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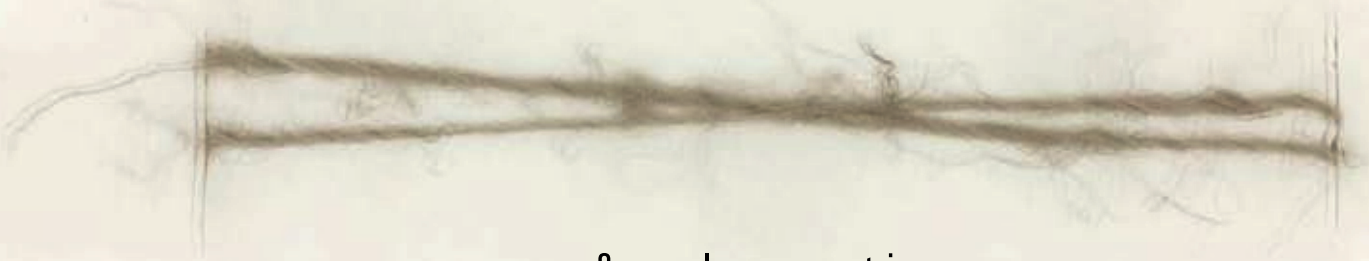


One Imperative

ISSUE 06
HOME

ALICE RENEZ TAY

Emptiness

Beneath the facade

Ray of hope

JEREMY FERNANDO

LOCALLY ASSEMBLED; FROM PARTS UNKNOWN

It is absolutely no surprise that LES MISÉRABLES is one of the most popular musicals in Singapore. When JEAN VALJEAN sings the line, *"who am I, who am I, 24601,"* Singaporeans who are in the audience can completely empathize: after all, the entire nation is obsessed with the notion of identity, the very question of *'what is a Singaporean?'*. This is also a question of the local, or more precisely, what it is to be a local. Clearly this is not just a question of geography—otherwise anyone that is within the island would be Singaporean—but also a cultural one. One has to follow a certain set of conventions to be local: otherwise we would not be hearing complaints about foreign workers not speaking enough English. It is irrelevant whether *'Singaporeans'* actually speak English or not: the comments are directed against the fact that the foreign workers are following a different set of living rules, a different code of conduct from the locals; something that is clearly not accepted.

This is precisely why the entire state was in a dilemma when three table-tennis players—LI JIAWEI, WANG YUEGU and FENG TIANWEI—heralding from the People's Republic of China, stood on the podium at the 2008 Beijing Olympics, winning the first medal for Singapore in 48 years. The question on everyone's mind was, *'do we cheer, or do we not?'*; this was not directed at the fact that three 'FOREIGN GIRLS' had won the medal for Singapore—no one held their triumph against them—but rather highlighted discomfort that the state was celebrating their triumph whilst white-washing the fact that these girls were only a few years ago non-Singaporean. The problem was this: the lauding of their achievements was a brutal foregrounding of the fact that the state considered you local if you were successful. By extension, if you were not productive, you are clearly not wanted by the state.

This double logic is not a foreign one to Singaporeans: the exact same thing happens when it comes to *the Pink Dollar*. Whilst sodomy is officially outlawed, it is also common knowledge that Singapore is one of the gay capitals of Asia. This would seem like a logical contradiction, but that would be missing the point; for, any state would not stand for

To be 'local' is now akin to belonging to a particular club, or to be even more brutal, a particular class.

something that was obviously contrary to its ruling logic. The fact that the gay community can find a strong base in the state shows that productivity in relationships is no longer limited to the realm of human reproduction: who cares if you no longer produce another human; as long as you are economically productive you are more than welcome.

One of the founding myths of the post-independent state is, *'Singapore has no natural resources; humans are our only resource'*. Underscoring the paramount role that performativity plays in the state is the rise in importance of '*human resource management'*; this is a brutal reminder to all that humans are only a resource to be managed. And as resources, every person has a shelf-life: more than that, the moment one's resources—one's self—is utilized, one can only expect to be discarded. There is an echo of this logic in the patch-work project entitled FABRIC OF A NATION that was run by then-named Ministry of Community, Development, and Sport in 2003, in the run up to National Day. Ostensibly, the project was a celebration of diversity, and the coming together of differences. However, patch-works are never a free for all; in fact they are governed by a strict overarching pattern. In other words, the unspoken message in a patch-work is: *'if you don't fit the overall plan, you will be cut out'*.

