

# Crossing the Graveyard

by

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If Harmony and I had not risked the shortcut to school across the disused graveyard, Harmony might not have met with such a tragic end and I would not have wandered the world with a dead crow sealed in a Jacob's biscuit tin. It has taken me more than twenty-five years to come to terms with my guilt and my sense of loss. Yesterday I buried the poor crow at sea, together with my childhood fancies and awkward dreams.

Harmony and I were cousins, Harmony being older by three years. Our mothers were sisters who lived in a rundown neighbourhood on the outskirts of Malacca. Our homes were close to an enormous burial site which, according to our mothers, had been used during previous centuries to bury murderers, traitors and outlaws. Because they had been evil creatures, their spirits were said to be capable of entering the bodies of the living to attack their internal organs.

Our mothers had little education. They adhered to a muddled form of Buddhism which left scope for slaughtering chicken for dinner and blaming sorcerers and ghosts when things went wrong. Each kept at home a porcelain image of the Goddess of Mercy upon an altar, before whom they burnt joss-sticks and made offerings in return for protection against all things unseen. Each altar had a small red lamp kept permanently lit.

Their superstitions and fears accounted for the chilling tales they drummed into us. Our imaginations left us suitably frightened. We thus refrained from larking around the lichen-covered tombstones with older schoolmates.

Sinister dug-up holes, tall tropical grass, clumps of malacca palms, twisted banyans and a profusion of frangipani could be seen from the front and rear entrances to the graveyard. The last gave off a sweet, sickly smell that reminded us of Indian funerals. The frequent cawing of crows added a touch of eeriness.

Lessons in local history, however, taught us that those buried there were by no means as fearsome as our mothers had made out. The site was in fact first used in 1640 to bury some of the seven thousand people killed during the long siege of Portuguese Malacca by the Dutch. It fell into neglect when ninety per cent of the population fled after the Portuguese defeat. It was only after the British takeover in 1795 that the population slowly returned to its previous level.

In the meantime, the poor took to burying their dead there without let or hindrance. The British tried to impose order but were strapped for cash. It was the

beginning of the twentieth century before a brick wall was built around the graveyard and a burial fee imposed.

After the Second World War the authorities decided to clear the site for redevelopment. But tracing descendants proved difficult due to the destruction of records during the Japanese occupation. So the project languished in a kind of limbo common in equatorial parts. Neither of us thought it productive to challenge our mothers with such facts. In any case, our new-found knowledge did not erase completely the prohibitions and fears etched into our psyches.

My mother died when I was nine and I went to live with Auntie Lan and Harmony. They occupied the front portion of the third floor of an old tenement. The rear housed a tailor and his family of five. The two parts were separated by a sturdy wooden partition. Our side was bright and airy because two large windows spanned the front of the building, offering a good view of our neighbourhood and a glimpse of the graveyard in the far distance. Auntie Lan's altar for the Goddess of Mercy was fixed to the wall between the two windows.

Auntie Lan was quite unlike my mother. She was jolly and robust whereas my mother, a washerwoman, was frail and timid. The most enduring feature about my mother was the rawness of her hands caused by the harsh soaps she used. They always felt so rough when she touched me. She also coughed a lot, often spitting up blood, and I only realized long afterwards that she had tuberculosis.

Auntie Lan ran an eatery in an evening food bazaar close to our homes and had a voice suitably muscular for the trade. She was expert at turning out all types of hawker dishes, like watercress seasoned with chilli and fermented tofu, scrambled eggs with clams, and a wide variety of fried noodles. Her cooking had such a reputation that even the wealthiest in the town went out of their way to try her fare.

Harmony and I had been close even before I moved into her home. Many bonds bound us. The greatest was the secret discussions we had about our fathers. Neither of us had any recollection of them. Our mothers told us they were dead but snatches of overheard conversation led us to conclude that their statements were unreliable. Our fathers had merely vanished from our lives.

It became clear at a very young age that our mothers held jaundiced views about men in general and our fathers in particular. Auntie Lan was forever warning Harmony about men. She once said: "When you grow up you'll find out just how rotten they are. They'll say anything, promise anything, to get their way. The richer they are, the worse they are. You'll come to no good listening to them. They'll just use you as a plaything and then abandon you like garbage.

"Let me tell you a story my own mother told me about a girl who used to live in this town. She was a great beauty and her name was Azalea. Her father was a

roadside cobbler. Her mother was from Cochin China and had mixed French and tribal blood.

