

My Grandmother's Chicken Curry & ..¹

© Charlene Rajendran

CHARACTERS:

Adnan (A), Davindran (D) and Siew Fong (SF) – three college students. They play several other characters as well.

SETTING:

A range of eating places.

A range of family living rooms.

PROPS:

Six wooden stools.

MUSIC:

A range of music styles.

Introduction

A If I were not male I would be female.

SF If I were not short I would be tall.

D If I were not thin I would be tough.

SF If I were not stubborn I would be soft.

A If I were not careless I would be careful.

D If I were not proud I would be different.

A If I were not vain I would be plain.

D If I were not blind I would run.

SF If I were not scared I would be stupid.

D If I were not deaf I would sing.

SF If I were not broke I would spend.

A If I were not mad I would cry.

- SF If I were not
A But I am
D So too bad.
A And if I were
SF Then I wouldn't
D So too bad.
SF Because the thing
A That I am
D Is not what
SF I want to be.
A If I were
SF I would be
D What I'm not.
- SF We like to think we are different.
D We like to believe we are unique.
A We may grow up to become the stereotypes we hate.
- D We used to be dependent.
SF We used to believe in other people.
A We used to think we could be perfect.
- SF We will be loved by people like us.
A We will be fooled and we will be feared.
D We will be less ignorant than they were.
- SF I used to dream about falling from a tall building. Falling, falling, falling, till I hit the ground. Then I wake up. I used to tell my mother my dreams. But not anymore. We used to talk while peeling onions. And sometimes at night while watching tv. And whenever I go home she'll cook my favourite food. Then complain about my father and sister when we sit down to eat. And lecture me about my friends and the way I dress. Nowadays I seldom go home. But she still cooks my favourite food when I do.
- D They want us to be like them.
A They want us to believe they are right.
SF They want us to believe we have hope.
- D They make us follow the rules.
SF They make us throw back our heads and scream.
A They make us strive for more.

- D They never see what's good in us.
 SF They never hear what troubles us.
 A They never understand.
- D I often think about life on another planet. Where alien beings are getting ready to inhabit the earth. And I believe they are here already. Only it's not time. My father thinks it's a load of rubbish. He thinks I am a dreamer. He never listens. He just condemns. He says I must grow up. Well this is part of growing up. Dealing with the unknown. Dealing with the facts. Dealing with reality. So I've stopped talking to him about these things. Except after a few drinks.
- SF was always trying to be one of us.
 A was always telling us her problems.
 D was always thinking of ways to escape.
- A could never keep a secret.
 D could never tell her father.
 SF could never get over her mother.
- A needed a lot of attention.
 D needed to please her father.
 SF needed to be understood.
- A The day I disappeared was the day my Uncle Siva was getting engaged. I was gone for only a few hours but my grandmother told everybody about it when they came for lunch that Sunday. As usual she cooked her chicken curry and everyone just sat and ate and listened to her talking. It's as if she has some secret recipe for getting what she wants. That day she was cooking her chicken curry when I came back after sixteen hours. She was so angry with me she scolded me and lectured me and blasted me and shouted and cried, until she forgot about her chicken curry and it got burnt. That was the first time she ever burnt her chicken curry. And everybody was shocked that there was no chicken curry for dinner that day. My Uncle Siva also married a Malay.
- A If I were not
 SF But I am
 D So too bad.
 SF And if I were
 A Then I wouldn't
 D So too bad.
 A Because the thing

- SF That I am
 D Is not what
 A I want to be.
 SF If I were
 A I would be
 D What I'm not.

Scene One: A Bangsar Café.²

Music.

JO If only I listen to my *cikgu*.³ I had MARA offer,⁴ but I play the fool. *Lepak*.⁵ *Cari* girlfriend.⁶ Liza that time. You know-lah⁷ must be cool. Smoke-smoke a bit. Drink a bit. So got thrown out.

SHIREEN I get really nervous about looking good. I have a sweet face but I feel ugly. No really. My friends tell me I am not ugly but I know they are lying. Life was different when my mother was still alive. My family used to eat together. Nowadays my father is never home. And none of my friends understand. God is cruel. Even He doesn't understand.

NATASHA If I had a choice you think I'd come here to look for men? Talk about a bunch of boring losses. Everyone's a hooker. But maybe today I'll get lucky. I'm old enough to know fairy tales don't come true. But I'm not too old to hope.

JO Then work in office. Office boy, dispatch boy – all kind of boy. That time I first start coming this place. I knew the boss here looking for people. *Gaji* okay.⁸ Tips okay. But Liza not happy. She say the woman come here to *cari laki*.⁹ So Liza and I finish.

NATASHA My men always leave me because they can't handle me. I am tough, beautiful and classy. Still looking for the perfect man. I don't believe he exists just yet. Hasn't evolved. In the meantime I'll just take what I can find and use it as practice for the future.

SHIREEN I wonder if anyone would miss me if I ran away. Probably not. Maybe after a few days somebody would tell my father. And then he'll pay somebody to look for me and just go back to work. Nobody would really care. Not even my friends.

