, one who could sew the most perfect pair of Armani blue jeans.

But as her abdomen began to show back home in Da Nang, her father, an ex-Vietcong Major, ordered her brother to hold her down as he extracted the foetus from her with a silver metal wire.

"My son ok lah," said Zu. A pair of sparrows circled each other overhead. "Eh, doctor say I can go home soon. When you discharge, you come my house. I cook for you. My *lontong* very steady one."

"What is lontong?"

"You here so long you don't know lontong? Anyway got special sauce. Secret."

Secret.

The word caught on Qianqian like the hooked end of a brown lalang seed on her naked forearm.

Qianqian's last memory of her mother. It was during the December monsoon, a few years after the Americans had left. Qianqian was four years old. Five? Her mother stood at the doorway and smiled at her. Qianqian remembers hugging her leg, her cheek pressed against the cold smoothness of her mother's silk *Ao Dai* dress. Then the world of the *Ao Dai* silk left her face, turned, shimmered down the wooden stairs, and never came back.

She had gone on a rainy day

Qianqian has a recurring dream about once a month: Her mother stands at the doorway, smiling at her. Qianqian asks her—where are you going?

She kneels down and cradles Qianqian's face with her hands.

Her answer is always the same.

'Secret.'

Only years later, the story of her mother emerges, piece-by-piece, one broken paragraph at a time, from her regularly-moonshine-drunk father.

Qianqian's mother had been a Vietcong spy. One of the best. Qianqian's parents had met while they were digging out one section of the Cu Chi tunnels for the North Vietnamese Army. It was a long, jarring, underground architecture that approached the complexity of an ant colony, with tunnels that branched and re-

branched off into sleeping quarters, meeting rooms, kitchens, bomb-shelters, and death-traps. There were numerous store-rooms that held different things—artillery shells, potatoes, sacks of rice, and even the corpses of fallen comrades before they were properly buried.

The history of our country is the history of her body, her father had said, with equal measures of pride and shame. She had seduced the last French Governor-general of French Indochina when she was only fifteen. Then various South Vietnamese ministers of agriculture. She had even gotten a high-ranking American military attaché to reveal the position of an American artillery firebase in the jungle. Five hundred young American Marines died in one night, because of the information that flowed into her naked body.

After the war ended, they had lived well for a while, before Qianqian's father descended into moonshine. He said it was the only way to cope with the ghosts of his comrades who visited him, even during the day. They would come, sit down on his bed, look at him, and smoke cigarettes without uttering a word.

Similarly, Qianqian's mother hardly spoke after the war. She brought Qianqian and her brother to the few green leafy parks in the city, left behind by the French colonials. One of them had a rectangular maze whose walls were made of hedges, as tall as her father. Qianqian remembers getting lost in it, and the desperate feeling of looking for her mother. It was like her body was being turned to ice from the inside. Minutes passed. Hours passed. She shouted and cried. In the end, it was her mother who found her. Her mother was good with mazes.

During one particularly drunken night, Qianqian's father spat at Qianqian as she cowered in one corner of their house. 'I don't even know if you are mine!'

Qianqian's mother did not say anything. She stood by the window and had a faraway look.

Then she left on a rainy day in December.

No one knows if she had been turned by the Americans, assassinated by them, or if she was just trying to escape her own silence by disappearing.

"*Oui* Zubaidah!"

They turned to see a female Indian nurse call them from the doorway to the roof garden.

"Doctor looking for you," said the sweating nurse as she walked up to them. She wiped her forehead with her hand. "One no leg, the other no toe, still can run everywhere."

Zu and Qianqian smiled at each other.

"The ang moh say must exercise," said Zu. "What ang moh say, we must do." Zu placed one hand on her wheelchair's arm-rest. Qianqian reached out with her right hand and covered Zu's hand with her own.

