

New Home

by S.L. Lee

There is a field by my home. It is not the typical cottage and meadow from Enid Blyton. Not even close. I live at the third storey of an old apartment building. And the 'field' is actually a sparse frangipani forest. I do not know how old these trees are, but the trunks are thick and whorled in a grotesquely hunched-backed way. So I guess they should be pretty old. And they are all frangipani trees; warped orchards without fruits. When I look at them, sometimes I think of those stories where an abandoned child was left in the woods. The orphan wondered about, hungry and lonely. He was looking for his parents who left him there and died of hunger and loneliness. But that sounds too dark to be an Enid Blyton story. In any case, they were already there when I moved in.

Government land is government's land – NO TRESPASSERS ALLOWED. Even though it was a rectangle with only one side bounded by a metre high fence, I have never seen the borders breached from the other three sides. Even so, I have yet to see anyone in the midst of the frangipanis forest. It seemed like a spell was cast. Its effects are on-going to this very minute. Even on hot, sunny afternoons, the field remained its fresh after-rain cool. It was more than the fence keeping the world out.

No one goes there. Not even the stray dogs and cats I see so often in this old neighbourhood. And they took care not to go near 'this'. Only occasionally did I see some crows perched on the trees but that was it. Even then, they do not settle there for long.

I moved in only recently. My mother owned this apartment. She was into property investments. She also holds a position as a psychologist and she opens a practice in the building besides Centre-point Shopping Centre along the busy Orchard Road. I seriously have no idea what my father did. They divorced when I was much younger. I never got old enough to know what he does.

It was all right in the beginning and then one day they could not live together. At least that was what my grandma told me when I asked. She looked after me for a while when I was young. She died many years ago. So, you can guess, I do not see my father very often. In fact, I do not see him at all after they separated.

The last time I saw him, I was working in-between my university terms. Actually, I was not working when I met him. I was sitting along outside a café after work. Sort of an in-between everything.

It was around ten and I had just got off from the office. I was alone because I didn't have any friends from work or from school. No one asked me out and, in turn, I keep pretty much to myself. It was just my cup and I. I counted the number of couples on the streets. That too is a form of people watching.

At first I thought he looked familiar. He was not in a 'couple' set. Then I nearly dropped my ice mocha when I knew. I waved to him. I guessed he recognised me. He came to my table with his drink in hand. He wore a golf-polo shirt. His pine-scented after-shave gave me the impression that he has just stepped out from a long hot bath. Images of posh toilet in some hotel faraway. That was it. He seemed like he left the country for a long while and just came back for a visit or something.

It was not at all like the movies when I would throw my cup at him or do something that will vent the frustrations of all my years in a 'fatherless-existence' on him. And he would feel guilty and somehow more than make up for me by telling me a perfectly good reason for having left us. In many cases, it was either to save the country from disintegration or it was to seek his long-lost inheritance. And in the end, everyone made up and lived happily ever after.

With the huge inheritance or the generous government grant for the Armageddon hero. It was really nothing like that, of course.

“Hi.” My voice was cool. Composed. To point of being compressed.

He nodded. I looked enough like my mother for him to know I am his son. He looked like the hazy image of the man I saw when I was five. Some perverse logic at work. But it could not bridge the gap between us. The gap was time.

“Have a seat?” I offered after he bought his drink. Ice mocha too. What a coincidence!

He seated himself. He drummed his fingers with that horse galloping sound. It amused me when I was young. And I do it when I am bored, or alone or just want to keep my mind off things I rather not think about. In fact, that was a fine time to be drumming my fingers on the table. But I didn't. He offered me a cigarette. He lit mine and then lit his.

“How's everything?” He spoke after a long while.

“Fine.” I looked at him. “And you?”

“Still okay.”

We did not say anything more. Just finished the cigarette. Occasionally we took sips of the ice-coffee through the straws. Other than that, we did not do or say anything more.

“I gotta go now.” He said.

I nodded.

He fished around his pockets and came out with a flimsy pack of cigarettes.

“Here, you have this.” He gave me his pack.

He did not exactly pressed it into my palms. He slide it over the tabletop to me. I looked at it.

When I looked up, he was gone. I half-suspected I have imagined him or conjured him up. Something stirred in me. There was one cigarette in the pack left.