JO Nobody looks at me here. Sometimes one old *mat salleh* man maybe.¹⁰ Glamour people all come here. But problem also. They all usually treat me like *najis*.¹¹

Music stops.

D Why did she have to do this?

A Why not?

D She could have tried something else.

SF She had no choice.

A There's always a choice.

SF Not always.

D Going missing is not exactly a smart choice.

SF Look, she had to do something. And this is what she chose to do. Who are you to say whether it was smart or not? You have no idea what really made her do it. And anyway it's easy to judge because you're on the outside.

D But why now? She said she was getting used to things at home.

SF She went with some friends to Genting¹² and got caught with her boyfriend by some officers.

A What *kena tangkap basah* is it?¹³

SF Something like that. And one of them was her uncle. So her father found out and he blew up in her face. I guess she couldn't take it anymore.

A They they'll have to get married.

SF Her father is a big shot. He'll take care of all that.

A But they'll try and find her and get them to get married.

SF Well maybe that's why she ran away.

A Did her father hit her?

SF I don't know. Maybe he did.

D They've had fights before.

SF But this is different.

A This is serious.

D Who's the guy?

SF The *celup*¹⁴ with the big bike and long blond hair.

D Him?

A Strange couple. She in her *tudung*¹⁵ and he with his blond hair.

SF Well he's still around. I saw him yesterday. Avoided me of course.

A Does she have money?

D She's always got money.

A She'll survive for a while.

D And then what?

SF Exactly. I'm scared she'll go too far.

A She won't.

D She's always been so cool.

SF The point is she's in trouble.

D Will she call any of us?

SF She may. But she can be quite stubborn. Remember when she didn't talk to us for months.

A That was because of some other boyfriend problem right?

D Would you have done it?

SF Gone missing?

D Yes.

SF If I had no choice. Yes. I would.

A I nearly did.

D Let's order.

A The day I disappeared was the day my Uncle Siva was getting engaged. For eight hours I walked from Ampang to Subang trying to decide whether to run away and disappear forever or go home and face the fiasco. Just go to Kota Baru and work in the market and become anonymous for awhile. Save up my own money and then decide what to do. But just leave. I was seventeen then. I walked and stopped and walked and stopped. And I looked at everyone carrying anything that looked like a bag of clothes and wondered if they were running away too. Thinking about the scene at home. My grandmother, my mother, my father, my sister. And I just kept walking with my bag of clothes. And my comics. I was gone for only a few hours. But my grandmother told everybody about it when they came for lunch that Sunday.

Music

SIFONE I buy shoes to kill depression. Because people will notice if you don't change your shoes. I worry about money and friends. And the right man. I used to think I was a loser. But now I know how to spend. 100 on earrings. 200 on a blouse. 500 on shoes. Money is everything.

CLAUDIA I often get nervous about my clients. I can't afford to lose them. So I bring them here. So they'll be impressed by my good taste. Some of them just want to go to bed with me. But I know how to handle them.

SIFONE I'm always looking for the right pair of shoes. The kind that looks good whatever I wear. The kind that I can wear all the time without looking old even when they get wet in the rain. The kind that will make people look at the person wearing them.

CLAUDIA Yet I wish I could fall in love. Get married or something. Have children. I pray every night I will have children. Deep down I am really soft. But my career must not suffer. I am Claudia – Superwoman.

Music stops

D I'll have the smoked salmon sandwich. Bitter lemon.

A *Mee goreng mamak. Air suam.*¹⁶

- SF Give me a vegetable soup and an ice lemon tea.
- A You always order the stylo stuff.
- D If you're going to come to a place like this you might as well.
- SF Yeah but you make such a fuss whenever we come here.
- D Because it's so crowded.
- A Like you don't enjoy the fact that everyone comes here to be seen as well.
- D I don't. I tolerate it.
- SF Except when a pretty girl walks through the door of course.
- D Then my eyes might as well *makan* also.¹⁷ I'm paying for it.
- A I come here because it's central okay.
- SF And sometimes it's fun to dress up for lunch.
- D But you can dress and go elsewhere.
- SF Not the same.
- D I notice you have some new shoes today.
- A Sale okay.
- D Starhill or Pertama Complex?
- A Lot 10.
- D Not bad actually.
- A I have to show you this new pair of shoes I got from Sunway Pyramid.¹⁸ Really weird but super comfortable. And it had lights on the side. Actually the only reason I bought it was the shop attendant was so cute I couldn't say no. My budget for the month is now completely *koyak*.¹⁹
- SF She used to wear some really way out shoes remember?
- A How to forget? That's how we started talking.
- D You knew her best. Where do you think she would have gone?
- SF I don't know. She has a brother in Penang, but they don't get along. And her grandmother is in Johor. But I don't think she's in contact with her since her mother left the house. I don't know.
- A You mean her mother also ran away?
- SF A long time ago.
- A No wonder.
- D Maybe she's just gone for a few days to wait for the fuss to die down.
- A This kind of thing does not die down easily.
- SF She must have been really scared.
- A Wouldn't you be?
- D She was always thinking about ways to escape.
- SF She told you about it?
- D Well not directly. But she used to talk about getting away from her father.
- A So where did she say she would go?
- D She never mentioned a specific place. But she would talk about living in a small town. She said she would be happy just to live peacefully even if she did not have much money.
- SF She never said anything like this to me.

