

A Novel by...

Marie Gerrina Louis

The
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DEDICATION

*What is a friend?
A single soul dwelling in two bodies.*

– Aristotle

For my first friends; companions from my childhood, who share
my earliest memories;
my sisters Rosita, Jancie, Stephanie and Indra.

For the friends from my adolescent years, for a memorable
school life; the former students of I.J. Convent,
Johor Bahru, Year 1981.

For the people I am fortunate to call my friends today;
especially the staff of Haridass Ho & Partners,
both past and present.

For the friends from my future (I hope!);
my protuberance-less children Judith and Veronica.

And for the woman who inspired this book and promised to
rock into old age with me;
my eternal friend Manogari.

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YEAR OF THE DRAGON

(February 2000)

The sound of firecrackers tore through the silence of the night suddenly. A prolonged burst of angry snaps that managed to sound both exuberant and defiant at the same time. Children squealed their delight.

The woman, sitting contentedly in her room upstairs, shook her head in part-irritation, part-amusement. Outlawed by the authorities or not, some people didn't consider the farewell to an old year or the greeting of a new year complete without the report of firecrackers.

It was the eve of the first lunar new year of the twenty-first century. An important new year in many ways, least of all because it was yet another year of the Dragon. Considered by many Chinese as the most auspicious of all the zodiac signs, the Dragon is always eagerly welcomed. A good year for starting a business. A good year for career advancement. And a good year to have sons.

The year ahead very much on her mind, the woman continued to put crisp, new ringgit notes into little red packets. She worked quickly and methodically, dividing the *ang pows* according to their value. More money for her own children and close relatives. Token sums for the offspring of friends and neighbours. The sweet scent of the new *ang pow* packets permeated the room, fusing with the excitement in the air.

She paused to rub the small of her back, noting that the older one got, the harder it was to be pregnant. She was thirty-six and determined that this would be her last baby. Three was more than could be expected from any normal woman. How did people have seven and ten in those days, she

wondered, shuddering at the thought of that many pregnancies.

This child will be a dragon like me, she thought. Not that it mattered to her or her husband who was a dragon himself. What did matter was the unreasonable surge of hope that coursed through her every time she thought of the Dragon year. For twelve years now, since the last Dragon year, she had been hoping.

What will she think of my life if she could see me now, she wondered. Banality personified? Her husband would be appalled if he could read her thoughts now. Banal? Us? She smiled as she thought of his pretence at outrage. And just as quickly, the smile turned pensive.

She will come, the woman said to herself for the hundredth time in as many days. It's our year and she'll remember. It has been long enough to feel safe and she'll try it. The woman felt it in her heart. The love of one friend for another. Instinctively reading the other's thoughts.

Willing her friend back home.

FRSEEEEEEEFRONNNNG

(Bee Chin – 31 December 1988)

Li Lian loved trains.

Which explains nothing and everything. There are several definitions for the word train in the dictionary. The one Li Lian liked was 'a line of connected railway coaches or wagons pulled or pushed by a locomotive'. The definition that reminds me of her is, 'a line of gunpowder used to set off an explosive charge'. Chilling but apt.

One of her all-time favourite books was Paul Theroux's *The Great Railway Bazaar*. It is the book for lovers of trains and train journeys. In it, she discovered what would become her favourite word. Frseeeeeeeffronnnng. It is the sound a train makes as it comes to a screeching halt. The clash of hot metal against hot metal. She loved the unending stream of e's, screeching the word against her tongue over and over again to get the right pronunciation. Sometimes, when a lesson in class became boring, she would scribble the word over and over again until several sheets of paper were covered with it. I soon became sick of it. Needless to say, I don't like trains.

Which hardly explains why on the last day of 1988, I was at the train station in Johor Bahru, waiting to board one to Kuala Lumpur, a worn handbag slung over one shoulder. Discomfort tickled my shoulders and burned in my ears. I could feel nothing of the excitement that pervaded the station. Arms crossed across my chest, I openly watched the other passengers.

Some had expressions of intense excitement written on their faces, thoughts of an impending break from the monotony of their daily lives. Others looked anxious, perhaps having had to make an urgent trip to meet with bad news at journey's end. Yet others, looked disinterested.