All of this is naturally troubling to the *'sons and daughters of the land'*; for, productivity is now the key factor to whether one is considered Singaporean or not. The fact that the state is still facing the effects of the world-wide economic recession only serves to heighten this concern. The furor over Permanent Secretary TAN YONG SOON's article in THE SUNDAY TIMES *(6 January, 2009)*—he was criticized as showing a lack of sensitivity during a time of economic crisis when he spoke of his family holiday at Le Cordon Bleu—highlights this. If one were cynical, one could claim that he was being scape-goated: after all, accusing one is the best way of making him an exception; and by extension, the rest are white-washed. Whether this is true or not is irrelevant; the fact remains that economics remains the basis of this state. The closest we have come to having a public demonstration in Singapore occurred when news of the collapse of AIG and LEHMAN BROTHERS broke: whilst this is not surprising in itself, it certainly highlights the fact that Singaporeans will only take to the streets when their finances are concerned; and for no other reason. However, once one takes into consideration that Singapore is historically first and foremost a port, this becomes less surprising: after all, the essential logic of all ports is, *'as long as you have the money, all are welcome'*.

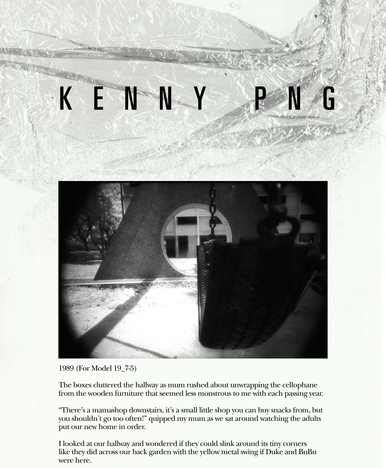
Or in the immortal words of DAVID BRAZIL, *"no money, no honey."*

All of this suggests that the concept of local has been transposed from a geographical one in terms of performance. To be *'local'* is now akin to belonging to a particular club, or to be even more brutal, a particular class. It is rare that GEORGE W BUSH says anything of note, but in this case, his quip—*"are you with us, or against us?"*—seems to completely capture this sentiment perfectly: play by the rules—produce—or leave.

And if one takes into account the fact that the term *'economy'* traces itself back to oikonomia (household management), the logic in Singapore is no longer that surprising. In fact, here one can open our receptors to another register—the colloquialism of calling a familiar place one's haunt. Home; or the management of one's household *(the culling of depreciating resources)* continually haunting what should have been one's haven.

When the three girls stood on the podium, and we were unsure whether to clap or not, we had begun to sense the spectre of this sentiment …
regardless of race, language, or religion …

KENNY PNG



1989 (For Model 19_7-5)

The boxes cluttered the hallway as mum rushed about unwrapping the cellophane from the wooden furniture that seemed less monstrous to me with each passing year.

"There's a mamashop downstairs, it's a small little shop you can buy snacks from, but you shouldn't go too often!" quipped my mum as we sat around watching the adults put our new home in order.

I looked at our hallway and wondered if they could slink around its tiny corners like they did across our back garden with the yellow metal swing if Duke and BuBu were here.

1992 (For Model 1.980)

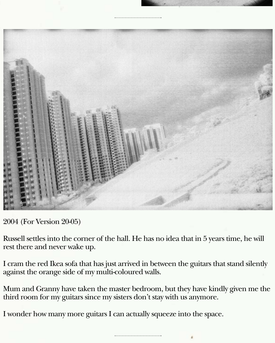
The static hum wheezed from our old Sony hi-fi set like a sigh of relief as I put the pick down to inspect my first electric guitar; An Aria Pro II JS guitar that I have bought secondhand from a friend with a hundred dollars from mum.

Mum peered at me silently from the corner of my eye as I amateurishly fingered the chords to Enter Sandman.

The hi-fi coughed with each brutish flourish of my hands, and it will suffer so until I do well enough at school to justify an amp.

Mum was always generous with me when she could.

She never liked me to play football downstairs with the boys but she would gladly hand wash the black t-shirts with their intricate skulls that I still share with my elder sister.