- A Probably because you would never have believed her. You're always teasing her.
- SF But she's such a *yang bahagia datin*.²⁰
- D So what do we do?
- A Nothing.
- SF Nothing?
- A Nothing.
- D What nothing?
- A Just wait. She'll probably call.
- SF Yeah. But how can we do nothing?
- A So, you want to drive all over the country with a loud hailer saying 'Girl missing. Please call home.' Get real.
- D Maybe he's right.
- SF When I finally decided to leave home I only told my sister and left. My mother and I had a big blow up a few days before and basically I realized she could not accept my lifestyle and my choices. So instead of staying home and constantly feeling bad about myself I moved out. I rented a room in a house with some friends.

I used to dream about falling from a tall building. Falling, falling, falling, till I hit the ground. Then I wake up. I used to tell my mother my dreams. But not anymore.

Strong willed. Stingy. Sweet. Stubborn.

Me? Mother. Mother. Me.

So much pain. So many problems. Too many dreams.

Me? My mother? Mother? Or me?

Values. Principles. Beliefs. Responsibilities.

Me? Mother. Mother? Me.

Anger. Irritation. Frustration. Fear.

Mother. Mother. Mother. Mother. Me.

Music

- ALEX I should have listened to my mother. I wanted to do my own thing. Go into advertising. Thought I'd have it all by thirty-five. Thought I was different. Now look. One sleazy bugger sitting eyeing the white girls. Should have become a doctor. After all I had the results. Then I'd have one wife, some kids, a comfortable house, family car and thriving practice. Instead I'm sitting here in this... one pocket full of bloody broken dreams. Go to church they told me. I went. Went to the temple also. Prayed for what? By the time I'm forty-five I'll have lung cancer and I'll be balding for sure. What the hell? I'm not going to see God anyway.

Music stops

- SF So are we going to look for her or not?
- A No point doing all that. She's too smart. If she wants to go missing she'll go far away and stay there awhile.
- SF Like Kota Baru?
- A Maybe. Money lasts longer there.
- D But what's the point of doing this? Get some attention and then come home is it?
- A Sometimes it's worth it just for that reason. It gets people to listen to you. You may say it's just for shock value, but that can work also.
- D For how long?
- A You never know. Some people need an electric shock before they can wake up.
- SF I spoke to her father yesterday. He says she hasn't called. He sounded quite upset.
- A Did he say whether they made a police report?
- SF No.
- A I bet he didn't.
- SF I think she just wants to prove something to him.
- D But she had a choice about whether to go overseas. Why didn't she go then? Her father was willing to pay for everything.
- SF She wants to be a designer. Her father was willing to send her provided she did Law. Go overseas for what?
- D Go first. Switch later.
- A No point. Once you say yes you have to complete it. Or you have to do something drastic to make them think.
- D I think if she really tried she could have persuaded her father.
- SF Her father doesn't listen to what she wants. He tells her what she wants.
- D But he is still her father.
- SF Does that mean he can squash her?
- A I'm getting hungry.
- D This sandwich tastes off today.
- SF Send it back.
- A The mee goreng hasn't even arrived.
- SF The soup is okay-lah.
- A We should have gone to the Chinese Coffee Shop.
- D So everyone can stare at you eating you-know-what.
- A But I don't. I only eat chicken and fish.

Family scene.

- A Why do you want to go?

- SF Because I have to.
 A Why now?
 SF I am old enough.
 A Are you sure.
 SF I am.
 A Old enough? Or sure enough?
 SF I want to leave.
 A Have you thought seriously? What about your mother?
 SF If I keep thinking only about you both I will be stuck here forever.
 A You have everything here. What else do you need?
 SF Freedom.
 A I never forced you to do anything.
 SF That's what you believe.
 A You made your own choices.
 SF With you holding my hand.
 A If you leave, don't come back.
 SF Is that a challenge?
 A Come and visit but don't move back in.
 SF I can do this.
 A Then go. Go. Go.
 SF What have you done for me?
 A I paid the bills so you can now choose.
 SF Money cannot compensate. You were never there.
 A Your mother could stay at home and look after you because I paid the bills.
 SF Is that what you learnt from your father?
 A My father was a drunk. I left the house when I was seventeen. Worked, studied and became who I am today on my own. He had nothing to do with it. He knew nothing about me because he was never at home. He just wanted me to grow up and start paying the bills at home. I went my own way. I didn't use any of his money. I was a man of my own time. So you want to go?

Scene Two – Chinese Coffee Shop

Music

- HO You always look so grumpy. You must smile to your customers.
 HU You always smile until it makes me sick. One day your teeth will fall out.
 HO You always look for husband. You must be soft or else they will not like you.
 HU You always look at the boss. But he is only care about his money. What for be nice to him?
 HO You always look down on people because you look down on yourself. You must learn to wear some lipstick. Then you will get more tips.
 HU You always think people are good until they walk on your head. You must be more real.