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My mother got to know an Indonesian-Chinese. He was a successful businessman. I never asked her how she got to know him. She knew him, and she knew him very well. They were engaged. She only told me about him after they were engaged. I was not invited to their wedding. I did not even know about it. I do not see her often. She led a jet-setting life between Singapore and Indonesia with her husband.

Perhaps she felt guilty and so she gave me the apartment. It was an exchange I guess. In exchange for what? I have no idea, but it felt like an exchange all the same.

It was close to town and my workplace. It was a modest four-room apartment with adequate furnishings. The transport was so-so. And I did not have to worry at all about rent. She drove me up to the apartment and went up with me to make sure that I found it satisfactory.

The furnishings were modern and the toilets were functioning well enough. There was a microwave oven, a family sized refrigerator, a fifteen-inch television, an expensive coffee maker and a hi-fi set. I did not make any disapproving sounds and she assumed I liked it. I did not have any objections.

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It was done in minutes. She wore a very smart black ladies suit with knee length skirts. I felt uncomfortable in my starched business shirt and pants. The seat was hard and uncomfortable. The air-conditioning of the lawyer's office needed a major overhaul.

She signed and I signed. Then I signed and she signed again. We shook hands with the lawyers and then shook hands together. I looked around for more people to shake hands with, and there was none. That was it.

I shifted in a week after.

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She was only twenty-one when she gave birth to me. This was normal twenty years ago. She still looks young now. Even in her mid-forties, she looks ten years younger than her real age. Not that she has no wrinkles on her face. You just have to screw your eyes really hard to see them.

We went for dinner in a posh Italian restaurant after she signed the apartment over to me. She refused to take no for an answer. I saw her husband for the first time. I still find it hard to think of him as my stepfather. His chauffeur fetched us.

"I hope you'll like him." She said as a matter of fact. She could have as well said 'You must like him' and there would still be no difference in the meaning she stated. We were in the steel elevator in the long ascend to the restaurant. It was the twenty-seventh floor. I felt awkward to be alone with my mother, especially in an elevator. I did not know what to say. I did not know how to act.

In reply, I managed to utter, "Sure."

"How's everything?"

"Fine, just fine."

"Sure?" She asked.

The lift-doors opened. He looked in his mid-thirties and was even slightly handsome in a matured, Eurasian sort of way. He struck me as having very brown eyes for a Chinese. Turned out that one of his grandmothers was a half-Portuguese from Macau. 'One of his grand-mothers' indeed.

We shook hands. He wore many rings. Almost a ring for each finger.

"You and your son look so much alike." He said.

"Really?" She replied.

I only smiled.

He turned to me. "Are you studying?"

"No, graduated two years ago."

"Really? I can't tell."

My mother smiled. Rows of perfect teeth. She covered them delicately with a napkin and looked at him as if sharing a private joke. It was not the best dinner I ever had.

"Here, take this." He pressed something into my palm when we shook hands at the end of the evening. It was metallic. It was warmed. The heat of his hands. I nodded and left. After I thanked him of course.

It was a platinum lighter. The buffered silvery shine reminded me of the full moon's glow. A luminous reflection in the dark. I hailed a cab to my new home. I slept early in my first night at the apartment. My apartment. I woke up before the sun was up. I did my daily exercise for forty-five minutes. I showered and made myself a mug of instant coffee.

The sun was still not up. I looked at the clock and it read five-forty. I changed my mind and wanted black coffee instead. I poured the instant coffee, which tasted bland and chocolate-dy anyway, into the sink. I worked the coffee-brewer and watched it drip, drip, drip and drip black drops into a pot. I was considering how brewing coffee was such a lonely art when the phone rang.

That was when I got that phone call. Well, the thing was that, there was no one speaking on the phone. But after I strained my ears really hard, I heard a very faint sound. "Hello..." I answered.

"Hello?"

"...-lo"

"What?"

"...-at..."

Now if it was someone who called a wrong number, either the conversation will go like this:

Caller : "Hi is so-and-so in?"

Me : "No such person. Wrong number." (I will hang up the phone).

End of conversation.