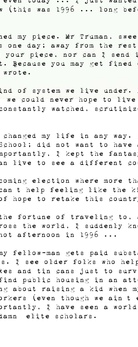
1996 (FOR Coda-5-197)

I watched as mum walked briskly along the concrete pavement leading to our block. Hot on her heels was my elder sister who never seemed to have enough to say to mum.

Dad followed a few steps behind in his typical swagger; they say I walk just like him.

Dinner today is soy sauce chicken, mushroom soup and a vegetable mix I have no name for, all already laid out on the dining table.

Granny is still recovering from her stroke and now stays with my uncle.

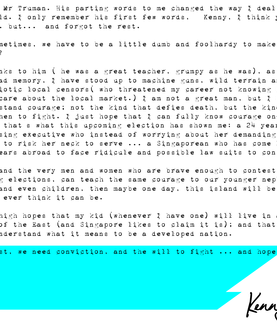


2000 (For Model 1999)

"Boy, wake up, go see your Dad," Said my aunt as I quickly sprung out of bed rubbing my eyes.

It is only 7.10am, or is it 6.55 am? The morning is bright.

Dad lies covered in the thin green blanket I have come to associate with him. He is shrunken and does not look anything like me even though relatives say we share a strong resemblance.



2004 (For Version 20405)

Russell settles into the corner of the hall. He has no idea that in 5 years time, he will rest there and never wake up.

I cram the red Ikea sofa that has just arrived in between the guitars that stand silently against the orange side of my multi-coloured walls.

Mum and Granny have taken the master bedroom, but they have kindly given me the third room for my guitars since my sisters don't stay with us anymore.

I wonder how many more guitars I can actually squeeze into the space.

Dear friends,

I must say this coming General election in Singapore fills me up with much hope, however false it may prove to be. More importantly, it has reminded me of a little episode that I experienced when I was a young first-year student in Victoria Junior College more than 13 years ago.

I was 17, and being young and naïve, thought that my General Paper tutor, who was English, would be more than open to some of my political views. I remember writing a long piece about what I thought about the good ole Godfather of Singapore sans the opposition; amongst other sanctity bits a young educated mind could conjure.

Mind you ... I was 17. I didn't understand some of the troubles our country faced, and continues to face even today ... I just wanted to be a rebel ... say what I thought I knew (this was 1998 ... long before Facebook and blogs.)

This was what transpired after I penned my piece. Mr Truman, sweet man that he was, called me out from class one day; away from the rest of my peers, and he told me: I can't grade your piece, nor can I send it on to the rest of the English department. Because you may get fired or even black listed for the very things you wrote.

Only now do I fully understand the kind of system we live under. Even in academia ... even as young children - we could never hope to live a life free with our own voice ... we were constantly watched, scrutinised and if necessary censured.

I am not sure if that little episode changed my life in any way. I just know that I refused to apply to Law School; did not want to have anything to do with the Civil Service. More importantly, I kept the fantasy that maybe one day ... just maybe ... I can live to see a different country.

Today, 13 years after, we have an upcoming election where more than 50% of the seats are being contested. I can't help feeling like the kid I was ... this could be the first glimmer of hope to retake this country no?

And now I have grown up. Having had the fortune of travelling to, and operating in, more than 50 cities across the world, I suddenly know better what I had tried to say that not afternoon in 1996 ...

I wake up everyday to a world where my fellow-men gets paid substandards wages while our elites earn millions. I see older folks who helped build this country picking up cardboard boxes and tin cans just to survive. I have graduate friends struggling to find public housing in an attempt to start a family. I find myself worrying about raising a kid when my wife and me are not exactly median-wage workers (even though we ain't exactly fat cat bankers either). More importantly, I have seen a world that is more hungry and determined than our dumb elite scholars.

You tell me.

It all begins with a thought ... that shapes a will ... that will force an identity.

Back to Mr Truman. His parting words to me changed the way I dealt with the world. I only remember his first few words. Kenny, I think you are brave... but... and forgot the rest.

Well sometimes, we have to be a little dumb and foolhardy to make things work no?