- AT Aiya I work here so long like a dog. Fifteen year. Still earn so little. All day I cook, make the customer happy, the boss get rich. I think I want to find new job-lah.
- HO Aiya you go away from here who is going to give you work? You got no degree or diploma, why they want to take you?
- AT But I can learn. And I can make good thinks with my wok. I can do.
- HO But how old are you now? Not so many places want to take your age people. They take the younger one. Pay them less. You better save your money from here and then one day you will rich lor. I am also doing that. Work here ten years. Also get the same pay. Our place is here. People know us. And if you go I will be sad. Nobody to talk when I come to the shop.
- AT Aiya, okay-lah. I better go and clean my wok. What you want for breakfast today?

Music stops

- A Ah Soh, no pork ah. I cannot eat.
- SF They know already. You come here so often.
- D Nobody eats pork now anyway.
- SF She called me last night.
- A From where?
- SF She wouldn't tell.
- D Is she okay?
- SF Yes.
- D Is she coming back?
- SF Not yet.
- A Is she safe?
- SF I think so.
- D What is she doing?
- SF She didn't say.
- A Has she got money?
- SF She always has money
- A What did she say?
- SF She wanted us to know she's okay. Not to worry. She sounded quite calm actually.
- A What else?
- SF Nothing. I was talking to my boyfriend about her. He says she was spoilt because her father gave her too much money.
- A But he also messed her up for it.
- D I think she'll come back after a while.
- A Maybe not.
- D How did this thing happen?
- SF It's been coming for a long time now. There were signs actually.

- A Yeah. I should have noticed.
SF was always trying to be one of us.
A was always telling us her problems.
D was always thinking of ways to escape.
A could never keep a secret.
D could never tell her father.
SF could never get over her mother.
A needed a lot of attention.
D needed to please her father.
SF needed to be understood.
D But everything seemed so normal. It's scary.

Family scene

- A Pa I want money.
D For what?
A Please.
D What for?
A To buy something.
D You think I'm your banker.
A You always give me money.
D Money does not grow on trees.
A But...
D What do you want it for?
A You always say if we need anything to ask.
D Grow up. Get a job. Start paying for yourself.
A But I'm still studying.
D Look at your room. It's a mess.
A Come on Pa.
D What's it for?
A Comics.
- SF Have you decided about the car?
A No.
D What did your mother say?
A That I should take it of course.
SF So how much more time?
A He says I must decide by the end of this month.
D I say take it.
A Easy for you to say.
SF Don't touch it.
D Somebody offers to buy you a second hand car and pay for maintenance, how can you turn it down? If it was me...

- A That's precisely it. It's me, not you.
 SF I think you should say now and be final about it.
 A But I don't think I have a choice actually.
 D But it's a choice. You will have a car. And you can do what you want with it. You always complain about the bus, so now you have a perfect solution. And you can choose where you want to go and at what time and with whom – even in the pouring rain.
 A And if my father ever asks me to take my mother to visit all my nightmare relatives, will I still have a choice to say no?

Family scene

- D Pa I need money.
 A Again.
 D For clothes.
 A You have enough.
 D Just twenty ringgit.
 A Take from your savings.
 D The bank is shut.
 A Wait till tomorrow.
 D But we are going now.
 A Who's we?
 D Friends.
 A Ask them to go tomorrow.
 D It's all arranged.
 A Change it.
 D Pa you're being unreasonable.
 A And you're not?
 D Just twenty ringgit.
 A Just enough for a movie and *makan* right?
 D For clothes Pa.
 A How many times have you watched *Star Wars* already?
 SF I'm worried about her.
 D Maybe we should ask the people here if they've seen her.
 SF She won't come here. She hates this place.
 D No harm asking.
 SF I think she's hiding something.
 A Like what?
 SF I don't know. I think she could be in danger.
 A What kind?
 SF Well, how is she supporting herself?
 A I'm sure she has a savings account. And she can get a job.

- SF You know her. She's never worked for money in her life. And she does not know how to live cheap.
- D What are you saying?
- SF Well do you read the papers?
- A Maybe you're right, but maybe not.
- SF What if she's in trouble?
- A She has to learn to deal with it. She chose to go missing. She has to work it out.
- SF Why didn't you leave that time?
- A I was too scared.
- SF Wouldn't you have wanted your friends to help you if you did?
- A Help do what? Persuade me to go back? If after eight hours of deciding I had made up my mind to leave, the last thing I would want is someone to tell me to go back.
- D Have you told her father she called?
- SF No.
- D Why not?
- SF She said not to. I'm not even supposed to tell you both.
- D I think you should tell him.
- SF What for?
- D He's still her father.
- A He has a right to know.
- SF And she has a right if she doesn't want him to know.
- A But we have a responsibility.
- SF To whom? Her father? Or to her?
- D It doesn't feel right.
- SF None of this is right. But we have to deal with it as best we can.

Music

MRS FOONG I have five sons and one daughter. All married. All working. All have car to drive. All have overseas holiday. All have good life. All come and visit me. But when I come here I have friends to talk to. I cannot stay at home. Too many grandchildren. And I like to get my own money.

