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# MAKAM KEEMPAT (THE FOURTH GRAVE)

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Paula came when the lights in the room had already gone out. Her body shone a white light. Soft. Glowing. I put down my cigar box on the table and slowly rose from my lazy chair to greet her. Yet, she turned her back, glided across the floor, then vanished in the middle of the corridor that led to the kitchen. And suddenly the slippery floor under my feet became covered with glue. I was trapped on its surface, like a mouse caught in a baited trap. I witnessed Paula beam rays of light. My hands that had been so ready to embrace her were arrested in the air, dangling awkwardly. She left the deserted room without leaving a trace of her scent. She had left me. Her appearance and disappearance were as mysterious as magic from a witch's wand, rising from nothing and vanishing into nothingness. We had been left to wait for ten seasons.

Before I had gotten used to the way Paula came and left, I would always cry out her name in the hope that she would turn around and meet my eyes. Not once did she heed my call. It was as if her ears had been plugged up with forged steel. Her body skimmed the surface straight ahead, before dissipating into the air. Still, I hoped.

Paula always appeared only when the last remaining illumination to the room came from the rays of my reading lamp, when the gradations of light blended into the darkness and disappeared into the corners of the dark corridor.

I said her name aloud, a tumult of feelings present in my voice; touched, happy, worried, desperate. However, this cracked voice was only answered by its own echo, followed by the deep sounds of my breathing, heavy, weary. After this, the night pushed me into a resolution: I had to sleep and leave my lazy chair that lay in sight of

the corridor before my wife came to fetch me to bed. Unfortunately, I am not a disciplined man, even though I know keeping watch all night would trigger my asthma. I preferred to have my wife come for me, even though I had to wait deliberately. She would cajole me in whispers, and then guide me to our room. I never paid attention to her words, but her arrival would signal me to leave my spot. You would see a pair of wrecked human beings walking with tottering steps, resembling zombies. In front of me, our bedroom door was swung wide open. The light from the lamps shone. The fragrance of jasmine drifted into my nostrils. (My wife always anointed the four corners of our room with the buds of jasmine that she had plucked from the garden. This had been her habit since the early days of our marriage.) I used to get angry at the sight of this wide open doorway. The mosquitoes would always swarm in, and Elia, my wife, would shut the door in haste. I would then spend the night in discomfort, scratching away at the length of my itching body. On top of that, I couldn't bear slathering my skin with insect-repellent creams. The smell always made me nauseous. I also disliked the smell of insecticides, which made my throat dry and caused me to be short of breath. Elia would curse herself all night, and I would alternate it with "it's alright, let it be" over and over again, all the while scratching at myself with the clawing motions of a flea-infested ape. Now, I've given in. Yes, yes, even mosquitoes need nutrition. Elia is calmer now.

After my body had settled on the mattress, Elia shut off the lights. She slept with her back facing me. I slept with my back toward her. There was a crack between our bodies, a silent path without light or the sounds of the bullfrogs calling. In a little while, I would hear the rhythmic sounds of Elia's sleeping, while I would be wide awake, my eyes open and stabbing the darkness like daggers. I allowed the mosquitoes to land on my cheek, or bite my fingers and toes. The buzz of those blood-sucking creatures kept me company. I wanted a cigar, but Elia hated the smell of tobacco in the room.

The sun's rays filtered in through the pockets of air on top of the doors and windows, brightening the dark room. I got up hastily and washed my face with cold water from an aluminum basin. Elia was no longer in the bedroom. Her blankets were neatly folded. She always left for the market early, when the fish and shellfish were at their freshest. Elia didn't like fish that had already been packed in ice. The flesh would become tasteless. Elia was good at cooking seafood. For a long while now, we haven't consumed any four-legged animal meat, nor have we drunk alcohol of late. Old people like us have to know restraint. If you want to live a long life, my mother used to warn me, don't eat like a pig.

I put down my washcloth next to the basin, and walked to the door. I would soon be inspecting our tobacco shop. This was my daily routine: to open and close up shop. Actually, I should have opened the store at 7:00 am. Now it was already 7:30. I had slept as contentedly as a buffalo after much difficulty shutting my eyes.

I stepped into that corridor. Cold. Right in the middle of this same corridor Paula had disappeared last night. The door opening into the store was in the left wall. I turned the brass doorknob. The air currents in the room felt warm.

