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Hauntings

There's an old wreck of a building back home, a few streets over from the bowling alley my friends and I visited after our last day of class. Surrounded by panels of zinc walls, the once-stately structure is still visible from the road, its bare bones long-overgrown with the thick greenery so common in Malaysia. The words *Shih Chung Branch School* still peer dully out from its faded facade. When I was little, I observed it with a kind of grotesque fascination—its profile nestled in between the immaculately restored townhouses like a negative image, forgotten in the darkroom. But as the years passed by, it became nothing more than another section of the city, blurring as I passed by.

After asking around, I gathered that many in the older generations considered the building haunted—nobody had torn it down or started renovations after so many years, despite the fact that it was situated on a prime piece of property in one of the most coveted areas of the island. Haunted houses seemed like something out of a paperback novel—not something that should have belonged in the context of where I had grown up.

It wasn't until I read Tan Twan Eng's *The Gift of Rain* that I began to understand that Southeast Asia—and most of all, the island of Penang—had not escaped unscathed from the war. That the school building had been abandoned because of some thought it was haunted by the spirits of people tortured by Japanese soldiers during the war. Tan's novel about war-time Penang's dark, blood-stained days stunned me. Once, I read somewhere that said that the British had lost Malaya not when Singapore fell to the invading Japanese on bicycles, but when the Crown had quietly pulled its officers and other expatriates from Penang, condemning the island to a swift fall. And what was this, if not an explanation, a careful reconstruction of how I viewed the island I had grown up on? Something that challenged the demarcation of the history we studied?

For so long, I had thought Penang to be a quiet, little island of dense rainforest and tourist-studded beaches. I had grown up there, toured her quaint colonial-era shophouses and its intricate temples, played tag in her neighborhoods, and wandered its back streets with my friends. And vaguely, from a third-grade history class, I knew that it had once played an important role in the Malaccan trade routes. For years in my imagination, the Penang of the past was spice-studded, filled with British admirals in tricorne hats, lapsing into an oblivious void of peaceful existence soon after—nothing more than an antiquated, more Anglicized version of the blissful home I knew.

Throughout my fourteen years at my international school in Malaysia, we studied the Second World War over and over again, from our tinfoil battleship models in the fourth grade to our policy analyses of appeasement and lebensraum that pervaded the European landscape prior to the war. We read excerpts of eye-witness accounts from Pearl Harbor, watched the grainy faces of interviewees from Nagasaki and Hiroshima, and listened to our teacher wax poetic about Nolan's *Dunkirk*. It felt clinical, detached—no matter how well our teachers taught. That, I thought, was the disillusioning thing about history. Everything always happened so far away, as if we were viewing the world through the foggy sheen of museum glass.

And how strange it was, in hindsight, that we never took enough time to delve into how the war played out in Asia, other than the occasional, cursory glances at Midway and Coral Sea. Instead, we lounged around on a campus converted from a former British military recreation center, studying a war that had taken place both thousands of miles away in Europe and on our own front doors. And yet, we barely talked about how Penang had been affected by this conflict, how there were still old grandfathers on the island that could remember the bloody days of military rule.

I read about the Sook Ching massacre, the mass graves sprinkled over the Malayan peninsula that harbored the unknown, unmarked bodies of the Chinese immigrants in the region that had tumbled like matchsticks, one after the other, into the open earth. I had never really thought about Malaysia's role in WWII; in class, discussions about the war in Asia were mostly limited to a general understanding that Japan had embarked upon a long line of conquests in the region, but we had never seriously discussed its impact on the place we called home. Suddenly, little things about Penang began to make sense—the stories about haunted jungles, the weathered memorials dotting the island, the distrust that many of the elderly still harbored against anything Japanese. Later on, as I wrote about Malaysian film history, I learned about the brief blip in history where the industry had been shadowed by war—where talking pictures became a tool of assimilation and imperialism, meant to teach the population how to fit into the Japanese empire.

Every year, our teachers repeated that history affected the present, and I had understood that sentiment vaguely, taking it for a common piece of knowledge. But why had we skirted the edges of what was buried right in front of us? As an international school supporting a foreign curriculum, were we not also responsible for learning the history of what had happened so close to us? It was difficult to think that we hadn't studied the intricacies of our own home, that we had spent hours and hours focusing on plights from distant lands while our own history remained neglected.

In January, I found myself walking downtown—past the derelict face of the school, the old townhouses and the soft, full face of a setting moon. It was early in the morning, the thin seepage of light spilling over the pier and dusting everything in a golden sheen. I looked around me at the island. There was still time to remember.