JIMMY LOH I am providing the best I can for my family. But my daughters still complain. They want to go overseas to study. But I say cannot. I believe in good education but no need to go overseas. Somemore the ringgit so *koyak*. I never go overseas still can make good money. Why they cannot study here like me? But they think I am a bad father. And my wife also agree with them. So everybody is against me. Why the God do this to me ah?

MR CHAN Aiyah. Girls you no need to worry. Going to get marry only. Have children. Diploma or degree. Local or overseas, what is important is whether she pretty or not. When the time come, you find the nice boy, have a big dinner and she will be very happy. Your wife also sure happy. I have three daughters. All married. All think I am very good father.

MRS FOONG All these young people don't realize that the way to make a man happy is to have a lot of children for him. These young people don't understand. If you make your husband happy you will be happy also.

AH LIAN If my mother had not run away I would still be in school and maybe gone to University. But now I have to work so my younger sister can have a chance to at least pass her SPM.²¹ Maybe one day I can study again.

MR LIM I always come here because they know me here. But nowadays the new ones also don't know me. They think I am a slow fart who knows nothing. I ask for tea they bring coffee and sometimes they put sugar. They don't know I cannot take sugar. They are very careless nowadays. And the boss also doesn't care.

Ah Lian spills some drink on his trousers

Aiyah you see what you do. My pants is so clean and straight. Now you see.

AH LIAN Aiya sorry-lah Uncle. Mistake-lah. Accident. I wipe it for you. Little bit only.

MR LIM Last time this thing never happen. Never have girl spill tea on my trouser.

Music stops

SF Are you going to tell your parents?

D I have to.

A You have a choice. Don't forget that.

D Eventually they'll find out.

SF This is different. Think carefully first.

A Having a girlfriend is one thing. But your case is special.

D I'm actually quite nervous about it. Maybe I'll wait.

SF Even your parents have a limit about this kind of thing I'm sure.

A They may be liberal about other things, but be prepared to see another side of them when you bring this up.

D I have to tell.

- A Then tell them. But be ready for the consequences.
SF Especially since you've never had a girl before.
A So?
SF So why were you so scared?
A I wasn't scared.
SF Then?
A She's not my type.
D What is?
A I don't know.
SF I remember the first time I had a boyfriend. My parents freaked. He was this Indian guy from my tuition class. And my mother wanted to stop my tuition after that.
A What did he look like?
SF Skinny with long legs. And very long eyelashes.
D What did you do?
SF It lasted only a few months. But at one point I told my mother I would run away with him if she didn't stop making a fuss.
D And?
SF It didn't stop her.
D My parents say they will disown us if we run away.
A All parents threaten their children. Mine do.
SF They want us to believe they are right.
A They want us to be like them.
D They make us follow the rules.
SF They make us throw back our heads and scream.
A They never understand.
D I don't think I want to have children.
SF Did your parents have a church marriage?
D Yes.
SF Arranged?
D Yes.
A Oh-oh.
D But I'm sure they'll let me choose my own.
SF Have you forgotten your girlfriend is a Muslim and she wears a tudung?
D It's just a phase she's going through.
SF Whatever it is your parents will freak.
A Why don't you wait a while before you tell?
D I really love her.
SF That's not the issue.
D What is?
A You can't bring her here to eat with you.

Family scene

- SF Pa I'm going out.
A With whom?
SF My friend.
A This is your friend?
D Uncle.
A Ah come, come. Sit down. Girl, make some drinks.
D It's okay Uncle.
A Ah make some hot coffee. Sit down. Sit down.
D Thank you.
A Which movie are you going to see?
D *Star Wars* Uncle.
A But my girl already saw that movie.
SF Pa I want to go again.
A Ah bring some cakes. You are hungry ah?
D It's okay Uncle.
A In the oven your mother made just now.
SF But we must go already.
A Bring, bring.
SF But Pa..
A You like my daughter's hairstyle?
D Yes Uncle.
A Too straight for a girl.
D But it's very convenient Uncle.
A Convenient does not mean good.
D Yes Uncle.
A Where do you live?
D Cheras Uncle.
A How long already?
D Twelve years now. Before that in Malacca.
A Your father is working?
D Yes Uncle. He is a musician.
A So who is supporting you?
D My father Uncle.
SF It's time already Pa.
A You are wearing that blouse to go out ah?
SF Yes.
A Better wear a sweater. The cinema is very cold.
SF No need Pa.
A Change the colour I think. Doesn't look so nice. What you think?
D Still got time Uncle.
A You also want her to change ah...

- D No I mean...
- A Faster. Drink your coffee boy.
- D Yes Uncle.
- A So you want to be a musician?
- D No I want to be a designer Uncle.

