

An Illicit Affair

written by Guest Contributor | April 23, 2019



Image Credit: [Margarita Kochneva](#)

I wanted to get married in a sari but my mother wouldn't let me. She wanted me to wear a wedding gown. "It's universal," she said. The issue, really, was that she had never accepted the fact that I, a Chinese girl, was marrying an Indian man. She was afraid of the backlash, imagined or otherwise, from her Chinese friends. "Oh, so your daughter is marrying an Indian" was a dreaded segue into the disparaging conversation. This was the 1970s when the three races—the Malays, Chinese, and Indians—lived in perfect harmony in Malaysia. Until your daughter wanted to marry someone from another race.

Raja and I had come home to Alor Star to discuss our wedding plans with our mothers. My mother didn't like the idea of my marrying an Indian man even though she knew him well, since we played together as kids. His mother was fine with our union because her eldest son had married a Thai girl; she had crossed the bridge of interracial marriage several years earlier. "What to do? My sons want to marry women of other races," she said with a confident smile and a gentle shrug when her friends enquired of the impending marriage of her second son.

I was twenty-three and Raja was twenty-four. He loved to tell our newfound friends over the years that I made eyes at him in Sunday School, when I was five and he was six; he was irresistible even then. But in Sunday School at Trinity Baptist Church in Alor Star, we didn't speak to each other unnecessarily. He was shy. So was I. He would come to church very neatly dressed in starched white short-sleeve shirts—probably his older brother's former school uniform top that had been patched too often and worn thin, and faded shorts pressed to a shine from an overly hot charcoal iron. He would sit quietly on the bench in the dimly lit room in the old house by the church where the Lees lived, which doubled as our Sunday School classroom. He always gave the correct answer to the teacher's questions, while I lay low hoping the teacher wouldn't call me. I was never sure if I had the correct answer.

When we were old enough, I went to St. Nicholas Convent and he went to Tunku Abdul Halim Boys' Primary School. In middle school, I did well enough in the Lower Secondary School Examination to enter the science stream and I

transferred to the prestigious Sultan Abdul Hamid College where Raja was studying. He was a young man of few words who excelled in academics and sports. He played cricket and hockey for the school and state, and was an orator playing Pilate and John Proctor on stage, bringing home trophies after winning competitions and debates. The girls had crushes on him. We never acknowledged each other in school, an unspoken agreement. At Youth Fellowship in church, there was group interaction but ours was kept to a minimum. Love grew between us in unspoken words and furtive glances.

We left home the same time—he to the University of Malaya, five hundred miles away in Kuala Lumpur, the capital, and I to nursing school in Penang, an island sixty miles away. It was then that we started writing to each other, sharing what life was like on campus in the big cities. Our daily news soon gave way to expressions of feelings for each other, an attraction that laid dormant through our teen years because our own personalities and conservative culture prevented us from showing how we felt.

Mail came between 2 p.m. and 5 p.m. from Monday to Friday, and it was placed on the round table closest to the door of the dining room of my hostel. I couldn't wait for teatime to come round every weekday—*would there be a letter from him today? Oh! the agony of waiting for that letter when you are in love.*

If I were on afternoon shift, I took the later tea break to ensure the postman had arrived already. It was the time of day when the warm afternoon air was maturing into a tropical thunderstorm. I moved at lightning speed through the hospital for my fifteen-minute tea break at the hostel where I foraged the extensive spread of letters, which had been scoured by a hundred student nurses before me.

There must be something for me today. *Let there be something for me today!*

If I were lucky enough to get a letter from Raja, I tucked it safely into the pocket of my white uniform, went to the front of the dining room to pick up a curry puff and poured myself a cup of sweet milky tea from the industrial metal kettle. I then picked an empty table in a quiet corner to read the letter. *What news, my love?* Mostly, it was to hear him say "I love you." I had five minutes to fly back to the ward. I tucked the letter back into my pocket for the insatiable rereads till the next delivery, stood up as I downed my lukewarm tea, took the curry puff, and hurried on my way. A sparkling day, despite the pelting rain outside.

Telephone calls were almost never an option. It cost \$3.60 *a minute* for us to call each other between 9 a.m. and 6 p.m., and \$1.80 per minute outside of those hours. We couldn't afford that kind of money. If the call came to my hostel—if it could get through at all—whoever was passing by or waiting for a call, would pick it up. She would have to come and get me in my room, which was up four flights of steps on the top floor, at the end of the furthest wing facing the mortuary. The whole fetching process could take more than ten minutes. Usually, the person answering the call just hung up so that her own call could come through. Raja and I always believed the telecoms company had a plot to keep us apart because even on payday when we could afford to make

one call to each other, the payphone either swallowed the money or had a perpetual busy tone.

