



Simon Sez's grandfather (right) extolled the virtues of simplicity in life.

EXCITEMENT UPRIVER

AS I gazed at the river surface waiting for another round of waves to hit the banks, the express boat laden with chattering passengers and newspaper-wrapped chickens sailed slowly against the currents. Powered by a 1000hp engine, the captain once told me that he'd down three extra thick kopis each time before navigating the muddy waters of Rajang to stay alert and avoid the heavy driftwood as he went upriver.

Growing up, a semester break wouldn't be complete without visiting my now 80-year-old grandpa living in Nanga Ngemah, a small settlement of 20 shophouses by Sarawak's Rajang River. Accessible only by boats, the mere thought of making that journey always made me restless with excitement the night before.

Disembarking at the berth shared by the Chinese and Iban of Nanga Ngemah, I'd be on the lookout for that suntanned 60-something, handsome in his cargo shorts and farmer's hat, who never failed to show up.

A man of few words, grandpa would pat my back and take our bags before swiftly

transferring mum and I into his longboat. For someone who didn't talk much, grandpa would make a conscious effort to remind me each time to not jump but rather step into our next ride with grace.

Making that final transfer always excited me. While bigger express boats would stop at Nanga Ngemah, our ancestral home, located slightly more upriver, required us to travel a little further in longboats constructed out of wooden planks, and which were often wobbly and leaky. With a cut-out coke bottle, my task was scoop out water that would slowly seep in while grandpa would be engrossed in manoeuvring his Yamaha outboard.

Oftentimes, I'd ask him why he didn't just get a proper speedboat like others, only to be told "If it ain't broke, don't fix it". Grandpa was raised a simple man, a trait he promoted to all in the family.

Since returning from the US and resettling in KL five years ago, I've not had the opportunity to visit my rubber tapper grandpa. It's time to make that upriver trip to Nanga Ngemah. Definitely.

SimonSez

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PRIDE OF A PERANAKAN

"OPOCOT! Oh! Gua mo ambek. Oh! Kurang ajar nya ayam." Mama's solitary mutterings would resonate from the backyard to the living room 6 metres away.

Her sudden screech alerted her two grandsons who dashed over to witness her shooing away the chickens, happily pecking on the sundried geragau (krill) that she'd accidentally spilt on the ground. I recall my brother and I chuckling from where we stood near the backdoor before being hustled to help Mama carry in trays of stinky little shrimps into the wet kitchen.

The smell of dried belacan can be rather unbearable for many, with the stench lasting for weeks. I was usually in charge of pounding the

dried shrimp into a paste before Mama shaped them into small squares. The large wooden mortar and the 2-metre-long wooden pestle were my toys in the kitchen. And Mama would often sneer and demand for me to put in more energy in the pounding. But deep down, I knew how much she appreciated what I did, just by the look in her eyes.

This has to be one of the fondest memories I have of Mama, a stalwart in the kitchen and a respectable Nyonya in the Peranakan community. Mention the name Lee Nya Swee and many will wax lyrical about her aromatic curry powder, achar, kuih bakul and belacan.

I was fortunate to have been able to observe, taste and absorb Mama's culinary skills. "Pakeh agak-agak," Mama always said. There are no fixed measurements to a typical Peranakan recipe. I was never able to recreate the exact same taste and quality of Peranakan delights made by Mama.

I have my hits and misses. But after almost two decades of her passing, I've come to realise her secret — to cook from the heart."

Gabriel Martin



Gabriel Martin (first from right) gained his culinary aptitude from his formidable Peranakan grandmother.

GIFT OF PRAYER

"RAJ has an aneurysm the size of a golf ball," our family friend said about my father that sunny afternoon in December 1984. We were in Sydney, Australia for what was supposed to be a holiday. I was too young to understand what the words meant, but I was aware that Daddy was gravely ill.

Hours later, while Mummy was at the hospital to help Daddy prepare for emergency surgery, my grandmother, Amma, stayed with me at the motel. I sat in a chair frozen while she prepared dinner, fed me and got me ready for bed.

At 8 o'clock, she switched on the TV but neither of us paid much attention to the programme.



Aneeta, with her late grandmother as a toddler, finds solace in the gift of prayers.

A while later, Amma switched off the television and sat next to me. She lifted my shaking hands and said, "Put your palms together." I obeyed. She did the same and said, "Now, follow me." She recited a mantra and didn't scold me when I struggled to pronounce the Sanskrit words. Instead, she patiently repeated them until I got it right. When I began to cry, Amma gathered me in her arms and said, "Don't worry.

Just pray."

Together, in that non-descript motel room in a continent far away from home, we must have recited that mantra over and over again that night. What moved me deeply was my grandmother's compassion and faith in our time of crisis.

Four years later, when Amma was diagnosed with cancer, she came to live with us. Daily, I observed how her once healthy body wasted away while she prayed for a cure. By then, I knew what the word terminal meant and prayed that Amma would die with her dignity intact.

Today, when I think of all the gifts Amma gave me, it's this intangible one — this gift of prayer — that I treasure most. And I miss her."

Aneeta Sundararaj



For Sarah, her late grandfather continues to have a comforting presence in her life.

SCENTS OF THE PAST

"HE was an olfactory delight. That's what I remember most. We'd sit next to each other listening to traditional Javanese music, the recordings often scratchy. He'd put one arm around me, I'd snuggle close, taking in those heady scents of doves, cinnamon and vanilla emanating from his tobacco pipe. His eyes closed, he'd sing along softly, shoulders swaying along with mine. When I started work years later, tobacco leaves were high on my priority list. That and Walkman — he loved those too.

My grandfather possessed a quiet grace compared to my grandmother's more robust nature. It was amusing watching them "bicker"; to anyone out of eyeshot, it looked like she was having a schizophrenic fit. He had a porcelain white Persian cat, ET, and the two of us would get into nasty battles. The ultimate prize? My grandfather's attention.

Cats have the patience of statues and ET won most times. But on those occasions when I did, my grandfather and I'd speak late into the night, and I'd fall asleep under the crook of his arm. When he passed away, I was in Paris, and couldn't come home in time for his funeral. Even now, over 20 years later, I still buy those tobacco leaves, place them in a jar, and take in deep breaths. As the night deepens, I'd hear those sorrowful beats of his old Javanese melodies, and my heart would soar."

Sarah NH Vogeler