Scene Three: Leboh Ampang Indian Shop

- A The last time we met here it was just before our Maths exam. The food was so hot it sent me to the toilet three times during the paper. Why on earth do we come here?
- D If we could *bungkus*²² the smell and take it home, I'm sure the Aunty would charge us for it. She is such a *kedekut*.²³ I'm sure she charges us for water to wash hands even.
- SF The food here is the best whatever you say about this place.
- D If I ever get a chance I'll own a restaurant where the customers can actually walk into the kitchen and watch the food being prepared.
- A I want to own a floating restaurant which serves different food everyday and sails from one place to the next to buy the ingredients.
- SF She loved coming here because it made her laugh. Forget all the problems at home. She and I used to watch the guys who come here for lunch. They all seem to have such a big hang-up about their ego – either too big or too small.
- D She loved to watch the guys wherever she went.
- A And she loved it when they watched her too.
- SF I remember how she loved to wear green nail polish.
- D I remember how she always bought us green presents.
- A I remember how she would wear a green scarf on her head with a skull cap underneath and then suddenly pull it off and pretend to be bald.
- SF I wonder if her hair has changed.
- A After a month it naturally would.
- D Maybe she's cut it.
- SF Never.
- A Never say never.
- D Maybe she's straightened it.
- A Or dyed it green.
- SF Maybe she wears dark glasses all the time.
- A Maybe she paints her toenails orange and purple.
- D Maybe she's still the same.
- SF Not likely.
- D Why not?
- SF You can't run away for a month and be the same.

MRS NITYA My husband died and left me this shop. Twenty years we were married. He never once shouted at me. Very good fella. I have one son. Useless fella. Whole day sit and eat. But I have to find a wife for him. Twenty-three years old.

MR SIVA My daughter is getting old. She is quite fair but not very pretty. Not like my wife. I told her to go and study somemore so she can get a better job. But she is a lazy girl. Now I have to look around for one boy. My wife has been keeping some dowry. But who is going to marry a blind girl?

MRS NITYA My husband got a big dowry from my father. Bought this shop. Now my life is here only. Stupid place. But what else have I got? My son says whoever I choose is okay. But who will want him? But I will find.

MR SIVA My wife says better for my daughter to marry a blind fella. I say no. She is not useless. She can do the housework. If she marry the normal fella at least her children will have chance. My sister also born blind. Drank poison and died.

MRS NITYA Maybe my grandchildren will be better fellas. Like this I am becoming old, white hairs all coming. They all think I am strict because I shout at them. But if you don't shout they won't listen.

MR SIVA I have money in the bank. Twenty years I have been saving. Enough to grow old. You must have money to die peacefully.

MUTHU My wife is with my children in India. Malaysia also I like. Can earn money for my children study. The amma here is kind to me. She let me stay in one room. Can eat the food. Sutimmah also very nice. Sometimes we go and see the Hindi movie. But India is better.

Music stops

A I think when she decided to leave she must really have had a lot of guts.

SF If she ever comes back she'll have so much to tell.

D I can't believe she's still carrying on with this.

A I can't believe she's managed this long.

D She hid a lot of things from us.

SF And we used to think she could not keep a secret.

D She must have saved a lot of money.

A Or she's learnt how to earn good money.

D I think she'll regret this later in life.

SF But she always said she wanted to get out of here.

- A We all say it. All the time.
- SF We like to believe we are different.
- A We used to think we could be perfect.
- D We like to believe we are unique.
- SF We used to believe in other people.
- A We will be fooled and we will be feared.
- D We will be less ignorant than they were.
- SF We will be loved by people like us.
- D So what should we do now?
- A Go to the police?
- SF Are you crazy?
- D But we have news. I think he's right.
- SF I think it's better we say nothing. Her letter says she is safe and she needs more time to think. Let her have it. She's not a baby anymore. Besides she trusts us to keep quiet.
- D But it could be dangerous for her.
- A And we have a responsibility?
- SF To whom? Her father? Society? The police? Or to her?
- D It just feels wrong somehow.
- A But if we don't tell and something happens, we would be guilty. Maybe we could have prevented it.
- SF If something is going to happen it could have happened already. I think we should let her be.
- D I still think we should at least tell her father she's okay. It's not fair to him.
- SF How do we know what's fair and what's not fair for her?
- A Okay, maybe she just needs more time.
- SF When I left home I decided not to tell my mother where I was for two weeks because I was so scared she would turn up and make a big scene. So I phoned her everyday to tell her I was okay and only two weeks later I gave her my number and address.
- D But you didn't just go missing. This is different.
- A Look Dave, maybe she has to go through this the way she chooses. Try and understand that you cannot prescribe a life for her.
- D I'm tired about just talking. Can't we do something?
- A Not much.
- SF At least we're here if she calls or wants to come back.
- D My parents are sending me to Singapore to study.
- A When?
- D Next month?
- SF How come?
- D They think I'll have a better chance there.
- A What's wrong with College here?
- D They think I'm not getting enough.

- A Do you want to go?
D No.
SF So tell them.
D It's not so easy.
A They want to get you away from your girlfriend right?
D I think so.
AS As if he'll be a 'good boy' in Singapore.
A Who knows?
D Why can't they just leave me alone?
SF Maybe the course will be better.
A Maybe you'll find a prettier girlfriend.
D I'm tired of people telling me I don't know what's good for me. I am happy here but I have to go. What choice do I have?
SF This fish curry is damn good, lah.
A Sutimmah looks very happy today. Muthu must have smiled at her three times.
SF Maybe you should come here with your Aishah one day. See what the Auntie does.
A Try holding hands and see what happens.
SF Aiya, if she's used to Muthu and Sutimmah, she may not even bother.
A Maybe you should get her to talk to your parents. Same generation what.

