

# Vaughan Rapatahana

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## Celebration

**Po Lam did not have much to be cheerful about.**

**She lived in a barren estate in Tin Yan, where, from her family's 25th floor window in their small, barren housing department apartment, she could see Shenzhen – if the smog which generally wreathed the view wasn't too thick. She shared her narrow, thin-mattressed lower wooden bunk with her mother, who had to strive as a part-time housemaid for several *gweilo* families in the neighbouring zone and who forever despaired of how to make their ever-increasing weekly food and accommodation costs pan out. Being on CSS 'assistance' didn't assist much at all, and there were times when the family had only noodles with a smattering of *pak choi* to eat.**

Po Lam sighed again. Her computer was blinking savagely and appeared to be reneging on any co-operation with her, as she tried hard to write an English language composition for her Form Four native-speaking English teacher, Mr Harris, who had a disgusting habit of picking his nose in front of the class every other day. Her own eyes were also blinking in sympathy with the computer screen, for she was tired from lacking a sequence of a decent nights' sleep and from having to work part time at a 7/11 on the weekends to try and garner a little pocket money for herself. One thing was certain – her mother had none to spare.

Her older brother was snoring on the upper bunk just through the thin wall in the tiny bedroom they all shared, to which there had never been any actual door. He didn't have a job, even though he had tried valiantly for a while, only to score evil-paying positions doing all the donkey work for fly-by-night building contractors who never paid him on time, if at all, and who tended to abuse him with choice Cantonese epithets about mothers. He had once earned great money for a time, servicing the completely illicit smuggling industry in Lau Fau Shan, but his boastful ringleader boss had been captured quite literally with fish in hand and busted. Besides Po Lam's brother, Ka Lun, soon got very sick of the crazy middle of the night hours and the perennially wet clothes they shared.

Po Lam glanced up at the cheap clock high on that same thin wall. It too seemed to be blinking and possibly running backwards, for she couldn't see how it could still be 8.00 pm when it had read that nearly two hours before. Another cheap battery

gone asunder. No more in the platoon to replace it and by now the computer screen had walked off the job completely and was refusing to budge, despite her prodding all the recalcitrant buttons. It certainly wasn't going to relent and share the time with her. Po Lam sighed yet again and wondered when her mother would be home and whether some of the employers had given her food to bring back – as the kinder ones sometimes did.

Po Lam turned on the television, which was a monster from the dark ages of technology and which took eons to wake up and roar and throb menacingly into some semblance of life.

All the news about Hong Kong seemed to be bad news – angry citizens demanding the Chief Secretary resign. Ferries sinking. Complaints about Mainland tourist troupes. Angry citizens demanding the Chief Secretary resign. Rampant pollution killing everyone in Central.

Po Lam switched channels, not that there were too many on this free for air system anyway. Nothing to cheer about, as the choices were restricted to ill-lit tales about mayhem and murder, and traditional Cantonese costume drama, which bored her. The one English language channel always seemed to have poor-reception coughing fits and she couldn't keep up with what its funny-looking commentators were saying anyway – English was *ho lan* for her, even though her mother could speak and write it okay.

She didn't want to go to bed just yet and she remained peckish. She knew that there was little of note waiting for her inside the old and very ugly fridge, which loomed in the kitchen, several sizes too big for its boots in such a confined space.

Po Lam glanced up at the other gaunt wall separating her from the kitchen. There was the old black and white and faded photograph of her father and mother and her and Ka Lun from ten years ago, when her father had still been with them. The photo had sunk like an old man's cheeks within its corroding frame and everyone's facial features had become too hard to discern. Po Lam couldn't really remember her father anyway and remained distantly angry with him, for he had deserted them all that time ago and had never, ever made any contact with them since. They seldom talked about him and his lack of any support whatsoever, but she knew her brother sometimes missed his father and that her mother despised him.

Po Lam heard screams from down in the quadrangle and got up to peer out in the gloom to see if she could see anyone who might be making such a din. No; not only because it was too dim and the lighting system in the estate was manifestly decrepit, but because there seemed to be no one down there. The screams had suddenly stopped quite coldly. It wasn't unusual for her to hear such noises. Po Lam shrugged and then tried to see any lights from Shenzhen, which – if the haze was helpfully on holiday – were markedly brighter than anything around here. No luck whatsoever. She remembered that her father was rumoured to have a mainland mistress in Shenzhen and had perhaps started an entirely new family there. She continued staring in a stupor for a while, until she heard the key in the burly front door lock and turned to see her mother come in, clutching a big brown paper bag and shaking her coat to get rid of the annoying rain drops which had chased her home.