After she was discharged, the Mamasan visited Qianqian on her first day home (to inspect the foot). She brought a tin of loveletter wafers and sat down on Qianqian's bed. "Aiyoh, Angel. Like that how to work?" said Mummy, holding up the heel of the four-toed foot.

"Mummy, don't worry," said Hahn from across the room, fanning herself with a rattan fan. "She can cover it with high heel shoes. Wear stilettos. Even more sexy."

Qianqian looked at her foot with the disappeared toe. She wished the rest of herself could disappear as well. Like her mother.

She was not even sure if the traffic accident that night was the taxi-driver's fault. It was five a.m. and the KTV lounge had just closed. She was walking home alone barefoot, still slightly drunk, the straps of her heels twirled around her fingers. She saw the taxi coming at her just as she was about to cross Joo Chiat road. She remembers thinking what it would be like if she stepped in front of the car. And her right foot lifted off the asphalt.

A month later, Qianqian knocked on the door to Zu's flat in Pasir Ris.

It was answered by a teenaged Malay boy.

"Oh, you're from the hospital right?" said the boy.

"Yes. Is Zubaidah in?" said Qianqian. She was holding a rustling NTUC plastic bag of oranges.

The boy kept quiet. The vertical metal bars of the grill door segmented his face into rectangular bars. Their shadows fell across his face.

Then he asked her to come in.

Zu had died three weeks ago, soon after leaving hospital. The doctors had said it was a heart-attack.

Qianqian did not know what to say. She mumbled a 'sorry' and got up from the wooden sofa to leave. Her mind was not working. She could hear the boy talking, as she struggled to put on her shoes outside the flat, but she could not understand what he was saying.

The boy had no more tears left, and had offered her a glass of water.

She looked at him, and feared to make the shared connection of pain. So she looked away and left.

Later, he threw the uneaten bag of oranges down the rubbish chute. He would not taste the sour, crescent-shaped slices of her confusion and inside, the small hard seeds of her pain, of losing another mother yet again.

Qianqian walked away from Zu's flat aimlessly. She came to Pasir Ris Park and stopped beneath a line of black rain trees. She took off her shoes and trod down the short beach to the sea. Under the moonlight, she stood knee-deep in the salty water for a long time. In front of her, was the South China Sea, and further away, the coast of Vietnam. A sea-breeze blew at her, lifting up her hair.

When her legs tired, she turned away and left the sea.

As she crossed the park, she noticed a dark object, in the middle of a sandpit bordered by rain-trees. She walked towards it, and realized that it was a circular maze for children. Its curved walls were made by wooden planks stuck into the ground.

Qianqian entered the maze and left strange nine-toed footprints in the sand.

She reached the centre of the maze and sat down, leaning her back against one of its walls, as if she were waiting for her mother to find her. Life, Hahn had said, was an accumulation of losses. But Qianqian refused to enumerate the lost things from her thirty years.

She could only think of her mother hiding underground in the Cu Chi tunnels, as American B-52s overhead dropped silver incendiary bombs that set the jungle on fire. She pictured her mother, huddled in the underground maze, furiously digging, constructing another series of tunnels inside her own head, where amongst the rooms that held the bodies of betrayed lovers, there was a single, indestructible room, built deliberately to hold the quivering memory of her five year-old daughter.

(2445 words)

Glossary

Potong – Malay for 'cut'

Mati – Malay for 'death'

Bodoh – Malay for 'stupid'

Ponteng – Malay for 'to play truant'

Lagi – Malay for 'more'

Ang moh – colloquial expression to refer to Caucasian, derived from *Hokkien*

Baju – Malay for 'clothing'. Used here to refer to hospital gown

KTV – short form of Karaoke Television

Mamasan – derived from Japanese, used to refer to an older woman who works in a supervisory role at bars and sex establishments.

Lontong – a Malay dish of rice cakes

Lalang – a tall species of wild grass

Ao Dai – traditional Vietnamese dress, resembling a Chinese cheongsam