

My Mother's Ghosts

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My mother began seeing ghosts in Singapore during her first pregnancy, a few months after she had travelled from Western Australia to marry my father. Perhaps the pregnancy hormones and Singapore's layers of history produced these apparitions. Or maybe they were illusions caused by the way the light fell through thunderclouds and humid air as it gathered steam during her first monsoon.

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She took long walks during that pregnancy, while my father worked at the nearby power station and the rain wasn't falling too heavily. At first she kept to the long jungle-fringed beach, walking as far as the Pasir Panjang Forest Reserve near the entrance to the harbour. She watched the sampans rocking near the mouth of the river, felt the baby rocking in her womb. The map she carried of the nearby mangrove-lined inlets in my father's 1957 Singapore Street Directory reminded her of the diagram of the human body's arteries she'd seen in the anatomy building at university back in Perth where she'd met my father, a Singaporean scholarship student. Everything led to the heart, everything sprang from the heart, it seemed. She felt her blood pulsing food and love to the baby in her own harbour.

This perfect tropical island. You could lose yourself, yet you'd always find your way back home.

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Sometimes on her way home from her walks, she cut through the remnant jungle and stopped for a cup of tea at the hotel overlooking the South China Sea, where English and Australian expatriates and tourists drank Tiger Beer, Bombay Sapphire gin and Singapore Slings copied from the Raffles Hotel's recipe. But back at their flat on the fifth floor, my father admonished her for roaming so dangerously.

'Ah-yah! Bandits hide in that jungle. And that hotel's as wild as the jungle. Not safe for a woman to walk on her own anywhere around there lah!'

So my mother began catching buses towards the city centre. How desperate she was to find good food and faith. She ate Nasi Lemak at street hawkers' barrows and many kinds of noodles in Chinese labourers' canteens that would have turned her parents' stomachs. She bought fabric and prayer mats at Arab Street and visited the nearby tomb of the Malay Princes in the old Malay Cemetery. She scrutinised the Raffles Museum's zoology, anthropology and history collections; peered into intricate dioramas showing early Singapore's Malay kampongs, sultans and pirates, its British colonization and Independence. On Lavender Road she watched the Chinese funeral decoration makers using bamboo and paper for replica houses, cars and effigies of recently deceased people, which they called *zen-sheng*, or 'true bodies'. She ate longevity noodles in Chinatown, bought dependable British underwear and *Jolie Madame* perfume at Robinson's department store in Orchard Road, stopped in Little India's Sri Sivan Hindu Temple to pray under polished brass statues of elephant-trunked and multi-limbed gods and goddesses, before going around the corner to eat dhal and curry served on fresh banana leaves. She felt almost delirious with happiness: so many different ways to nurture body and soul within this small island's city, compared to Perth.

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Once in a Chinatown alley opposite a shophouse selling true bodies, a wrinkled old Chinese woman wearing a moth-eaten black silk jacket beckoned to her and touched her long-nailed forefinger to the mole at the corner of my mother's jaw.

'A sign of... unspeakable pain in infancy. You won't understand. Until you are old,' the fortune teller predicted.

'What do you mean?'

The fortune teller's eyes were sympathetic, but she simply shook her head, over and over, until my mother thanked her and left.

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In her third trimester of pregnancy, the humidity increased as the monsoon season descended. My mother's migraine headaches intensified, sometimes accompanied by auras and bright white flashes. In the immediate aftermath of these auras and flashes, she sometimes saw strange people doing strange things. Once, on the edge of a kampong near the apartment she shared with my father, she saw a wrinkled old Chinese woman with thin grey hair breastfeeding a newborn baby. Impossible, surely? She described them to my father after he returned home from work.

'People said there was a woman in that kampong who breast-fed her grandchild after his mother was killed during the war,' he said. 'But the old woman and the baby died a few months afterwards.'

The next evening, she told my father when he returned from work that she'd seen an aging bald man in a sarong and white singlet sitting in his deceased father's carved plantation chair in their living room, drinking a whisky stengah.

'He sort of ... evaporated when I approached him.'

'Evaporated? Impossible lah! Describe him.'

'Stocky build. Same skin colour as you. Thick eyebrows. Almost fierce expression on his face but he nodded at me and smiled before disappearing.'

Her young husband's eyes widened behind his spectacles and his voice trembled slightly as he hastily crossed himself.

'Ah yah! How did you know my father looked like that? He used to sit in that chair after he changed out of his harbor officer's uniform into a sarong after work. Many Singaporeans believe in ghosts. But not any British or Australian expatriates I know.' He paused. 'So why are you not like other white women, lah?' he asked. 'Why do you see ghosts?'

My mother did not know how to answer that question. Not until decades later when she was old, as the old Chinese soothsayer had predicted.

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My father took photographs of his pregnant wife. When he had them developed, one of them showed a bright white person-shaped flare behind her, its face apparently looking out through the French doors of their apartment towards the South China Sea. But the flare obliterated any identifying features.

