

“Who are we visiting again?” asks my sister, tumbling in with her suntanned shoulders and sandy feet.

It’s a rare Sunday where all three generations’ of women are gathered around my grandma’s carved redwood dining table. The one for ‘formal’ occasions.

We’re here to talk through our long-awaited family trip to Penang.

(it’s finally made it out of the family Whatsapp chat and into my grandma’s dining room).

“Your *jiu gong*,” Mum’s up and out of her chair to grab a towel. No doubt she’ll be pulling out the vacuum in a moment’s time, hands compelled to eviscerate every tiny grain of sand from her house. “And leave your thongs outside!”

My sister kicks her thongs off her feet. They make a satisfying slap against the flyscreen.

“Who’s that?”

“*Poh poh*’s brother,” I say.

At the sound of her title, *poh poh* turns and smiles. She’s perched – never slouched, even with her wonky back at 83 – on the couch. Behind her, the sharp tones of the TVB Cantonese variety show blares from the TV, its bright colours vivid against her greying hair.

“And we should probably go *bai gong gong* as well.”

“What?”

“You know, when we visit his grave? And burn all the paper stuff he needs for the afterlife?”

My sister laughs. “I’m going to burn him an iPad.”

“I’m going to burn him a BMW.”

“Ooooooh let’s burn him a cybertruck!”

“A Tesla!”

“Nah he’d like the BYD more.”

Mum laughs at our antics and thrusts the vacuum to my sister. “He’s not going to know what all of that is. Just burn some money for him.”

“Yeah...guess we wouldn’t want him terrorising the roads up in heaven,” says my sister. “Remember when he didn’t want to get into the car? To go to *yi yi*’s birthday?”

“It wasn’t the car – it was your driving he was scared of.”

“Piss off, I’m a better driver than you,” she points the vacuum closer to my toes.

“Whose lost more demerit points?” I counter.

“Double demerits don’t count!” she jabs the vacuum at me.

*Poh poh* shuffles over at the commotion.

“*Poh poh*, do you think *gong gong* wants a,” I pause as my mind scrambles for the word in Mandarin, “...*che*?”

She smiles wide, eyes crinkling. “Yes... he was good drive.” Her jade bangle cracks against the dining room table as she mimics a steering wheel. “Fast! *Tai* fast!”

Mum, brow sweaty from her victorious campaign against the sand my sister tracked into the house, collapses into the chair beside *poh poh*. “He’d use to drive all around Penang for work, then cross the bridge to get to KL” she says, picking up the thread of memory *poh poh* spun. “He’d be gone for weeks, then come back and force us all into the car for a day trip. We went to the beach, ate ice-cream, then to the movies, then ate again – usually at a hawker nearby. And then dessert.”

*Poh poh* nods, “*Chi tai duo – tai duo!*”

It’s hard to weave together the threads of memory mum and *poh poh* spool in English, Mandarin, with the burst of occasional Hakka. It’s partly thanks to my rudimentary Mandarin, stunted thanks to the stubbornness and arrogance I had as an angsty pop-punk loving teenager, who’d rather listen to Fall Out Boy’s latest album than the listening tracks for my Mandarin class.

I can grasp the broad strokes of the picture they’re weaving – afternoons fishing off the coast of Malaysia, sticky fingers dipping into the rectangles of *kueh* he brought home and the durian that’d have my mum, uncle and aunt fighting for the single toilet in their small home on the outskirts of Penang.

Yet the picture they weave is hard to loop into my own memories of *gong gong*. As my grandfather, I remember him as a stoic, slumped figure on a couch – first in Kuala Lumpur, then in Perth. He was a man who survived under the shadow of his depression, stunned into stillness, bar the occasional outburst of frustration. Where *poh poh* would stand, he would sit. When faced with *poh poh*'s nagging he was silent; when any of us grandchildren arrived he would greet us with a single syllabled grunt. He found any movement beyond the front gate of his home an inconvenience, preferring to travel with his eyes through the pixels of the TV rather than his feet.

That's all to say, the memories I have of him are frayed.

They are thin strands of memories, threads of good intentions that do not bridge the tear between migration, mental illness and mispronounced words.

“Do you think we can visit the hawker he took you to?” I ask. “The *char kway teow* would be so good.”

Mum's eye flashes and she pauses – she's either caught in a memory or she's found another speck of sand.

When she talks through her memories of *gong gong*, the sweetness of freshly pressed sugarcane juice and the crisp crackle of homemade roast pork, she looks youthful - carefree even. Nothing like the dust-destroying, bill-counting matriarch that she is.

“It's probably not there anymore,” she stands. “Give me the vacuum,” she says to my sister.

Ah. Must've seen some sand then.

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Planning an itinerary for a family holiday is like cooking in an overcrowded kitchen.

There's too many pots on the stove, each with their own ingredients, each needing their own seasoning to come to the boil. Some need salt, some need spice. Some crave the heat of the beach while others prefer the cooling sensation of an air conditioned shopping centre. Some want a holiday to be stuffed full with sightseeing, a temple visit and another shop– stuffed as full as a Christmas turkey. Others prefer a slow simmer, like a bone-broth that steeps for hours, which offers a gentle healing warmth with each sip.