Or the caller would simply hang up the phone on me the moment he or she hears an unfamiliar voice. But what was I to make of a conversation like 'this'? I thought about someone tied up or beaten up and gagged. Like in abductions or kidnaps. They make calls home. They take the receiver up and press it against the mouths of the abducted people. So close and so hard that it must be painful. You pick up the phone to hear the screams on the other end, exceptionally clear, exceptionally loud. The pain more dreadfully conveyed. All the better for the kidnappers. All the clearer for you. It was that sort of voice.

Yet, I could not hear a single word. This must surely defeat the purpose of a kidnapper or whoever he was. The receiver, lifeless, in my hands. A question unsolved. There was no reason at all. There was however enough coffee in the pot for a mug of coffee. I poured it into a mug and sipped it slowly. Then the phone rang again. I think I kind of expected it.

"Hello?"

"Meet me at the bus-stop near –"

She sounded urgent. The same person who made the earlier phone call. Other than that, there was nothing remarkable about her voice. It has that sort of recorded quality about it. Like the voice that announces that 'so-and-so' plaza or shopping centre is closed for the day and you really ought to pack up and go home. That kind of voice that leaves no space for retort.

The bus stop was close to my home anyway. But I did not like the idea of being bossed around. Not even if it was close to my home. And especially by a woman whom I have never met face-to-face before. Also, the sun was not even up and – I have my coffee waiting for me. The more I thought the angrier I felt. And the larger the coffee cup looked. The more I wanted it. The more I wanted to stay at home.

"If you think that I —"

"Come on. Bring your precious coffee down if you want to," she paused, "you won't regret this." Then she hung up.

I was a little puzzled. A little disturbed too. How did she know that I was drinking coffee? I know I should be wondering if she was a part of a robbery plan. Or even a special agent from the secret service. Or someone who was bent on abducting me to avenge a wrong done by my father. Or to up a stake in the negotiations with my new-found stepfather. Or just anyone of those things that, to quote a cliché, goes 'bump' in the night.

But no – it was my coffee and only my 'precious coffee' that I was thinking of. I looked about the house for the right vacuum flask to fill my flask in. I found a steel vacuum flask. I poured the remaining coffee into it and took it with me.

The bus stop was only a few steps away from the forest of frangipanis, near the fenced-up side. The morning wind carried the scent of the frangipani like a freshly dyed silk. The stars that showed up in the sky formed intricate patterns I never thought I could see in

Singapore. I finished my coffee while waiting for her. She did not turn up. I re-entered my apartment. Were we in the wrong bus stop? Perhaps. I took another shower then left for work. It was a long day as it was a Friday and I needed to settle all my tasks before the weekends. By the time I got home, it was eleven.

When I got home, with what remaining strength I have, I selected a CD and played Satie's Trois Gymnopédies on the hi-fi. I slumped onto my huge, soft black leather couch.

I could not get up to switch on the living room lights. It was just I and the strident-hesitant piano keys for company. The phone rang and I picked it up.

"Hello." It was the girl with the 'recorded' voice.

"It's you again."

"Sorry, I didn't turn up."

"You could have called earlier to apologise. Or better still, not called at all."

"That's exactly what I am doing now?"

"A little late don't you think?"

I was not really angry. Only tired and I just wanted to needle this girl with the 'recorded' voice into some emotions.

"You are really petty for a man. No wonder you are alone."

"Well what's wrong with that? I like being alone. What has being with people ever done for me?"

I felt something stirring in me – and on the tip of my tongue.

"Don't you feel terrible? Don't you want to reach out to know that you are not alone? Why is everything about what other people has done and can do for you?"

"This is ridiculous – I 'm going to hang up." And I did. She was not kidnapped or abducted or something. Just someone very bored and wasting my time. Probably with a pair of binoculars at her bedroom window, just waiting.

After I put down the phone, her words rang in my mind like some sort of tape recorder on a play and replay mode – again and again and again.

"Don't you feel terrible? Don't you want to reach out to know that you are not alone? Why is everything about what other people has done and can do for you?"

The piano played on and on and then it started to skip at the climax. I got up and turned it off.

There was a hairline scratch about an inch long at the CD's iridescent surface.