‘Must be one of the ghosts you saw,’ he joked.

‘Maybe it is.’

‘Nonsense lah. You can’t photograph ghosts. A ghost image like this is common in the tropics when you’re shooting into bright light. It’s just a phantom image, most likely of the camera’s lens diaphragm itself. Personally, since I went to university in Perth, I only believe in what I can see and touch.’

My mother felt a pain, low and sharp in her belly. A contraction, she guessed. ‘*Breathe in... Breathe out...*’ she told herself.

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We left Singapore when I was almost too young to remember everything we left behind, and built a new life in Perth, the capital city of Western Australia, named by the white settlers of the 1800s after a city in Scotland. By the time we arrived, the streetnames, buildings and institutions in our new suburb seemed almost to have erased all traces of the indigenous people who’d lived there in previous centuries. But when my mother and I went walking along the river nearby one hot summer evening, she stopped suddenly on the walking trail, looking stricken. Goosebumps appeared on her arms, despite the heat.

‘What’s wrong Mum?’

She shook her head, rubbed her upper arms as if she was cold.

‘I can sense something here.’

‘What? What Mum?’

‘Spirits.’

‘Spirits?’ I squawked. ‘Do you mean ghosts?’

‘More or less,’ she said.

‘What kind of ghosts?’

‘Very old ones. Spirits who’ve always belonged here, I think.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Aboriginal spirits, probably.’ But she hurried on, and wouldn’t be drawn further. I ran after her as the river sheoaks shivered in the weak sea breeze, dark against the silver river.

I looked for ghosts around the river for months after that, but found not a trace. And just as disappointingly for me, our suburb lacked the diversity of people, food and languages I dimly recalled from our old Singaporean home.

‘I’m sick of this place,’ I complained to her during my early adolescence.

‘I feel the same way,’ she sympathized. ‘Too much consumerism. Not enough space for the old histories and cultures. You have to open your eyes to other things. Look at the way the light falls here, how it leads us to the world beyond.’

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My mother hoped to travel to Europe.

‘I would like to see Spain, Portugal and Venice,’ she said. ‘And maybe Singapore again.’ But divorce, poverty and illness made it impossible for her.

‘I will take you when I get the time,’ I promised her as she grew old and I became middle-aged. I began planning how, when and where I would take her.

But I did not find the time, not in time for her. Because death had already begun mapping its course through her body’s tributaries, and took her much sooner than both of us had planned.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

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After my mother died, I hoped in vain to be visited by her ghost, or to receive some kind of message from her. I finally left Australia a few years later, after the vapours of Covid had subsided slightly, to visit the cities she’d wanted to visit. Maybe there, denser layers of history might produce ghosts.

During my brief stopover in Singapore, I visited our old apartment block overlooking Pasir Panjang beach and the South China Sea, but it was completely uninhabited, locked up and surrounded by demolition equipment. All the kampongs were gone, and the only place I could find to eat longevity noodles was in a glaringly lit new shopping mall. The closest I came to seeing ghosts were brightly illuminated international brands and holograms on Orchard Road.

Perhaps partly due to my jetlag, the layers of history in Europe seemed more conducive to ghosts. In Lisbon’s Alfama district, I walked down an apparently ordinary set of steps between two buildings with a local archaeologist who showed me on the exterior wall of the closest building, the traces of the revolution, dictatorships, Jewish, Medieval, Moorish and Roman history. In Barcelona I saw churches built on similar foundations, with bullet holes added at contemporary eye level by Franco’s murdering men. In Venice, I found myself floating on a temporary pedestrian bridge erected for the acqua alta tides. On a full moon evening it carried

me past Byzantium, Roman and Medieval buildings as if I'd lost my footing and bearings in time and place, like a ghost myself. But unlike my mother, I did not see any ghosts.

Yet when I close my eyes sometimes now, in whichever city I am, I sense her as I continue travelling amongst the vapours of Covid and earlier eras, hoping to find traces of histories I can see and touch before they are eroded by water, wind or evaporate in the mists of forgetting. Still I don't see any ghosts. But it occurs to me that my mother's ghost lives in me, heightening my sense of the world around me and enjoining me to open my eyes wide again after the weight of grief closed them. *Breathe in. Breathe out.*

If I could, I would show you this, the way the light falls on the world. Even here in the harsh glare of Perth's consumerism and its hottest summer on record, where I still sometimes struggle to believe in anything but what I see and touch.

Simone Lazaroo's award-winning novels and many of her short stories explore individuals struggles for survival and meaning at the juncture of cultures. Her short fiction has been published in Australia, United States, England, Spain, Portugal and Cuba. Her novel *The Australian Fiancé* is currently optioned for film. She mentors emerging writers and is an honorary research fellow at Murdoch University. Her new fictional memoir, to be published in 2023, will be her seventh book. She is now writing a novel about a Western Australian's relationship with regulars at her local beach and her encounters with residents, homeless people and tourists in Mediterranean Europe.