The glass jars filled with various assortments of tobacco were lined up on wooden racks. Some are blends. Some are pure tobacco. Their flavors are diverse. In this village, people my age take pleasure in inhaling from cigarettes hand-rolled from loose-leaf tobacco in *marning* paper. For me, a factory cigarette just doesn't have the full flavor. I also sell quality cigars that range from mid-priced ones to highly expensive ones. There aren't as many buyers for those cigars as for the loose tobacco, but still, there remain some. This store has supported my family throughout, including paying for Paula's college education in Java. I wanted her to be an important businesswoman, not a small shop owner like me. I let her gain all the knowledge there was, as high as the sky. Let the heron soar, said my mother. And yet, the land and water that you drink has a way of determining your path. Paula chose her own way. But why, why that one? Elia blamed me once. She said, the kungfu stories of Kho Ping Hoo that I used to read to our daughter, with their tales of superhuman warriors, had left their indelible mark on an impressionable child, doomed to mark her until adulthood. Was it so?

I heard the screech of the side door. Footsteps. A little cough. Elia had returned. I didn't want her to see me stuck here. I was also feeling too lazy to open up the store. I decided to look into Paula's room. Perhaps, my daughter was already sitting there, reading or writing.

One night, she surprised us. We heard sounds coming from upstairs. Together we climbed the stairs and silently pressed our ears to the door. The sounds of drawers being opened, and papers shuffled, and then shredded. Was it my mother cleaning up the place? As far as I knew, mother always came without making a sound. No, no, it's not mother, I whispered. Elia agreed. Mother always comes silently, she said.

We steeled ourselves to knock on the door. Three times. Three knocks to start with. Not much later, the tiny frame of my daughter appeared. My wife began to cry. I was floored. Paula said she had come home without warning on purpose, entering through the unlocked side door. (My wife is sometimes careless. No one has ever lost anything in this small village, she insists.) Why did you come home so quietly, without asking to be picked up? Where did you get the fare home from? You already came home once last month. I felt uneasy. Paula looked at me and her mother, back and forth. "I'm being pursued by people," she said slowly. I replied with a joke: "being chased by your boyfriend?" Paula's face tensed up. "If there is anyone who shows up asking about me, tell them you don't know me," she said tersely. What do you mean, I don't know you? You're my daughter, our only child. "I won't say anything about you either if anything happens," she said, not caring. My wife was instantly hit by a bad feeling. "What have you done, child?" Elia's lips were trembling. That night, Paula refused to say a word. She only shook her head or nodded. Early in the morning she left the house, boarding the first ship. My wife cried all day long. I had hoped that my daughter would speak. But, Elia forbade me to push Paula. Do not force her. She is our only daughter. Alright. I didn't want to be called a dictator either. Emperors usually are. I'm no emperor, I said. Elia protested again. Don't you bring up those kungfu stories again. Alright, fine. I chose to be silent.

Paula's room is upstairs, where it faces the setting sun. From the edge of this window, my adolescent daughter would stare out into the backyard, where there were

three graves. The oldest grave is my father's. Unlike other graves, this one had no body lying there. My father was lost at sea when his ship overturned in the Arafura Sea. My mother then asked someone to dig a grave, where she buried all of father's favorite things, following Chinese tradition. It is unclear what my father was searching for on that last doomed voyage. My mother said, your father wished to trade. However, one of my cousins broke the secret. Your father had another wife and child on another island, he said. Traders are the same as sailors, marking their arrival on the bodies of women, whispered this cousin.

Father and Mother's graves are flanked by Yan Yan's, my dog who died of old age. Little Paula used to leave flowers on top of all three graves. One day, she ran into the house and hugged her mother tightly. What's the matter child? Paula refused to speak, even though Elia tried to persuade her over and over again. During the night, she developed a high fever. My wife and I panicked. The doctor only prescribed a fever-reducer. This daughter of yours cannot tolerate the change in weather, said the doctor. At that time, we were between monsoons. The next day, Paula's body temperature returned to normal. After a few days, Paula told us that she had seen a woman wearing a maroon *cheongsam* appear out of her grandmother's grave and fly up into the sky. I believed it to be my mother, making herself known to her granddaughter. Several times after, Paula saw a beautiful woman wearing a *cheongsam* appear. She would place herself in the corridor leading into the kitchen, in the dining room, or in the backyard. She would glide across the floor, sit in a chair, or perch in the branches of the ylang-ylang tree. Paula became used to my mother's presence, and began to miss her grandmother all the time. My wife and I often heard Paula conversing with someone. When we would then see her alone, we understood. Our daughter is talking to her grandmother. The sounds of Paula's laughter would sometimes reach my ears, even though she wasn't there. I believed my mother was guarding her granddaughter all the way across the sea. The thought calmed my heart.

Paula's room lay vacant for years. Our houseguests hardly ever spend the night. And if they did, they preferred to unroll a mattress or a straw mat on the floor of the living room. Once a year, when Paula came home for her school holidays, the room would have an inhabitant once again. Paula's room was painstakingly cleaned every single day by my wife, as if she still lived with us. Clean sheets remain on the bed. Books on the shelves neatly ordered. Not one of Paula's dolls have left the toy rack. The scent of liquid floor cleaner always lingered.