“Azalea used to take the midday meal to her father at his pitch outside the office of the Eng Corporation. You’ve heard of the Eng’s. They’ve been here for generations and still dominate the tin mines, the rubber trade and many of the other businesses in this town.

“When Azalea was seventeen she caught the eye of the heir to the Eng fortune. The young man was so smitten he showered her and her family with presents. He even spoke of marriage.

“The rascal was quite engaging and Azalea was swept off her feet. Her parents were also overwhelmed. So they allowed the youngsters to keep company. The inevitable happened. Azalea got pregnant. It was then that the rascal showed his true colours. He claimed his father had forbidden their marriage because it could not be a marriage of equals. He offered money for an abortion instead. Azalea, however, would agree to nothing less than marriage and a proper place within the Eng household.

“Things were deadlocked. The poor cobbler and his family did not know what to do. When Azalea’s condition could no longer be concealed, she went in the middle of the night to the front of the Eng mansion and hanged herself from a banyan tree. That, sad to say, is the fate of girls who lend their ears to silver-tongued men.

“At the funeral Azalea’s mother cursed the Eng’s. She beseeched heaven and hell and all the gods known to her to destroy the Eng’s and end their progeny. But what was the use of that? Her beloved daughter was dead and to this day the Eng’s remain as powerful as ever. Where is justice in this world for the poor?”

Auntie Lan’s story depressed Harmony and myself. Although we were not certain whether it was a true happening or just a legend, it dawned on us that our mothers might have been abandoned by our fathers as well. But we lacked the courage to probe.

After my mother died, Harmony provided the only company I had outside of school. We shared household chores, such as sweeping the floor and doing the laundry. We did our homework together and at night we spread straw mats before the altar and slept side by side.

Of course we engaged in horseplay and pillow fights like other children. But most of our spare time was spent trying to figure out the baffling behaviour of grown-ups and the whereabouts of our fathers. We swore we would find them some day. In the meantime we pledged to look after each other.

Neither of us saw much of Auntie Lan. When we left for school she would be still asleep. By the time we got home she would have left or be on the point of leaving to collect provisions for the evening’s business. She did not finish her late

trade till long after we had gone to sleep. Except for weekends, we only saw her briefly each day during dinner at the stall.

Weekends were the best of times. On Friday and Saturday we were allowed to help at the stall in the evening. That meant a chance for tips. We felt a certain pride when schoolmates and their families turned up and we would ask Auntie Lan to prepare their requirements with special care or to give them extra big helpings.

Our part of the tenement floor was sub-divided again after a fashion, by two seven-foot high mahogany wardrobes Auntie Lan salvaged from the discards of a departing colonial administrator. They stood side by side about eleven feet away from, but parallel to, the partitioning wall. Thus a small pen was formed to serve as Auntie Lan's bedroom. She slept on an old double bed with a brass bedstead.

A steel cable, fixed to nails in the partition wall at one end and to one of the wardrobes at the other, offered the means for a printed cotton curtain to be drawn across the enclosure.

Auntie Lan kept her things in one of the wardrobes. The other was used by Harmony and myself. The only item I had, however, apart from my clothes and my school things, was a Jacob's biscuit tin containing my birth certificate, some foreign stamps acquired from classmates, a pack of dog-eared playing cards and the few ringgits I had managed to save.

The area between the windows and the wardrobes was where Harmony and I spent most of our time. A square table with a formica top and two metal folding chairs were the items most frequently called into service. We used them during breakfast, as well as for our homework. In order to hide the unsightliness of the backs of the wardrobes, we covered them with coloured pictures of foreign movie stars and a large calendar distributed by an American pharmaceutical company showing a scene of the Swiss Alps.

Our first venture across the graveyard happened when I was about eleven. We both got up late one morning because the sunlight which normally woke us had been blanketed by dark, threatening rain clouds. We leapt from our mats, dispensed with breakfast and raced for school. By the time we reached the graveyard wall, we knew we could not make it before the bell. The prospect of receiving demerits set our hearts pounding.

"Across the graveyard!" Harmony cried, suddenly, and started to race between the leprous tombstones. I ran after her, more out of fear of being left behind than anything else. We had previously learnt from schoolmates that cutting across the graveyard could save seven or eight minutes but we had never dared to chance it before.

To our relief, the shortcut enabled us not only to beat the bell but also the downpour that followed. We naturally maintained a conspiratorial silence before Auntie Lan.

But something strange and frightening happened about three weeks later. I was awoken in the middle of the night by a noise. I opened my eyes to find Harmony missing from her mat. The light in Auntie Lan's enclosure was on. Though the drawn curtain I could make out silhouettes and hear whispering. Then I saw a patch of blood on Harmony's mat and I froze.