That's all to say that planning a family holiday is *hard*.

And like feeding a family, it's thankless work.

And no matter what, someone will complain that it's too salty.

Sure, there's countless ways to get help these days. Google maps for starters. Every travel influencer has a reel on Instagram for your holiday of choice – *Malaysia on a budget! What to do in 24 hours in Penang! Best hikes in Malaysia! 10 Hawkers you must go to in KL! 5 meals to try in Malaysia - from locals!* And the TikTokers have synced it all to music that'll have you humming at 3am in the morning.

When all else fails, Chat GPT gets in on the action, whipping up a 3-day itinerary that covers all the attractions from the Snake temple to the Upside-down museum in a matter of seconds.

But for all the hashtags, #sponsored content and travel blogs out there, there sure as hell isn't a Tripadvisor, Expedia or booking.com recommendation that caters for my sister's first trip back to Penang since she was 8, my shopping needs as an office-worker who can't find a suit in her size in any Western shop as someone with the average height of a pre-teen child, and my mum's need to visit half of the island to meet up with 'family'.

Intrepid sure as hell doesn't offer a tour that packages all the "traditional family things" one is obligated to do as the "Australian-born Chinese" kid who hasn't been back to Malaysia for years. Things like sweeping tombs and paying respects to every single branch of the family tree.

Contiki doesn't provide easy bus transfers to all the "must-do" cultural things that you have to do to reconnect with your roots as someone who is rapidly losing their connection to their heritage – all in 14 days.

So I consult the next best thing: my mother.

The doorbell rings at 5:56pm while I'm pulling out a miso-glazed cauliflower from the oven. My eyes hurt from squinting through the stained oven door for the past 15 minutes, trying to figure out the fine line between a "caramelized" glaze and a "burnt" one.

Mum comes in. She's dressed in a bright red shirt, red lipstick with her wheelie backpack in tow. Fresh from work.

"Dinner will be ready in a bit."

She nods as I return to my lump of cauliflower.

Mum's here tonight to book hotels and get a few logistics done for the trip.

Naturally, in the way adult life does, we're snatching moments of time to plan the trip in-between work, taking *poh poh* to doctor's appointments, yoga and grocery shopping.

Of course, this is a natural tempo for anyone who has the privilege of living in the same city as their parents. While as a teen I was caught with the burning desire to move out as soon as I received my first paycheck (I clearly had no working knowledge of how the rental market worked – informed only by the fictional goal of living with a nucleus of pals from the tv show *FRIENDS*). As an adult I am thankful that, unlike many of my friends, I don't have to take a plane to see my mother or ration annual leave to attend a grandparent's funeral.

But seeing mum hunched over a laptop at the table brings memories of me doing homework under her watchful gaze bubbling to the surface. I taste her simple soup on my lips, a quick meal of rice, steamed *gai lan* and braised pork. Simple dishes that could be turned into soup noodles the next day. The efficiency required of a working mother.

She may be still working, but there's a reversal of roles on this Monday night.

I am caring for her; she is the one cared for.

I'm the one scooping rice into a bowl and setting it out on the table.

I'm the one putting the apron away, not her.

The tightness in my chest crescendos as I bring the browned head of cauliflower over. It's nothing like the brightly green vegetables she'd steam.

"Let's eat."

"Thanks for cooking," she says, putting her laptop to the side. She prods at the brownish-black dome on the plate. "What is it?"

"Miso-glazed cauliflower."

She chews thoughtfully. My experimentation in the kitchen (experiments like miso-glaze, ube basque cheesecakes and chilli-oil cookies to name a few) is a privilege – the privilege of time, the privilege of having an office-job that allows me the flexibility to work from home, the privilege of a steady salary – the privilege of *choice*.

It's a privilege that was inconsistent with mum's job weaving concrete bags in the factory, impossible to have as a home cleaner and frowned upon as a high-school teacher. All work that required her to be *there, somewhere, anywhere* but home.

"It's nice," she says around a mouthful, affording me the kindness that I never gave to her as a judgmental kid. "A little salty."

"Just eat it with more rice," I say, cheekily parroting a line from my childhood.

She laughs.

I find myself wanting her to eat more. I put more rice on her plate – just as she would do to me when I was a kid.

"Eat, eat." I say. "I'll pack you some for lunch tomorrow."

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At the office the next day, I am falling asleep at lunch.

"Got any leave planned?" a colleague asks, unwrapping his conti sandwich at the lunch table.

"Going to Malaysia."

"Going to or going back? You have family there?"

I can't say whether it's the exhaustion from looking up the best hotel room deal for 3 people or just the usual tiredness that comes from a day at work that has me feeling evasive. It's an innocuous question (nothing as blatant as the "where did you come from" that dogged me in my childhood), a question that can be easily brushed off as kind curiosity, lunchtime conversation – workplace banter even.