Family scene

- D Get up from that chair.
A But there is another chair.
D Get up and sit there. Have you washed the car?
A After this programme.
D I told you hours ago. Go now.
A After this. The car will still be there.
D Have you done your homework?
A Nearly.
D Look at me when I talk to you.
A I'm watching.
D Look at me.
SF The boy's room is a real mess. The whole day he does nothing. You better tell him to clean it. I already tried but he never listens to his grandmother.
D Is your room a mess?
A A bit.
D Look at me and answer properly.
A I'll clean it after this.
SF That woman's character is really in that boy lah. One kind of devil you married. If I am not here to do all the work how will you manage? Yet you treat me like a servant.

- A But you have an imported servant.
 D Don't talk to your grandmother like that.
 SF That girl is so useless. Everything I have to teach her and still she's so slow I might as well do it myself.
 D Yes mother. We are very grateful.
 A Pa I need money.
 D What for?
 SF You give him so much allowance and he still asks for money.
 A Class trip to Genting.
 D Who is going?
 A Friends.
 D Teachers?
 A No.
 SF They all go to Genting and gamble. Even though they are underage. I know these boys. Good for nothing fellas. And your son probably drinks and smokes too. Like his mother.
 A My mother is none of your business.
 D Stop it.
 A Your own wife and you don't defend her.
 D She stopped being my wife the day she walked out of this house.
 A Have you ever wondered why she did?
 SF Because she's a bloody...
 D Mother, enough! How much do you want?
 A Two hundred.
 D I'll give you a hundred and the rest after you wash the car and clean your room.
 SF You shouldn't let him go. His exams are coming and he should study hard. And you should stop him watching tv. I can't get to watch my movies.
 D Here. Now turn off the tv and go and do your work.
 A After this programme.
 D Now.
 SF The trouble with you is you never slap the boy. If you had talked to me like that...

Scene Four: Coliseum Restaurant²⁴

Music

MICHAEL Hey, you. You waiting for your grandmother ah? Sit here so long for what? Your grandfather's chair is it?

AH SENG Eh boy, why you sit here so long? Go home and study. Be a good boy. Don't wait here. No good.

MICHAEL You waiting for girlfriend is it? She ran away or what? Frighten of you already. You wait so long like a stupid only.

AH SENG Eh boy, no need to wait for girl. Let the girl wait for you. Nowadays a lot of girl not good girl. Do a lot of bad things. You must be a good boy.

MICHAEL You also want to run away ah? You also want to disappear is it? Go lah. What for you think so much? Just go.

AH SENG Eh boy, you better go home quickly. Your mother is sure to worry. Go and study. Don't wait for girls. Be a good boy.

D I waited for her for four hours. Then I had to go. It was the day I left for Singapore. I could not wait any longer. She called. She wanted to meet. But I had to leave. After four hours.

D I have to go.

A You have to tell us what she said.

D I have to go now.

A We may be able to help. You cannot just leave. You have to give us more details.

D I must go.

A You have a responsibility.

D She said not to tell.

SF You have to tell us where she would meet you. We will wait for her. You cannot go without telling us.

D I have to leave now.

SF You have to realize she could be in danger. You have to do what's right by her.

D I am sorry. Really. I have to go.

A I can't believe you're doing this.

SF There's no point trying to do anything about it now. It's too late.

A He could have said something. He could have stayed if he really wanted. He just allows other people to control him all the time.

SF We all have our problems.

A He used to be my friend. But sometimes friends are your worst enemies. What's the point of challenge if nobody wants to change?

SF He has not learnt how to stand on his own. But we can't prescribe a life for him. He has to make his own choices.

SF She and I used to eat durians by the roadside. But I sometimes think I never really knew her at all. I feel such a failure. I should have tried to understand. We were so close yet she kept many things from me. It has taught me how to see things differently.

- A I should have believed her. She'll probably never trust me with her problems again. I should have listened carefully to what she was saying. I could have helped her. She knew I had been through it before.
- SF She really wanted to have a sister. Used to hug me tight even after one day of not seeing me. She had made me challenge my deep rooted prejudices against people who are different.
- A She used to think she was unique. Used to think she could solve all her problems by changing her identity. Wanted people to think she was different just because she wore a *tudung*²⁵ with jeans. She made me realize not all parents are good to their children. I am a prisoner in my own house. I am a hypocrite just like everyone else.
- SF She has made me realize how important it is to accept myself. I know I am crippled like the others. But I do have choices. And I can learn how to help myself by strengthening my faith and my beliefs.
- A I should have gone to look for her a long time ago.
- SF What stopped you?
- A I don't know.
- SF We need to do something. I want to go and look for her.
- A We need to tell the police what we know.
- SF But I'm afraid that will make things worse.
- A We have to learn to trust other people.
- SF I've stopped believing in other people.
- A You cannot help her on your own.
- SF I was talking to my boyfriend. He's willing to come with me.
- A I should come with you too.
- SF You don't have to. Someone should stay here in case she decides to call again.
- A He should have stayed.
- SF He's gone.
- A And we could not prevent it.
- SF Who knows? The point is he's gone. And so is she. And we have done nothing.
- A I want them both back.
- SF I'm afraid we're going to lose what we had together.
- A I kept wanting to get away from her all the time. As if she reminded me of stuff I wanted to forget. As if she was the reason for all these things happening. I kept thinking she was just exaggerating. I just hated the way she did things.
- SF I hoped the things that I had been through had helped her to learn as well. But I never realized she could not see. I kept hoping she would find her own strength. Maybe it's too late now.
- A Maybe not.

