

Some Notes on a Party

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The colour of an invitation can dictate the strength and contour of a gathering.

Cream invitations denote parties that are filled with a sense of forced freshness and 'tag your location' decor. Green invitations tell of an earthy, winery vibe: an ode to youth. Red conveys an all-you-can-eat Asian buffet and decorative pearls in vases. Dark blue breeds an image of a rooftop with people in crisp linen shirts, tipping back expensive gin. Black is decidedly a plea for you not to attend, orange a renewal of vows, and pink, a suburban attempt at a baby shower.

One day last November, I received a letter with my family's name and address written and crossed out in blue ink multiple times, alongside a stamp of the Queen's aquiline profile. I ripped open the plain white envelope, noticing that it was poorly 'licked' on the back. I recall thinking: the remembrance of saliva *must* be a desperate plea for attendance. Struggling to release the tightly inserted slip of paper, a sudden strong smell threw me entirely.

During primary school, the smell of empty paper bag lunch orders that were strewn in the classroom recycling bins gave me a quasi-orgasmic sensation. I instantly knew that it was the exact smell. A whiff of lunchtime freedom, of genuine excitement, of a child's passion for nature and of just life.

I flicked open the paper bag letter and read:

Sophie, Conrad, and Stella,

I'm having a small gathering at my apartment in Ang Mo Koi. You remember it, don't you? I know it's been so long but I was just wondering if you were still living in the 419 HDB, nearby the Hawker Centre? Goodness, it has been very many years. And now beautiful Stella is all grown up! Don't you remember, Sophie, when I used to take care of Stella after

school and she would eat red bean cake? She was so happy. And Conrad, how is the filming? I remember you were struggling to find work, so I hope you are doing well. I would love for you to come next week (the 27th), at around 4 O'clock. Some other family and friends will also be here. It would be so good to see everyone again. Don't bring anything, only yourselves.

I hope this invitation meets you in good health.

Best Regards,

Sarah Law

I had lived in the 419th Housing Development block on the 7th floor - tucked away in a two-bedroom complex on the East Wing - for the three years before moving back to Australia. The way to the flat will forever be mapped out in my mind - a Singaporean labyrinth of winding streets, cluttered with shoes left outside the houses' entrances, raised heavy wooden doors lining the corridors with brass knockers incongruent with the peeled doorframes. It was initially a place of wonder and unfamiliarity for my 9-year-old self. A place which I eventually came to call home.

Sarah Law was the middle-aged daughter of Mr. Law who lived opposite our flat. She even introduced herself as 'Law No.2' or the 'Second Law'. Every time I would return home from a Saturday family outing, I would see Sarah through the flat's fly screen, dusting, rearranging and caring for the elderly Mr. Law who passed away soon after we moved in.

Naturally, we weren't invited to the funeral. Instead, from our apartment, we watched a grand procession all follow a white van - a hearse, as I was told. Sarah was at the front, arms stretched out to the white double doors. I could just make out her straight, long hair, half pinned back with a single jade clip, the rest flowing behind her as she clutched on to her younger relatives in anguish. Relatives that had now forgotten Mr. Law.

After the funeral, she started picking me up from my bus stop in the afternoon and walking me to our local food court, where she would watch me do homework from the perch of her friend's *nasi goreng* stall. She would always repeat to me 'study hard, play later' and 'be more like your Mum' all the while affectionately gripping my shoulders with spindly fingers. Somewhere deep down, I knew that she missed her father. But my young naïve self never asked, never wanted to ask, how she felt, lest it meant no more food court excursions. I now regret not asking.

It was sad leaving her at five o'clock each day, when my mother would come and collect me. Sarah would be peeling okra or stirring rice, and nodded tight lipped as I was ushered away from dinner and bed. I've never felt safer than when sitting at those tables, a red bean cake secretly tucked away in my backpack as a treat after dinner.

Until around two minutes prior, I hadn't thought about Sarah in six years. The letter obviously must have been re-routed by the apartment's current tenants.

Suddenly, our landline started ringing and I shifted myself to the phone.

'Stella! Can you please remember to turn off the heater when you leave the house?'

It was my mother frantically calling from work.

'Look Stell, I also have some bad news. Do you remember Sarah Law? You know, the old woman who used to babysit you? Ayo, I'm sorry Stell, but I just got a text from Kian. She passed away on the 30th from cancer. I'm so sorry, I... I.. I think it was breast cancer.'

Looking down at the envelope, I realised then I truly missed Sarah's aura. Her aura of Singlish murmurings of encouragement for a good and productive life.

I had missed my Second Law- a law that dictated paper bag invitations were for small gatherings to celebrate a life.

Stella's piece received the first-place prize in the 2018 E.M. Cummings Essay Competition, in which Burgmann residents present an essay of no more than 1000 words that takes inspiration from a designated book of the Bible. In 2018, the theme was Deuteronomy.