The University of Malaya worked on a ten-week term. Raja took the bus home to see his mom for the week and then took the train back to school. The northernmost part of the railway line in Malaysia begins in Butterworth, which is just a thirteen-minute ferry ride from Penang where I was in nursing school. The overnight train to Kuala Lumpur left at 11 p.m. On the day that Raja was going back to school, we would spend the day and evening together in Penang, out of my mother's sight. Ours was an illicit liaison. She didn't want no Indian man coming home broke and drunk, and beating up her youngest daughter, as was the stereotype of Indian men at that time. On the other hand, we found Penang to be refreshingly progressive culturally in contrast to Alor Star. We were not stared at as much there. We dared to hold hands in public.

We didn't have much money, so we walked everywhere in the tropical heat instead of taking the bus. We sat in the shade on public benches when we could find one, and shared Penang's famous *char koay teow*—flat rice noodles stir-fried in lard and soy sauce with duck egg and Chinese sausage, served on a plastic plate lined with banana leaf—in between sips of iced rose syrup water bought from hawkers. In the evening after the sun had gone down, we lay on the cool grass of Fort Cornwallis surrounded by the ancient cannons and ruins. We could hear the waves gently lapping the shore just yards away as we held hands and looked up at the stars. Lying on the grass in the dark one evening, I found that the bashful boy could sing, as strains of John Denver whispered in my ear: "You fill up my senses / Like a night in a forest / Like the mountains in springtime / Like a walk in the rain / Like a storm in the desert / Like a sleepy blue ocean . . ." Annie's Song became our song.

When the clock on the Moorish-style Jubilee Tower by the fort struck eight, we picked up his overused soft suitcase swollen with books and a duffle bag packed with tins of Indian snacks his mom had made, cushioned with pieces of clothing, and slowly walked to the ferry terminal a couple of hundred yards away. Hearts as laden as his bags. The ferry brought us to the mainland terminus by the train station. We had about two hours before our day together ended. Raja purchased his ticket and we headed into the train and sat there until the station master blew the whistle. We quickly held each other tight, dreading the ten-week separation. I jumped off the train as the second whistle sounded and the train was set in motion, and caught the last sight of Raja waving from the window as the train sped into darkness.

Our trysts carried on till I graduated and moved to Kuala Lumpur where Raja was doing his Masters program. He surprised me one evening when he got down on one knee and proposed. We decided to get married a year later.

Our trip to Alor Star in 1979 to discuss our wedding plans, didn't go as expected. My mother said if we didn't do it her way in a wedding gown rather than a sari, we needn't come home again. We were devastated by my mother's ultimatum. *Never come home again*. The decision rested heavily on our shoulders. For Raja, the issue was not the dress: "If your mom doesn't want you to wear a sari, it means she hasn't accepted me for who I am."

We didn't have our wedding in Alor Star the way my mom wanted. We decided to have it our way in Kuala Lumpur where we were both working, and we asked our pastor in Alor Star to personally go and invite my mom to our wedding on our behalf. I didn't know if she would come as there had been no communication between us since our pastor visited them with the invite. As I walked down and back up the aisle, I looked for my mom in the church. Raja's extended family had come in full force but I didn't see any of my family members. I was heartbroken.

Did I let my family down? Should we have had the wedding in Alor Star the way my mom wanted? I pondered achingly as Raja and I stood at the church door and thanked our guests for coming. As we greeted the last guest, I reached for Raja's hand by his side. He turned and smiled as he took mine firmly in his, and we walked over to the reception to celebrate, my sari resplendent as the gold threads shimmered in the evening sun.

When the time came for us to go back to Alor Star for our annual family visits, I called my mom with trepidation from the payphone near our house in Banting, where we had settled after our wedding.

"Ma?"

"Yes."

"It's me. We are coming back to Alor Star next week. Can we come and visit you?"

"Of course!"

"But . . . but you said we couldn't come home if . . ."

"I never said that."

Confused, I didn't know how to respond to her last statement. She must have sensed the faltering pause and continued, "I'll see you both next weekend."

As soon as we walked through the door with our bags the following weekend, my mom greeted us with a smile and asked, "What would you like to eat for dinner?" Life resumed without a flicker.

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To this day, I do not know if my mom had forgotten the ultimatum, or if she had forgiven us for going against her wishes. One day, I came home early when my mom was visiting us for the week. She didn't hear me come in through the back door. As I passed the den which doubled as the guest room, my mom appeared engrossed in the armchair in the far corner of the room. She was looking at our wedding albums. I tiptoed to my bedroom. We never spoke of those albums, but I knew she had seen me in my sari. It would have to be enough.



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