But thanks to him (he was a great teacher, grumpy as he was), as well as my bad memory, I have stood up to machine guns, wild terrain and even idiotic local censors who threatened my career not knowing I don't really care about the local market.) I am not a great man, but I think I understand courage; not the kind that defies death, but the kind that knows when to fight. I just hope that I can fully know courage one day because that's what this upcoming election has given me: a 24 year old advertising executive who instead of worrying about her demanding job, chooses to risk her neck to serve ... a Singaporean who has come home after years across to face ridicule and possible law suits to contest....

If we, and the very men and women who are brave enough to contest this upcoming elections, can teach the same courage to our younger nephews and nieces and even children, then maybe one day, this Island will be more than we ever think it can be.

I have high hopes that my kid (whenever I have one) will live in a true heaven of the East land Singapore likes to claim it is); and that we will truly understand what it means to be a developed nation.

But first, we need conviction, and the will to fight ... and hope.

Kenny Png

MICHAEL KEARNEY

A REICHIAN PLACE

Dreams to be built became atrocities,
even though you followed the prescribed
systematic course.
Instead, led down into a
narrowing spiral,
pressed tight chest,
fake warmth
in the crushing suffocating constrictions.

Original image
becomes a pin-point:
fades to absolute
nothing.

Reich revealed the living-deadness:
screams,
absorbed in silence,
absence of sense,
of movement.
An unperceived rotting takes hold;
trance induced, "good," someone unseen,
unheard utters.
Vapid vacuum,
stimuli removed,
a floating thought-stifled automaton,
safe in absolute sensory deprivation.

Painless fragmentation leads to
the final solace of encasement,
You're home again.

HINTERNAL/HEXTERNAL

Home can be a scary place because it is
an untouchable internal construction,
never a location to be found outside oneself.

What home do you see when you close your eyes?
What one when you reopen them?
Do you want to pluck your eyes out?
What happened?
How did you screw this up?

It seemed achievable, simple.
Where was the wrong move that let it slip away?
Did you move too quickly?
Too slowly?
How could you know where and when to move?
At the time, it all looked good.
Should you rebuild or just settle in?

BRIAR HEDGE

Unending growth of
entwined briar branches,
years of twisting.
Thorny protection, nestled
down, hidden in the
depth; stay inside.
Protected from the stabs
of external elements,
peering out, selective of
timing to emerge,
but selection always wrong, get struck,
retreat.
Fewer journeys from within each
passing day.

Better stay put, let
the barbed hedge
get thick and
secure.

LIM LEE CHING

Meal on the hill

Do you have change for a fifty?
No. Why don t you pay when you
come here the next time?
But I don t live around here.
It s ok, you will come back.
overheard

A difficult place to arrive at
Far from a stop, even obscured
The house sitting atop

They speak of the flavours of a
place
Of the here and sometimes
Of nothing rushed

Efforts have to be made
To inherit the parts that matter
Some even known to weep

Amid drizzles of tears and taste
Many an ordered credulity
Affirmed by the agreement

Of others who would declare
Allegiance to alternative
Choices and dictates

Textures and echoes
Rarely, barely described
Every gesture a completion

Nearby, the picking resumes
Doubles and triples
Packing and return.

Paoli Chinweike

home

For the third time in the same week, Mei-chih had caught Tsala watering the flowers outside the kitchen window. Usually she complained about wasting clean water when children were still dying from dysentery in the villages. But there was a somnolence in her movements that convinced Mei-chih something in her head wasn't communicating properly with her body. Not only had Tsala started doing chores she didn't like before, but she was doing the usual ones with unusual speed and a strange enthusiasm. Suddenly, the mountains of ironing disappeared and the Chinese vegetables seemed less troublesome to wash. More and more frequently, Tsala was leaving before ten o'clock and Mei-chih could find no reason to keep her. Mei-chih guessed that these were the signs of a woman in love and she felt a tiny prick of jealousy.

"Now, going out tonight?" Mei-chih asked nonchalantly as she brought out a recycled tooth-pick from her pocket after dinner. Before Tsala could answer to the contrary, she continued, "Why you not wear I give you dress to Chinese New Year?"

Tsala smiled in an offhand manner without looking directly at her employer. What was the point of telling her, when it was so obvious, that the dress, for those who have seen several sizes too small – that even if she'd thought of asking the genius of a tailor at the marketplace to readjust them, he would not have substitute fabric for the extension.