"Help Harmony quickly, Auntie Lan!" I yelled in panic. "The demons are after her! We went into the graveyard! I don't want her to die!" My mind was suddenly seized by visions of demons tearing at Harmony's entrails.

"You went into the graveyard, did you, you rascals?" Auntie Lan shouted from behind the curtain. "I'll deal with you tomorrow. Go back to sleep. Nothing's wrong with Harmony."

But I could not get back to sleep. I was covered with fear and confusion. I pretended to be asleep when Auntie Lan and Harmony came a short while later to clean the mat. After the light had been switched off again and Harmony was back on her mat, I reached over to take her hand. I suddenly realized she was the dearest person in the world to me and could not bear the thought of anything bad happening to her. But she flung my hand away, apparently upset over my betraying our secret.

The next afternoon, Auntie Lan was waiting for us when we got back from school. She was in an angry mood. "Haven't I told you not to go into the graveyard?" she demanded, giving each of us a clout across the back of our heads. "You like the company of the dead, do you? Then go and live in the graveyard! You think it's a joke? You could be inviting evil spirits into this very home. May the Goddess of Mercy have pity on us! I'll not have any more of that, you hear? If I catch you going there again, I'll give you the thrashings of your life."

We kept silent, took our punishments and looked suitably contrite. We knew from experience not to argue when Auntie Lan was angry. It was better to allow her to let off steam.

By evening, however, Harmony annoyance with me had passed. She explained that crossing of the graveyard had nothing to do with her bleeding. It was just something girls had to go through on reaching a certain age.

"We're being educated and that means doing away with superstitions about ghosts and the like," Harmony said. "I don't want to live like my mother, full of fears about this and that and wasting her life cooped up in a lousy dump like this."

Though I conceded Auntie Lan's fears about demons and men might be exaggerated, the burial ground still gave me spooky feelings and I told Harmony I did not want to go through it again.

The next morning, when we were passing the graveyard on our way to school, Harmony grabbed me without warning by the arm and dragged me through the graveyard. She did that several more times in the days and weeks that followed. I resisted at first but I soon began to lose my uneasiness. The twisted banyans

seemed less malevolent and the smell of the frangipani less sickly. It gradually became our preferred route to and from school, in common with that of many of our classmates. We took pains to keep that from Auntie Lan, however.

Although our pattern of life seemed unaltered after breaking Auntie Lan's taboo, I knew something was definitely changing between Harmony and myself. For one thing, I was sprouting much faster than she. When I first came to live with Auntie Lan, I was three inches shorter than Harmony. But by the age of twelve, I was every bit as tall.

While I gained in height, Harmony fleshed out in all the places that mattered with girls. We used to engage in friendly wrestling matches to determine which of us should do the breakfast dishes or sweep the floors. Harmony used to beat me frequently. After I was twelve the outcome gradually became reversed, though I did not struggle too hard to break free from the headlocks she clamped on me. To have my face pressed against one of her burgeoning breasts was distinctly pleasurable. So too was the sensation when she straddled me to pin my shoulders to the floor for the regulation count of three.

I began noticing the glow in her face, the smooth perfection of her limbs and the almost regal manner in which she carried herself. So did the older boys at school and some of the customers at the food stall. I often caught them looking at her in a way I resented.

Harmony must have been aware of her own blossoming beauty, though she seemed not to mind others feasting their eyes on her. At home, when she drew the cotton curtain to change, I would invariably try to peep at her. If I caught sight of her partially naked I would feel an excruciating excitement.

The cousinly love I used to feel was being transformed in ways that were shameful and uncontrollable. I felt seared by a hot lava of guilt and base desires. I became terrified that a demon from the graveyard might indeed have turned me into a monster. But I could not talk about my condition to anybody, least of all to Harmony.

The months leading up to my thirteenth birthday were a period of unmitigated hell. I lost appetite and did poorly at school. I often lay awake at night studying Harmony's sleeping form in the unnatural red glow of the altar lamp. I longed to pounce upon her, to embrace her and to smother her with kisses like the heroes of movies we had seen.

Harmony, noticing something amiss, often placed an arm around my shoulders -- as she was accustomed to doing -- to ask what the problem was. Her touch and the scent of her nearness only made matters worse. It was about all I could do to stop myself screaming. I felt I was slowly going out of my mind.