SF Will you help me look for her?

Closing

SF I worry too much. I want to be calm.

A I long for attention. I want to be right.

D I need to build trust. I want to break free.

SF I want to open myself to endless possibilities. I want the experience and the exposure. I'm really quite selfish. I want things my way.

A I am blue with orange green trying to be white. I love black but try hard to have colour. I am unsure of what I really am. I am the in-between, filling in the gaps. Constantly changing colour. I long to have control and power.

D She went missing because she felt lost. She walked out on her life here when she had a chance. She has more courage than I do.

SF We get the kind of life we end up living. We grow and learn everyday. I need to have faith. I need to find the trust. I am caught between my Chinese upbringing and a Western style of living.

A I am in-between yet I refuse to accept. I am a bottle of energy with no force. Neither love nor hate. Neither high nor low. I refuse to accept and so I rebel. Yet I believe in magic and myth and infinity.

D She makes it hard to know what is right. She could be better off than she was. She has been gone for too long. She has really made me think.

A I believe you must try to understand.
I realize I can be really wrong.
I still don't know why she did it.

SF I believe life is a series of tests.
I choose not to conform.
I still feel hurt because she left.

D I believe everything changes.
I still find it hard to be open.
I think she will never come back.

SF I used to dream about falling from a tall building.

D I often think of life on another planet.

- A The day I disappeared was the day my Uncle Siva was getting engaged.
 SF I used to tell my mother my dreams.
 D I believe they are here already.
 A My grandmother was cooking her chicken curry when I came back.
 SF Nowadays she seldom cooks my favourite food when I go home.
 D I've stopped talking to my father.
 A After that day she had never cooked her chicken curry.
- SF If I were not
 A But I am
 D So too bad.
 A And if I were
 SF Then I wouldn't
 D So too bad.
 SF Because the thing
 A That I am
 D Is not what
 SF I want to be.
 A If I were
 SF I would be
 D What I'm not.

THE END

Notes

¹ This play was devised and written by Charlene Rajendran, in collaboration with Mohd. Arifwaran, Jerrica Lai, Deanaharan Nair and Donovan Goh. It was first performed in September 1998, as part of the Five Arts Centre Director's Workshop, initiated and curated by Krishen Jit. It was later restaged in July 1999, produced by Five Arts Centre in association with The British Council, Malaysia.

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² Bangsar is an upmarket housing area in Kuala Lumpur, with several chic eateries.

³ Malay for 'teacher'.

⁴ MARA is the acronym for Majlis Amanah Rakyat, a governmental body which provides educational opportunities for Malay students.

⁵ A Malay word indicating 'hanging around aimlessly'.

⁶ *Cari* is Malay for 'look for'.

⁷ 'Lah' is commonly tagged onto words in Malaysian colloquial speech (of any language), usually for emphasis.

- ⁸ *Gaji* is Malay for 'salary'.
- ⁹ Malay for 'find a man'.
- ¹⁰ Malaysian colloquialism for 'white man'.
- ¹¹ Malay word for 'faeces'.
- ¹² A highland resort area with a large casino.
- ¹³ A Malay phrase, suggesting that an unmarried couple have been caught *in flagrante delicto*. For Muslims in Malaysia, this is a punishable offence under *Syariah* law.
- ¹⁴ Malaysian colloquialism indicating someone of mixed race.
- ¹⁵ Headscarf worn by many Muslim women.
- ¹⁶ Fried noodles, Indian-Muslim style. Warm water.
- ¹⁷ Malay for 'eat'.
- ¹⁸ Starhill, Pertama, Lot 10 and Sunway Pyramid are shopping malls in Kuala Lumpur.
- ¹⁹ Literally, Malay for 'torn'. It implies that something has been ruined or destroyed.
- ²⁰ This is a kind of honorific or title which a wife receives when her husband is named a *Datuk*. The usage in this context implies someone with money and the leisure to spend it.
- ²¹ SPM is short for *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia*, or Malaysian Education Certificate. This is the major examination taken at age 17.
- ²² Malay word for 'pack', here referring to the act of packing some food as take-away.
- ²³ Malay word for 'stingy'.
- ²⁴ An old steak house in Kuala Lumpur. Surviving from colonial times, it became quite an institution in Kuala Lumpur.
- ²⁵ *Tudung* is a headscarf, worn by many Muslim women, completely covering the hair and usually the shoulders as well.