"It's good dress. I can still wearing if not already too small."

"Thank you, madam." Tsala replied, knowing that any good intentions were better than none and deserved some form of gratitude. Despite the insincerity of the gifts, they had contributed to Chifundo's school fees. Tsala just hoped that whoever bought the dresses wouldn't one day turn up in front of Mei-chih because it would force her to tell more lies about non-existent relatives, and how many lies like that worked before your extended family got busted?

"Maybe one day I meeting him," Mei-chih said as if talking about her own Mr. Right. "Four boyfriends all meeting on the street at night-time. This one also same!"

Tsala refused to take the bait and get angry. At the beginning, she'd tried to explain to Mei-chih how her culture did not frown upon single women sleeping with any available man she wanted. But, that didn't mean they just picked any man off the street! Like re-lationships everywhere, there had to be qualities that were mutually attractive to both parties to bring and hold them together. Certainly, for some it could be just sex, but for the majority it was a lot more than that. Tsala often wondered if someone like Mei-chih would ever understand.

"To leave daughter in China is more better. My husband can good caring her. When I make plenty money I going back China find her, make good life for her."

Tsala didn't even want to start explaining how naive and irresponsible that attitude was. Didn't she think that she might never find her daughter again, or that by leaving her behind in the first place she'd probably ruined her life? Did Mei-chih really believe that money would turn things around in ten years time? It wasn't just idealistic, it was almost delusional. Every child needs the security of a home and \nothing provides that better than the presence of their mother – shouldn't all animals know that instinctively?

Tsala felt guilty when she had to work after ten because she knew Chifundo would be home alone in the dark. There weren't any children at that hour to keep him company and she couldn't afford to pay for electricity. Once she'd made him a football with an old rag, but there was never time to play so he carried it around like a soft toy and took it to bed with him. It broke her heart to see him so lonely, and that was what really motivated her to look for a man. Moses had left four years ago when Chifundo was only five, she hadn't heard from him since and did not expect to. In the past a woman could comfortably provide for her child by working on her farm, but singlehandedly bringing a child up in the city was very different. Food and clothes were expensive, but more important than that there were new things like school to consider. Moses had wanted to become a truck driver so that they could send Chifundo to school, but who would've thought a machine could take a man so far into the future of his dreams that even his own son and wife couldn't bring him back.

"This one special, yes?" Mei-chih made one last-ditched attempt.

Wiping the sink one more time in an effort of good will, Tsala announced, "I'm finished."

The relationship between the two women had soured when employee discovered employer's profession. For the first few weeks, Tsala had no idea what her boss did for a living. She lived alone in a big colonial house, the type that had looked like white palaces from a distance with ivy growing up the walls and along balconies. In the past, a house like this would've been shaded by big trees and protected by a well-kept fence. But now its appearance did very little to prove its past glory. Huge rotting tree stumps dotted the dry unkempt lawn and leaky drains stained the yellowing walls orange. It was the inexpressible ugliness of the place that made watering a patch of gaily blooming flowers so pointless to Tsala. If Mei-chih had had any normal interest in aesthetics, she wouldn't have cut down the old trees or ripped off the ivy for the sake of a garden, and at least she would've watered the flowers herself. But everything was just produced at keeping up appearances. Tsala could easily imagine the surprise or shock that someone might feel on meeting the lady of the house after wandering through her premises. Her beauty had to be universal because even Tsala could see that it was all her knowledge of Mei-chih's personality and behaviour, that she was lovely to look at. Her ebony pupils contrasted brilliantly with the whites to sparkle with life; her lips were a velvety pink even without any lipstick; her nose was neither big nor small with flaring nostrils that served only to accentuate the fragility of her fine bones. Not a single vein, freckle or hair blemished the smooth whiteness of her exposed skin. Despite having a perfect set of teeth, Mei-chih's mouth was like a broken valve where esteem escaped from her body like high-pressured steam. Her English was atrocious but that was understandable because she'd never spoken it until she escaped from China, however when misunderstanding combusted with a frankness bordering on rude inconsideration then all signs of beauty melted before your eyes.