I removed my socks, bathed and read the papers. Some woman was dieting herself crazy and died choking on sushi. I think it was a raw salmon type. On another was about some military bombing that has killed a thousand-odd people in the gulf region. The picture was in colour and I glossed over it for a while. Then at the back page was a full page of advertisement on the Great Singapore Sale. I took a pen and ticked off the items I wanted to buy. Some plain shirts and pants, a pair of sunglasses and a pair of sport-shoes. All branded of course.

But still, I felt strangely disconnected. Like I would never know that thousand-odd people who died, or even the woman who choked herself to death. And I would never make it to the sales on time to get what I want. And it was useless to want anything else.

I replayed the CD, bypassing the minute that has the skip.

It was a while before I dozed off.

I woke up from a long dream. It was one of those dreams that can never quite connect.

Details as close and real as life moments ago, became decayed and fragmented half-memories.

Think I got that description from some novels I read in the past. Another decayed and fragmented half-memories.

I looked around the empty apartment and felt something stirring within. I wanted to cry but I closed my eyes instead.

I had a dreamless sleep after that. I had the most wonderful dream after that only that I forgot all about it.

What's the difference? There's always the waking.

A lady came to sit in front of me. She was dressed in black. Even the palm-sized circular pendant she wore was made of black opal.

It was the lunch hour on a Saturday. I had to return to the office to settle some more work. There was an indoor fountain in front of me. The table was in a secluded corner. That was a good thing, as I did not like to share my table with anyone. I bought sushi because I didn't want to eat in the food-court even though it was air-conditioned.

She came up to me. Without asking if the seat was taken, she sat on it like she knew me. She had a presumptuous air about her. At any rate, she looked in her early thirties. A little on the fat side though but she looked elegant in her black dress and her palm-sized opal pendant.

She reminded me of that girl who died on a sushi. I have no idea why. Her photograph was never shown on the newspaper. I was eating sushi. And the raw salmon type too. What coincidence. She didn't spare a glance at the sushi however.

"You are alone?" She said after a while. "You expecting anyone?"

"I am alone." I said.

"Thought you would be."

I was a little annoyed. 'Thought' I would be alone. How does she know that? There was something demoralising about it. That realisation.

"Your eyes give you away." She answered my thoughts. But it was such a common phrase that could have been copied from some old-movies.

*How do you know (I love you)
Your eyes give you away*

*How do you know (I'm X)
Your eyes give you away*

*How do you know (I have a Royal Flush in poker)
Your eyes give you away*

I smiled without mirth.

"So – what about my eyes?"

"That's the problem – your eyes." She confided.

She was infuriating. That self-assurance was almost mocking.

"There's nothing wrong with my eyes. I mean, true, they may mis-read a word or two sometimes, but other than that, they are perfectly normal and...and I see no reason to think that I'm lonely because—"

She held up her hands before my face. She spread her five fingers wide. She meant for me to stop. She has that 'I got it all figured out' look all over her face.

“Don’t argue. It’s in you. You can be with someone, get married, have children, grow old and everything – but you’ll be alone.” She leaned closer to me and touched my chest, “...it’s in there, in your eyes, behind your eyes, in your mind, in your heart—in you.”

I felt a jolt of pain where she touched me and when she gazed into my eyes. If some people are psychic then she must surely be one of them. I felt stripped bare in front of her. I did not like the feeling.

Like she was seeing me from the inside out. And she saw me clearer than I did. And I didn’t even have a clue. She had a look that I would almost call half-mad too. Forget the elegance. But I couldn’t run away. I kept looking at her huge, palm-sized opal that her hands were stroking as she spoke.

“It is in you and you can’t hide from it. You can’t even run from it.”

I did not know what to say to her. I felt as though a death-sentence was pronounced onto me.

“Thanks.” I uttered for want of a better reply. Strangely, I was reminded of my conversation with my mother in the elevator.

It was a normal afternoon as far as I was concerned. The normal office lunchtime crowd.

The usual bustle, the freezing air-conditioning, the usual airport music played in toilets and shopping aisles, and people you do not know and do not look into the eye at. Even the sushi I was chewing on were no different from the ones I usually buy for lunch. The ones you see in any major super-market chains in Singapore.

But at that moment, I was in a different angle – not looking in a different angle but living in a different angle. Living and being in the world but at the same time separated. I was like a spirit looking at the world with ghostly eyes during the annual hungry ghost festival. Disassociated.