Following my thirteenth birthday, I drifted into a dull kind of melancholy, feeling at once foolish and expectant. But expectant of what I did not know. There seemed to be no future worth having without Harmony and no way of

expressing my increasingly warped love for her. My studies deteriorated and that was quickly noticed by both my teachers and Auntie Lan. But their stern warnings sounded like only peripheral noises around the screaming chaos in my soul.

One day, when making our journey across the graveyard, we noticed a crow prancing upon a headstone a short distance from the path we were taking. It was cawing loudly and flapping its wings. Though we thought its behaviour peculiar, we paid no attention. There was in any case a lot of crows in the neighbourhood.

On subsequent days, however, we noticed a crow behaving similarly upon the same headstone. We did not know whether it was the same creature but our curiosity was aroused. We went to examine the headstone. Inscribed upon it, in Chinese characters, were the name “Azalea” and a simple epitaph “Killed by Deceit”.

I was astounded. It could only have been the grave of the Azalea Auntie Lan had spoken about. Questions buzzed around my head like hornets. Why was the crow drawing our attention to the grave? Was it some kind of omen? Or was the crow a reincarnation in the endless Buddhist cycles of rebirth? If so, was it of Azalea or her mother? In either case, what did it want from us? Did it expect us to avenge Azalea’s death or what? I became truly frightened. I wanted no truck with the supernatural.

When I conveyed my fears to Harmony, she dismissed them out of hand. “You’re getting as bad as Mother,” she said. “There are no spirits or ghosts. They’re just inventions of foolish people who cannot explain things they don’t understand. This may or may not be the tomb of the Azalea of Mother’s story. So what? If you searched among the thousands of tombstones you are bound to find an Azalea or two. What then? The silly crow hopping around is probably just a coincidence.”

Shortly afterwards I began having a recurring nightmare about a crow revealing itself as a reincarnation of Azalea’s mother seeking vengeance. I felt as if I was being sucked into that ancient tragedy. But given Harmony’s scepticism, I kept my nightmares to myself.

Then, one Friday evening, a group of well-dressed young men turned up our stall at the bazaar. They appeared flushed and florid with drink. Harmony attended to them and they began ogling her in a disrespectful way.

Their leader was a short, podgy man who kept flashing a greasy smile. He had an unusually thick set of eyebrows which somehow appeared abbreviated, as if their ends had been chopped off. That lent his face a shifty quality.

The group ate their meal boisterously and upon settling up their leader gave Harmony a tip of five ringgits. That was extremely generous in those days, for that amounted to almost the cost of the meal itself.

The next evening the young man with the strange eyebrows came back alone, in a gleaming Italian sports car. He parked within sight of the stall. He was more subdued than the previous evening but boasted that his car was the only one of

its kind in Malacca. He lingered after his meal to engage Harmony in conversation. He again tipped her five ringgits.

When he turned up the following weekend as well, I began to resent him. Perhaps I envied his smartly tailored shirts, his immaculate white trousers and his stylish two-tone shoes, not to mention his sports car which was certainly worthy of admiration and respect. He ordered noodles costing little more than fifty sens but again left a tip of five ringgits. I was convinced he was up to no good and I told Harmony so.

“What have you got against him?” Harmony asked.

“Just look at his eyebrows! They mark him as a man not to be trusted,” I replied.

“He’s just a customer and he hasn’t tried anything funny. He’s a bit chatty but what’s wrong with that? I don’t have my mother’s fear of men, even when they have strange eyebrows. He’s just returned from studying business administration in America. It would be useful to know people like that, especially when it comes to looking for a job. He seems well connected. He may even be able to help us find our fathers.”

What Harmony said seemed reasonable. Reflection told me that my dislike for the man was rooted in jealousy, though I could hardly say that to Harmony. My preoccupation with my rival produced an unexpected effect, however. It took my mind off my nightmares.

The man kept coming back, weekend after weekend, and I could sense him gaining Harmony’s confidence. I was gripped by a feeling of impending disaster, of somehow losing Harmony altogether.

Then one Saturday evening the man hung around till after the rush of the dinner trade. As Harmony and I were about to go home, he asked if Harmony would like a spin in his car.

I could see Harmony being tempted. I immediately pulled her to one side and whispered: “Don’t go with him! You don’t even know his name. You can’t be too careful these days. He may be a white slave trader or an underworld character. Don’t be taken in by his big tips and his fancy car.”

“Don’t be so melodramatic,” Harmony said. “You’ve been reading too many bad comics.”

“Why else would he leave such big tips? He is using them to get on the good side of you, to buy his way into your confidence.”