Mei-chih had asked Tsala how women met men locally and Tsala had been honest about a man she'd met on her way home from a late night shop. Single women had a lot of freedom in her society; it wasn't only men who had the rights to hunt for suitable partners. But from then on Mei-chih took great pleasure in referring to her as a street walker. That blurring of lines did not sit comfortably with Tsala and many times she was tempted to return insult with insult. But then Tsala would ask herself: what did a woman who could leave her child behind, a woman who chose to run away from her own people, a woman who saw money as the only goal in life know or care about social mores?

Mei-chih pondered Tsala's behaviour as a distraction from what was truly worrying her. Not so long ago she'd started to notice an orange pick-up outside her fence. Nobody suspicious had walked through the gate, at least not while she was watching, but there were plenty of holes between the fence all around the house where a grown man could squeeze through without any trouble. Customers had been dwindling for a while and she wasn't getting any new referrals, so who would pick so conspicuously near her house? She'd had a very angry customer not so long ago who'd threatened to teach her a lesson when she refused to give him a discount after he'd finished. Mei-chih was used to bad-mouth her in the Indian community and hire thugs to rape her. Nothing had happened but she'd had iron bars welded to all the windows and added extra locks to the doors. In Mei-chih's view, this insecurity at the slightest threat was the biggest problem with living alone as a woman. Even though Chifundo was only eight, at least Tsala had company if not protection at night, and now it seemed like she'd even found a man.

It was Saturday and Timee was taking them to visit his mother. When they passed the back door in the dawn darkness, Mei-chih opened it as if she'd been waiting for them and had never gone to bed. As always her make-up was done to perfection and she was dressed as if a party was going on inside her house. Tsala instantly disliked the way Mei-chih and Timee looked at each other.

"You going where?" Mei-chih asked eying Timee from head to toe. "This who?"

Timee was the head mechanic at a garage. He was a muscular man, not because he did any heavy manual work, but because he helped his mother on her farm every weekend. Even though she had sent him to school and now he owned a car, his love for his mother and the countryside always drew him back to the village. On this particular day, the little party was all dressed up. Chifundo wore a grey shirt with his blue school shorts and Tsala wore a pink T-shirt with a new chitenge. There were a faded Ralph Lauren polo shirt and khaki shorts. He could've passed as a comfortably well-off man taking his family on an outing and, when he stretched his hand out to introduce himself, a sudden surge of pride made Tsala's bladder weak. Not only was he a man who exuded confidence, he was also a filial son and, more importantly, he wanted her to be a part of his life. It was hard to tell whether Mei-chih declined the handshake on purpose or because she was too busy shock by the picture of manhood that was dating her maid, but Tsala was relieved that Timee didn't insist.

"She's quite beautiful," he said as soon as they were safely in the pick-up.

"Didn't you mind that she didn't greet you or shake your hand?

"I don't really care, besides you're her employee and maybe it's not the custom where she comes from. But I can imagine why she's in the business. Does she pick customers?"

"Of course, why not?" Tsala replied, trying to hide her irritation. "She's got all colours of the rainbow."

"No need to be nasty," he said with a genuinely sympathetic smile. "It's hard for a single woman. You said so yourself."

Nothing verified Timee's sincerity more than Miriam, his mother. As they approached the foot of a small hill, her grass-thatched hut stood out like a brown clip on a head of green braids; it was the middle of the rainy season and the lovingly tended rows of maize were thriving. Timee proudly pointed out the land that belonged to his mother and how even at the age of seventy she was staying ahead of the weeding better than anyone else. She grew cabbages, beans, tomatoes, sweet potatoes, cassava, pumpkins, bananas, papayas and mangoes too. Miriam had farmed and been independent even when her husband was alive; he was a skilled fisherman but had drowned when Timee was eight. In person, Miriam did not look a day over fifty. Her arms were muscular under the slightly loosening skin, her face was radiant with health and she stood perfectly erect like a priestess demanding attention and respect.

"My daughter," she said as she reached out to touch Tsala's arm. There was no awkwardness as they exchanged unspoken words of each other's hardship.

"Mother," Tsala replied shy with happiness. Because she had an uncontrollable urge to stare at Miriam's peculiarly blue eyes, she forced herself to turn to Chifundo who clearly hadn't registered anything unusual.