Speaking and being with this woman – I was disassociated.

Come to think of it, a better word to describe my state of mind was – lost.

She held my right hand and closed her hand over mine. And she pulled my hand to the opal pendant hanging between her breasts. She was strong and I couldn’t break free.

She pressed my hand against it. It felt smooth, and hard. And cold as though she had no body heat.

“This is something that is in you. You cannot escape from it because it is in you. Like a dormant gene that is passed on from generations to generations till it is triggered.”

“In me?”

“Yes, in you. It is not something you can do about. Some people are born tall, some are born short. Others are thin or fat. Some have acne, yet others have perfect skin. Similarly, you are born with this in you and you can’t escape it. It is in your blood.”

“My loneliness?”

She looked at me as if to mean ‘now you got it’.

“Perhaps...”

I honestly did not know what else to say.

“So if I can’t do anything about it, why are you even telling me?”

She picked up her black leather purse and made ready to go. Perhaps she changed her mind because she turned around.

Then she clutched at my hand again.

“Speak to her. No one can be alone too long – no one can get used to it. That’s the whole problem. Nobody understands anymore.”

The girl with the ‘recorded voice’? What did she have to do with it?

But before I could reply, she turned around and walked off. Her presence was so strong that even though she has released her grip on my arm, I still felt that tightness at my wrist where she held me. I do not even have the luxury of dismissing her as simply eccentric. And then she walked away. And I could almost breathe easier. Almost.

When I got home, I waited by the phone for a while.

I slept while waiting.

...It was dark and I heard sounds of a girl weeping. It seemed like a field covered with thick branches overhead. I smelled grass and leaves and the un-mistakable scent of frangipanis.

She (who was she?) crouched alone in the dark. She was cold and she hugged herself tightly to withstand the cold. She got up. There was public phone booth in the field. No light emanate from it like usual phone booths. It looked like a graveyard monument. She dialled some numbers in frenzy. Dialling in an almost obsessive way. As she dialled she hoped desperately, hoped to hear a human voice on the other end. Hoping someone would pick up her persistent ringing. But it was engaged again and again...

When I woke, the phone rang. Rather, the phone rang, and I woke.

“Hello?” The girl with the ‘recorded’ voice, with the pair of binoculars as she stood by the window.

“Hi—”

“In a better mood?”

“Sorry, I hung up the phone on you the other time.” I said.

“It’s all right. I did not turn for our meeting the other time also. You have got the right to be angry at me.”

I was curious about her, especially after the dream and after that strange woman.
“Where are you now? Where are you calling from? Who are you?”

“Can’t tell you, but I am close. Very close to you.” Her voice was a little louder at the end. Like she was really closer.

“I wish I could see you.”

She kept silent for a while.

Then she spoke, “You can’t. We can only speak to each other on the phone, don’t you see?”

“You know of woman in black and she seemed to know everything? She has a huge black opal hanging between her...on her chest?” I asked.

“Well, why?”

“She told me to speak to you.”

“Does it matter if I know her or not?”

“I guess not...”

“Then let’s ignore her.”

I laughed.

“You are quite something aren’t you?”

“No, I’m just bored.”

“And lonely?”

“No – not really. I am speaking to you.”

“Why did you call me?”

“I just dialled a number and you picked it up. A coincidence?”

Somehow I had the feeling that she was lying. But I didn’t press on with that point.

“Do you know where am I?”

“Of course, I can even see you right now. Remember that I told you about your black coffee?”

“Right.”

“You really ought to have a hair-cut. Guys look better with the hair short.”

“Really? You don’t say,” I muttered as I tucked my hair behind my ears.

“What else can you tell me about me? Are you psychic too?”

“I don’t know. I’m different I guess, I’m alone all the time... Why are you asking me so many questions? Do I disturb you? I can really spook someone up. I did it once in fact. But, really, I don’t want to. Too much work. Too horrible. I forget myself. I get overboard. People die. She died. They died. The people leave. The house empty. Only me again. And I hate it. And I get angry. So angry. You want to see me when I get angry? SO ANGRY I FORGET MYSELF, LOSE MYSELF...”