“Do you think I care about his tips?” Harmony retorted, angrily. “I enjoy talking to the guy, if you must know, because he’s been places and can tell me what they’re like. We haven’t been anywhere, not even as far as Johore Bahru, let alone New York and Hollywood. I’ll split his tips with you if that’s what’s bothering you!”

My inability to persuade Harmony about the nature of the customer left me frustrated. "Keep your lousy money. I'm not so easily bought!" I cried, rashly, desperate to make her see sense.

"If that's what you think then I might as well go and enjoy my ride!"

That was the first time Harmony and I had ever quarrelled. I had not meant to hurt her. I was just worried about her being compromised. As I watched them drive away, a terrible foreboding descended upon me.

When I got home I tossed and turned on my mat, oppressed as if the weight of the world was crushing the breath out of me. I wanted to make up with Harmony and longed for her return. But she never came back. Neither did Auntie Lan, until well into Sunday morning.

Auntie Lan was hysterical on arriving home. It appeared she had spent the night at the morgue. Harmony had been killed in a car crash. My heart almost stopped upon hearing the news.

Days of blurred agony followed. The newspapers reported that the car had gone off the road and smashed into a tree. It had been driven by none other than Eng Kok-king, the heir to the Eng fortune. Harmony was killed instantly but the driver survived for a few days.

It came out during the inquest that in his delirium Eng Kok-king kept crying out about a woman and a child appearing suddenly in front of the car. He crashed trying to avoid them. However, witnesses on the spot reported no sign of any woman or child.

Auntie Lan became a changed woman after the tragedy. She lost interest in her stall. She kept kneeling before the Goddess of Mercy, beating her head on the floor and lamenting: "Why my baby, oh Goddess of Mercy? What have I done in my previous existence to deserve this? How did my baby come to be in a car with an Eng? My baby hasn't hurt a soul. She was a good girl. Why rob her of life?"

I was no less devastated but I had to mask my true feelings. I could not tell Auntie Lan that we had been crossing the graveyard regularly, that we had found the grave of Azalea and that I had quarrelled with Harmony before her ride. I was consumed by guilt. If I had not provoked Harmony, she might not have taken that fatal ride.

Strangely, the deaths of Harmony and Eng Kok-king brought an abrupt end of my nightmares. I became more convinced than ever their deaths had to be connected in an unfathomable way to Azalea and the Eng of an earlier generation.

As the days of misery went by, I felt unaccountably drawn to Azalea's grave, as if an irresistible force was beckoning. I went there accordingly and to my amazement I found a dead crow next to the headstone.

The discovery set me trembling. Supernatural spirits had to be at work. If the spirit of Azalea had previously resided in the crow, where was she now? Had

she been reincarnated into something else? What of Harmony? Had she been reborn and, if so, where could I find her?

A hundred such questions whirled around my brain. I quickly put the dead crow into my school satchel and took it home, in the hope that the carcass might provide answers to such conundrums. In order not to upset Auntie Lan, I hid the dead crow in my Jacob's biscuit tin and examined it when I was alone. But it shed no light on my concerns. When it started to smell, I took the tin to a tinsmith and had the lid welded tight.

The loss of Harmony and the uncertain fate hanging over me sent me into deep depression. The unceasing lamentations of Auntie Lan made matters worse. I speculated whether, with Harmony gone, the unrequited dead might reach out for me. I felt I had to escape. So I ran off to sea, taking with me the dead crow in my Jacob's biscuit tin. That was the last I saw of Auntie Lan.

I have since travelled the world, from Haiti to Hokkaido, from Mozambique to New Orleans. I have witnessed voodoo rituals, delved into shamanistic practices and listened to countless tales of ghostly happenings and supernatural interventions. But I have yet to come across an occult thesis which unambiguously supports or dismisses a possible linkage between the deaths of Azalea and Harmony.

Last week, the steamer I was working on collided at night with a small native fishing craft while passing through the Straits of Malacca. That necessitated an unscheduled stop at the port itself. The unexpected return to the scene of my childhood brought back with all my old longings and pain. It also set me wondering whether that collision had been due to pure chance.

Mercifully, since the stay in port was brief, no shore leave was permitted. Though I realized that I could never be completely rid of the bitter sweet memories of my youth, the collision brought home to me the prudence of ridding myself of vestiges from the past. For all I knew they might be capable of transmitting secret signals for creatures of the nether world to track me down. That was why I decided to bury the poor crow at sea yesterday, in my battered Jacob's biscuit tin.