Miriam was as tall and graceful as the maize she raised and she spoke with a slow, soothing voice. Chifundo's attention was riveted from the moment she began telling him stories of the goats and chickens that ran in and out of her hut like naughty children. She did not stop Tsala from pricking up a hoe and following Timee into the fields where they joked and laughed all morning. At lunchtime, they sat down to a fish and tomato stew with young pumpkin leaves. The food tasted so fresh and nutritious Tsala thought it was no wonder that Miriam had stayed so youthful and healthy.

Since her hut was small and she was old-fashioned, Timee knew that he would have to cut the weekend short by taking his guests back to the city. As they waited for the afternoon rain to recede and prepared to leave, Miriam went around her hut collecting all the things that they could take back to the city with them. She stuffed handfuls of beans, large pink knobby pumpkin leaves, sweet young cassavas and small packets of dried fish into two well-used carrier bags.

"Mother, when Tsala and I get married we're thinking of coming back to live with you. Timee said sitting by the door and looking out across the lake.

"This is home," Miriam replied.

Tsala admired the way Miriam responded without revealing any expectations or giving any pressure. It was a given that she would welcome them for a visit and his wife as well as her child, if they needed her. They only needed to come and they would be home.

On the way back and in the following weeks, Tsala praised Miriam to the skies. "You can get," Mei-chih shouted at her one evening. There was clearly nothing more to be done and Tsala's glowing radiance was beginning to irritate her. Being only twenty-eight herself, the sight of a lovestruck forty-year-old woman made her sick. But there was nothing that could ruin Tsala's happiness for she felt that there was nothing she couldn't overcome with Miriam's lower-of strength supporting and encouraging her the way. Her fingers started to itch and she couldn't wait for a bit of soil to grow something on. As the relationship developed, so did her nesting instincts. More and more she wanted to be there for her child and partner; she wanted to make a home for them, to be there and take care of them instead of looking after a stranger who would only ever reward her in pieces of paper. Ironically, as Tsala's heart fed the workplace, her efficiency increased. She worked shorter hours but accomplished more, and Mei-chih began to worry seriously about losing her. Not only was Tsala a reliable worker, she was also the closest thing Mei-chih had to family in a foreign country. Where was she going to find someone like her again? Mei-chih couldn't understand what kind of a man was able to compete with the pull of money, how could he have such influence over someone as strong-willed and clear-minded as Tsala? In an attempt to keep her, Mei-chih offered her work day and offered to pay double if she didn't take a weekend off, but Tsala seemed set on going home and working on the land as her ancestors had.

"Savages," Mei-chih would rant in Chinese, "with no sense of economy or desire to move ahead in this day and age. There's money to be made everywhere, but stupid people can see no further than the next rainy season. It's no wonder the Chinese are leaping into the twenty-first century and the Africans are being left behind."

After discovering that the orange pick-up belonged to Timee, Mei-chih began to treat it like her own personal taxi service. She asked Timee to take her shopping, paying for petrol and the service, without feeling any compulsion to ask Tsala first. She invited Timee into the kitchen, flattering him in front of Tsala and asking her in a sickly sweet voice if she didn't concur. This irritated Tsala but didn't make her jealous, she believed in Timee and his ability to see through such a false and manipulative woman. However, one day she heard that Timee had been seen in the marketplace with Mei-chih on his arm, this made her so angry her hands shook and she had to spit several times to get rid of the bad taste in her mouth. When Timee did not deny what had happen and even tried to explain that she'd been pushed off balance in the crowd, Tsala handed in her notice. There was probably no fail-proof way to protect a man from the charms of this kind of women, especially not when she was throwing herself at him for free.

Mei-chih threw a temper, then cried and begged for her to stay. But Tsala's mind was made up and the disgust she felt was beyond rectification. She wanted to think better of the Chinese, weren't they supposed to be like the Taiwanese she'd worked for before? Besides, she believed in the integrity of women no matter where they came from, but if she stayed with a woman like this her faith in humanity would be ground to dust. No, it was unbearable, and she wasn't ready to cast Timee aside as just another cheap man.

A couple of nights before Tsala was due to leave, armed burglars broke into Mei-chih's house. They didn't realise what was happening until they heard Mei-chih's scream and a gunshot. Timee was about to run out in his underwear when Tsala harshly pulled back.