I saw that the window was already open. The fresh air flowed indoors. I walked to the window, looked out at the backyard. Three graves. I was planning to add another, but didn't have the heart to reveal my intention to Elia.

That grave has to be dug so that we will stop waiting for her return. Elia and I are forever waiting for Paula. She meets me in the quiet of the night, but never speaks. She isn't really there.

In our last phone conversation, Paula said that she would be home three days before Christmas. My wife stitched a simple dress for her. Ever since she was a child,

Paula disliked lacy dresses. They only make my body itch, Papa, she grumbled. I smiled at the memory of our daughter's behavior. Now she was already grown up. Did she have a boyfriend? Once she shocked me with a frightening statement. Don't expect me to get married Papa. Marriage is only for the rich. Huh? Papa and Mama got married with only the clothes on our back, Paula. She was silent for a moment, and then tapped my sleeve. Listen Papa, she whispered, my friends and I are trying so that everyone can live in prosperity and safety. When then happens, I'll get married. I laughed. You're not a magician, child. She burst into laughter.

But my daughter never came home on the third, nor the second, or the day before Christmas, and not even in the years following that. She didn't keep her promise to her parents.

I called her the first night she was late. She wasn't at her dormitory. She moved out a long time ago, said the woman who lived across. How long ago? Almost a year. Ooh... I followed her tracks to Java, looking for her on campus. She dropped out a long time ago sir, said a lecturer in a reluctant tone. Where are you my child?

Elia issued an edict. I was not allowed home before our daughter had been found. I pored over the newspaper columns on crime. I listened to the news on television. I visited the morgues of each and every hospital. Our daughter was nowhere. I came back after three months of tracing the steps of our daughter. In the end, Elia believed that Paula had really disappeared. Fortunately, she was devout, accepting the loss of our daughter as God's will.

Two years later, someone who claimed to be Paula's close friend called me and reported her missing. We already know! I barked. From that same person, I received some new information. Our daughter had organized people to resist the despotic emperor. I repeated this to my wife. She screamed and clawed at me. You're the one who incited her to be a fighter! My wife came to in the midst of this confusion. We have to find her, Elia said, with overflowing eyes. Where can we look? Anywhere, as long as it's still on this earth. Alright.

A journal bearing the name of my daughter indicated that she might be locked up in a fortress.

**A** fortress. I remember the story of a princess with long hair, locked up in a tower. Little Paula didn't like that story very much, and always told me to read her another fairytale. I don't know how it began, but I read her bits and pieces of Kho Ping Hoo's works. Paula was shaken. Those clear child's eyes of hers never blinked. She fell in love with the characters, those champion warriors. She imagined herself as a champion with supernatural powers, carrying a blade, elegant, beautiful, hard of heart, rescuing others.

Now she was trapped in a tower. The divine and powerful champion trapped in a fortress. She should have been able to escape. Should have.

I went to the place that was mentioned in the journal, accompanied by Elia. We gazed at hills, bamboo reeds, the tangled undergrowth. Where had they locked up my

daughter? There was no fortress. Another piece of information I received: the fortress was underground. If I were an earthworm, maybe I would know where it lay. People helped us look for a fortress. They began to dig from noon until night. Yet there was no fortress. Paula had really disappeared.

That afternoon I approached dinnertime with an odd feeling. Elia was roasting shark meat. I didn't want to eat shark meat. What if our daughter had been eaten by a shark? Some people said Paula had been dumped into the sea and eaten by sharks. Elia served the roasted shark meat at the dining table, but I only touched the plain vegetables. Tears welled up in my eyes. What is it, Elia asked. I sobbed even harder. What's the matter, she asked in a gentler voice. Our daughter's in this shark, I whispered, choked with sobs. Immediately she choked, leapt from her chair, and began weeping at the edge of the washtub. Not long after, she returned, lifted the plate of fish from the table, and threw its contents into the dustbin.

Later in the evening, I decided to talk to my wife about Paula. I didn't want to wait for our daughter every night. I wanted Paula to be at peace. I wanted us to live peacefully, without her. Let her go, let her be with my mother, I said. My wife nodded slowly.

A fresh grave was just dug next to my mother's. Rest, my child. Even champions need rest. Suddenly the boughs of the ylang-ylang rustled. Flowers fell. I felt my wife's cold hand in my grasp. Mother has received our child, she whispered, relieved.

This morning we are well-groomed. I have on my best suit of clothes, and shined leather shoes. I look at the aging and shrinking Elia in her black dress. So black, like the crows that cry and swoop in my mind. My tears fall. Elia looks at me. She wishes to say something, but fails. In a little while, we will go to church, and pray. This is the fifth Christmas without Paula.