I had to lift my ears away from the receiver. It was getting too loud. Her voice was no longer even and ‘recorded’. It was the opposite. She was shouting into the phone like a manic. It was too real. Too much in the present. Like she was next to me. And I didn’t like that.

“...I rather have a conversation. Through the phone.” She concluded.

“I see.”

“Stop saying that. You don’t see. I can wave my hands like nuts and shout at you till my voice is hoarse and you still can’t see me.”

She went on and did most of the talking. I could only listen and sometimes slip in a few questions. We went on like this for the next few hours. Sometimes she fell asleep and stopped talking. I could hear the sound of crickets chirping in the background. So clearly they have to come from beside me. And it was so clear, the passing of a car speeding into the midnight. I swear I can even hear it from the window.

I am in that forest with her. In spirit if not in body. Then just as I was about to put the receiver back she spoke again.

I told her I’ll ‘take five’. I took my cigarette and lighter, then I went out for a stroll to freshen up.

It was night. Quite far into the night in fact. My digital watch read 0237. But I did not feel sleepy. Maybe it was the cigarettes. I decided to have a glance at the frangipani forest. It was the same bus stop I waited for her in.

The frangipani trees were all bent and twisted like Grecian sculptures. In their very own ways, they looked like unique elongated bonsai. And each tree was suffused in a white nebula of fallen frangipani blooms. The frangipani’s scent came from not only the flowers on the trees but also those fallen on the ground. Even on the wet mossy grass, the fallen petals retained their unsullied white. Their undiluted scent. Time stood still and decay could not set it for them.

Of course that was an illusion but it was a beautiful lie. Everything rots. Everything dies.

The trees seemed strangely at peace. And even though it was a whole community of separate trees on a single field, the entire place was like a single entity by itself.

The frangipanis are called 'egg-flowers' in Chinese. I always thought it was inelegant, and from some angles it is. But the fallen blooms that formed a ring around every tree were like cracked eggs with the yolks spilling out. So many flowers, so many eggs cracked and it was a pitiful sight. Truly.

Yet, I could still believe that the cracked eggs will still hatch out fluffy yellow chicks that would grow up into happy chickens that have no memories of being broken from young. And somehow everything will be fine and happy.

I did not feel quite so alone anymore. Or rather, the loneliness did not quite feel so bad anymore.

I reached deep into my pocket and held the platinum lighter in my hand. I drew back and threw it into the field. Then I did the same to the pack of cigarettes in my pocket.

They disappeared the moment they crossed over the fence.

I stood and looked at the field of frangipanis. Nothing stirred within. There was nothing in it. Only crickets chirping. I thought I lost something. That same stirring feeling again. I held myself.

It was strange. On my way home, I thought of the two children who were kidnapped when I was young. It shocked the entire nation. I think I was only nine or ten then. Leaning against my grandma as we watched it from her two-room flat. Chewing nuts she cracked for me. Nuts she can't eat because she removed her dentures.

Were they found or were they gone from this world altogether?

Or were they, and the girl in the telephone, and maybe that psychic with the black pendant and maybe even my mother and her Indonesian husband and even my real father in some part of the world, all looking up into the same sky, stars and moon at the same time?

I did not quite feel so alone anymore. Or was it that the loneliness did not feel quite as bad.

On my way to the void deck, I saw a kitten lying at the side of the road. It was thin and grey. It must have fell into the drain and was forgotten by its mother. It was wet all over. But it had climbed its way out.

It was shivering and it did not move when I walked near it.

Very slowly, because I did not want to frighten it, I squatted in front of it. I reached out my hand to stroke it very gently. It wrinkled its eyes at me and yawned a soundless 'meow'. It stood up and shook itself up. It warmed itself to me immediately.

I carried the cat in my arms. I brought it up. I thought of Basho's haiku:

Girl-cat, so/thin on love/and barley

But there was neither love nor barley for it here? Why did its mother leave it here?
I wondered.

The street lights reflected gold, and silver, imperfectly in the slits of its eyes. It seemed to grasp all the meanings there are to be. But what is it?

The receiver, soundless, I put it back into the phone. I noticed that the wire was not connected. It probably never was. But never mind. I was not surprised.
But if only she was here with me. Really here.

I sat back by the window, the cat asleep on my arms, and waited for sun to rise.