Her mother smiled at her daughter. Po Lam smiled in reply and waited for her mother to speak her funny Cantonese – funny, as her mother had had to learn the local language so as to communicate with her own kids, who went to local CMI schools. Her mother was from the Philippines originally and had met her father in another country altogether, married and returned to live with him in Hong Kong twenty years previously. It was to her credit that she was multilingual, but to her despair she was perennially labeled as 'just a Filipino' and could not gain employment anywhere, despite these linguistic talents. She now cleaned toilets and scrubbed floors for white people, who spoke an English scarcely any different from her own.

Po Lam never let on to her classmates that she was half Filipino, because she knew just how racist they were. The last thing she needed was being ostracized by them.

"Look, babe, I have got some leftover chicken here from the Jackson's place. Mrs. Jackson made me bring it back for you and Ka Lun. She said they would only throw it out if I didn't take it. Is Ka Lun still sleeping?"

Po Lam nodded at this last question and waited for the food to arrive at their small table, nestling next to her mother on the groaning couch that her grandmother had purchased for the family when they first came to Tin Yan. Outside, the naughty rain was really cascading down now, as if to say to everyone that it was the boss and that they had all better stay right where they were.

Her mother served up onto their few ill-assorted plastic dinner plates the chicken and some rice she had heated in the antiquated microwave, and she and Po Lam ate in rapid silence, chopsticks flashing in

unison like synchronized swimmers. Po Lam only stopped once to drink the remnants of the *dong ling cha* that her mother had prepared before she had gone out earlier.

"So, how was your day, babe?"

Po Lam didn't really have too much to say. Her day had been another mirthless round of too much schoolwork with too many disaffected schoolteachers yelling at them through microphones; having nothing to eat for lunch; suffering a double PE lesson that had worn her out completely; carrying over her school jersey, which had decided to grow holes where the fabric used to be, a far too heavy schoolbag, stuffed with unnecessary textbooks, and coming home to discover a slumbering brother and very little to dine on. Still she smiled. She didn't want to upset her mother.

It was then she noticed that her mother was now grinning quite hugely, as if she had a secret that no one else had ever dreamed up.

"Guess what, babe," her mother chuckled, after wiping her hands and mouth on one of the leftover paper napkins from Yoshinoya.

Po Lam had no idea what to guess and merely shrugged her shoulders, although she did respond with a smile of her own. "I don't know ... what is it, Mummy?"

Her mother struggled a bit to get to her aching feet and limped over to the handbag that she had latched onto the front door handle as she came in earlier. She struggled deep within the entrails of the worn out bag for some time before she came up triumphant, prancing around somewhat, her energy renewed. Po Lam couldn't quite see what all the fuss was about, because it seemed all that was clutched in her mother's hand were small pieces of dirty looking paper.

It was only when her mother placed the free passes to Ocean Park directly under the steadily flickering light, next to their deserted dishes and the few scraps of chicken and rice which lingered there, that Po Lam could appreciate her mother's ebullience.

This was rather like winning Mark Six, Po Lam surmised. Things like this good fortune just didn't happen to her and her immediate family.

"Let's celebrate, babe. Mrs. Jackson also thrust these on me as I was gathering up my things to come home. Two free passes to Ocean Park. I know that you haven't been there for years. Why don't you and your brother go there during the weekend?"

For Po Lam this was all next to a miracle. She was almost crying with joy. She hugged her mother closely, feeling the love and warmth coming from her mother's petite frame. They were both laughing now, while her mother was also reflecting that

although life was tough, sometimes there were bits and pieces of it when it was not all unrelenting and that there were indeed occasions – few and far between – when her daughter could be just a fourteen-year-old girl.

They threw the plates in the sink, scrambled the remaining food into the begrudging fridge and went to their bed to dream of another good day tomorrow.

Above them Ka Lun was snoring quite merrily too, echoing the diminishing raindrops that sneaked in through the window frame. Po Lam would be the one to wipe it all up tomorrow morning, before she slowly trudged to school.

“This is all more than enough to celebrate for now,” Po Lam thought, just before sleep devoured them both.

*gweilo* – Cantonese – white ghost, aka white person

*pak choi* – Cantonese – green cabbage

CSS – Social welfare department in Hong Kong

*ho lan* – Cantonese – difficult

*dong ling cha* – Cantonese – iced tea

Yoshinoya – chain of Japanese food outlets

Ocean Park – huge amusement park and aquarium in Hong Kong

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