But I feel exhausted at the thought of trying to explain that most of my family migrated here to Perth in the 1980s, that my understanding of Malaysia's geography is shaped by the stories my mum shared of roaming the streets in a motorbike in her bright blue school dress, the fresh pandan leaves that *poh poh* still longs for when she's steaming rice; that I've shopped more at Woolies than a *pasar malam* in my entire life.

I can't find the words to explain that I've driven more kilometres, down the freeway, driving on down the dirt-roads in remote northern Western Australia, all the way down to the cool wineries

of Margaret River, yet have driven exactly 0 kilometres of the roads *gong gong* traversed on his work trips. That my fingers are stained with outback-red dirt, not the red-pink flesh of mangosteen and rambutan.

How do I explain that I travel with my mouth even though I can't speak any of the 4 dialects my family speaks. My tongue traces the topography of Penang with each laksa I slurp, each banana leaf I unfold and each chendol I devour. How I thought milo was a hot drink made with water and condensed milk until I went to a friend's house in high school. How durian makes me hurl, but jackfruit makes my mouth water. That I have whole shelves of cookbooks dedicated to *nonya* cooking, whole cookbooks dissecting the differences between Singaporean and Malaysian *kuay teow* and the art of making *kueh*, yet no recipe gets me anything close to the salty-crunch of *poh poh's loh bak*.

The thought of offering all that information over a lunch hour in a concrete cubicle leaves a bitter taste on my tongue.

I word vomit all of this to a friend on the bus home.

"Ah so you're doing the roots trip," my friend says in a voice memo a few hours later. "Good luck – make sure you bring vitamins back for the aunties!"

The roots trip. My Australian friends with Malaysian parents used this term jokingly to refer to the trips to various parts of "the homeland" our parents would drag us to during the holidays. We would come back on the first day of school comparing stories of the *kampong* that we stayed in, the humidity that had our clothes sticking to our backsides, the fear of falling into the sewer when using a squat toilet and the mountains of stationery we got. We would commiserate at the way each of our aunts would call us fat, compare notes on the 'health remedies' that were given to clear our acne (from snakes' blood to snail slime) and share CDs of Mandopop idols that we fawned over from afar.

It was a knee-jerk reaction to being told to "go back to where you came from". Going "back to your roots" seemed to churn a lot less of the angst about "identity" and being "caught between two cultures", making it more palpable to digest.

More *Eat Pray Love* than *Border Security*.

We weren't alone in these feelings of course. Many Asian-Australians have written about their experiences going "back to the homeland", sharing the odd feeling of being able to "blend into a crowd" until they opened their mouths to speak, the flatness of their Australian accents outing them as outsiders. TV shows like Benjamin Law's *The Family Law* and *Fresh off the Boat* bring

humour to this experience, while MasterChef has elevated Adam Liaw, Poh Ling Leow and Melissa Leong as household names. Across the Chinese diaspora, *Crazy Rich Asians*, *The Farewell*, *The Brothers' Sun* have brought the confusion and laughter of being 'between cultures' to film, in all its colour-graded action-packed goodness.

I'm growing to accept that my roots are here. I have been nurtured in the dried, cracked, arid sands of Noongar country. I eat spaghetti with chopsticks and travel with all the privileges of a "Western" passport. I miss the smell of eucalyptus more than a warm cup of steaming *teh tarik*.

Yet I am scared that my roots will end here, chopped and discarded from the lush humidity of Penang's hills.

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Planning a holiday is hard, but I'm tempted to argue that navigating the check-in counter at Perth Airport is harder.

Especially when your uber was late, you swore that you'd forwarded all 6 flight bookings to everyone and made a special request for wheelchair access for *poh poh*.

People should talk about how hard it is to plan a multigenerational family holiday.

Having seen *poh poh's* enthusiasm when recounting memories of Penang with mum, I thought she'd be excited when I asked her to come with us to Penang.

"*Tai ma fan*" she said. Is it a common trait for grandmothers to constantly think they are a burden? *Poh poh's* stubbornness was legendary. I admired her for it as it let her come to a country with the words "hello" and "how are you" and make friends with the lollipop man and the greengrocer.

When she turned her stubbornness to me, I almost wilted. It was easy to say no. Cite the practical difficulties – travel insurance, her routine dictated by dementia, the way she rubbed her knees everytime she had to walk for more than a minute.

"It won't be fun without you," I said. "*Gen wo men wan la.*"

(Yes, I wasn't beyond the occasional guilt-trip – granddaughter's privilege!)

For every hour stuck in traffic on the freeway, every GP's waiting room we had to suffer in, I think of *poh poh's* smile when she agreed to come to Penang. I think about how she tried so hard



to stop the corner of her lips from lifting into a smile when I took her to get her passport photo renewed.

“Of course she’s happy” mum says. “*Poh poh* hasn’t been back for 15 years.”

*She didn’t think she’d see her brother before she died* is what she didn’t say.

As the plane took off from the tarmac, the stress of late-night planning, point-miles hacking, months of budgeting dissipated into the clouds.

Seeing *poh poh* smile as she clicked in her seatbelt was worth every minute.