"Do you want to get killed?" she whispered angrily. "This isn't our business." As soon as she'd said it Tsala knew that she didn't mean it, and if there was no chance of the police intercepting they would have to think of something quickly. People laughed at the joke about dialling 597, that the only way to get help from the police was to send a car to pick them up, but many knew it to be true.

Timee for his own part was poised in the darkness; he was ready to risk his life because he knew that he could not knowingly let another person die. Finally, at the third time ran out together banging pots and pans as if their life depended on it. When they rushed into the house, it was already too late. The burglars had taken everything they wanted and left Mei-chih lying on the kitchen table. Her cheeks were pink as if she was still alive, her mouth hung open in surprised fear and in her eyes a look of defiant disgust lingered. It seemed like she'd been deriding her attackers and fighting them until they decided to blow her heart out. Lying there in the kitchen instead of the bedroom, where she usually did her business, it seemed like she was cursing the heart of her home and the family that she didn't have when she needed it the most.

SIX-COLOURED RAINBOW

Credits for Six Coloured Rainbow

Written by:
Jeremy Fernando

Director:
Kenny Png

DOP:
Jaye Neo

Starring:
Vanessa Vanderstraaten & Vanessa Dahlan Martina

To watch, please go to *http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cnqVGT46_Ic*

TAMMY HO LAI MING

THINGS IN MY OWN (BED) ROOM (101)

Me of different ages, all mermaids;
(I sing! I sing! I sing of the arcade.)
trees that grow human skulls;
sugar spoons covered with miniature elephants;
reproachful pillows that seek heterosexual heads;
(What is love but a sentence misread?)
plastic, greasy bags that remain plastic, refuse to decompose;
(There is a time when roses eat crows.)
innocent prisoners' inked fingertips;
(Partial (partial?) eclipse of the church lips.)
rain-covered wardrobes;
fluffy curtains catching moon's fire;
(Of wine, political flyers and sexy attire.)
tall people.... etc. etc.
:::::

RED RIDING HOOD AND GRANDMOTHER

I rather liked those red dresses in the basement.
They were tucked away in small trunks.
Their covers were heavy. I needed both hands.
Curiosity is easy to inspire but not satisfied.

The dresses smelled old.
There must be many stories in their folds.
My grandmother wore them when she was young. Then her
younger sisters who were ugly and had giant moles.
My pathetic mom got to wear some, I was told.
And now it's my turn. Except my mom didn't let me.
She said dresses are for girls.

I breathed in the ancient fragrance of them before supper.
I was mad for they kept mum. I suppose grandmom
had made the dresses dumb. Everyone was scared of her:
'She's a horrible bitch.' 'Don't say that.' 'Oh yeah, she's a witch.'

But she loved me. I was the only boy.
Every iota of me turned her on. 'You are so pretty,'
she said, huskily. 'Prettier than all the others
who stink of girly flesh.'

I was permitted, every now
and then, to put on her dresses
& keep my hair long.
:::::

WORST FEARS MANIFESTED IN LAUNDRY

i.

The following week, when auntie and her new husband visited, they bought Ann a pack of five panties. They were cotton, all creamily monochrome: beige, green, blue, pink, yellow; no generic butterflies or daffodils on them. No lace for she was just a little girl. After the Jay Chow concert, it was too late for them to drive Ann home and she stayed in their apartment. Her auntie saw Ann's half-wringed-dry and mouldy underwear hanging on the towel rack when she had a shower. At home, Ann was made to wash her own panties and they were clean and they didn't smell; they just never dried properly.

ii.

And then there's that clichéd spot of pomegranate on the uniform tailing her around smugly in the school library.

iii.

For months in their rental home Ann had been using a broken closet while her boyfriend's clothes were sufficiently neatly folded in a converted cupboard. Ann's furniture looked fine from the outside but inside all the wooden partitions were broken or gone. Her clothes lumped like garbage in that confined space. Because the clothes looked like unwanted items, Ann had often not wanted to wash them: just throw the dress and the stockings right back in after wearing them for the day.

One afternoon when she returned home she saw all her clothes on the double bed, spread out like caged acrobats released to stretch. The landlady had, in Ann's absence, taken the liberty to ask the movers to replace her old and broken closet with a new used one, which now stood with doors wide open, all partitions in place, white and menacing. Ann broke down and cried.
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