Almost as if it did not matter whether they boarded the train or not. What did I look like, I wondered. I had never been on a train before and had never wanted to. I was doing this for her.

Li Lian had always been different. Like fireworks at Christmas, she stood out, a glaring example of a childhood gone wrong. A life held in abeyance too long, its ownership uncertain. The fragile threads that held her past and present together, hopelessly tangled.

She was my best friend at a time when such things meant something. We talked about everything, allowing each other to peel open the layers that hid our innermost feelings. Sensitive, painful layers that hurt with each peeling and which were, to the outsider, unseen. It was because of those layers that I was now contemplating a train journey that I could have chosen not to take.

In another month or so, the year of the Dragon would be ending, giving way to the Snake. Li Lian and I turned twenty-four as Dragons, I in April and she in August. Aries and Leo. Fire and fire. We shouldn't have got along, according to the stars. We would burn each other up. But we didn't.

As I continued to wait for the train, I looked around me. The station was dusty and dismal. Sweet wrappers lay ignored in dusky corners. Why do train stations always look so dingy? Grime-encrusted cement floors and black finger-printed walls. Why not strive for the plastic efficiency of airports? But I knew the answer to that. The dirt and grime lent these stations their colour, their earthy character. And they had to match the sickly grey of their trains anyway. What use had they for plastic and chrome? Without that essential griminess, they could be any insignificant building. I hated it all. Give me plastic efficiency anytime.

A wretched child left her mother's side, ran over to the edge of the platform and leaned over to look at the tracks.

From a distance, I saw the approaching train, fashionably late as usual and wondered idly if the child was going to fall over and play havoc with everyone's schedules. The mother looked quite disinterested by the prospect.

She was a tired-looking woman with depressing strands of hair escaping a single, oily pony tail. There were gold bangles on both arms that jangled every time she adjusted her baggage, which she did frequently. In fact, she seemed more interested in her bags than with her errant child, now quite entranced by the oncoming train and still in danger's way. I understood his fascination. Li Lian had been just as drawn to those long steel tracks on their gravel-covered foundation. They had mesmerised and beckoned to her. An invitation to clamber down the stone platform and touch its cold steel. To feel the vibration of an oncoming train ...

I was seriously considering pulling the boy back by the collar of his tee-shirt when some instinct of self-preservation took over and he pulled himself back in time, going back several steps to ensure that he had put sufficient distance between himself and the oncoming train. Then, when he was clearly safe, his mother slapped him. Angry with him for putting himself in danger or with herself for her lack of attention. Whatever it was, he suffered for it and once the train stopped, was hauled on board bawling lustily.

People shoved me aside, trying to get on quickly. I let them pass, trying to appear nonchalant when actually I was tense. Bustling, rushing crowds always do that to me. I hate being in close proximity with strangers. They smell different. My mother calls me a snob when I say that but my father understands. He knows how abhorrent it is to have to share one's space with another human being.

When I could wait no more, I boarded. The train never stopped for long at this station, often sliding away while one or two people were still on the steps, trying to squeeze themselves and their baggage in at the same time. As I

climbed up, a man's hand grazed my arm and I cringed. I would have preferred to fly. There would be none of this intimate jostling with total strangers. Quietly filing into a spacious jetplane with wide seats that allowed one to sink into one's own thoughts without the need to make conversation with one's neighbours. No need for touching arms or sitting thigh-to-thigh with some sweaty stranger whose body odour could overcome me and render me nauseous.

I have read *The Great Railway Bazaar* too but the line I most identify with is 'I sought trains; I found passengers.' I can imagine the author's infinitesimal shudder as he wrote this and it's a feeling I share with him. If I can ride an empty train, it will be a different thing. Then perhaps, I can begin to capture the fascination it holds for Li Lian and make it mine as well.

The train moved slowly out the station, like some giant grey caterpillar. For some inexplicable reason, I felt sorry for the people clustered on the platform. They seemed to be looking longingly at the departing train and I expected some of them to jump on at the last minute, shouting, "To hell with it! I'm going too!"

Some people like to say their goodbyes on the platform, preferring to remain dignified to the end. Others persist in hanging on to doors and windows to pass on last minute messages to loved ones on the other end. Although, with the advent of the telephone, I fail to see what can be so urgent that it can't be telephoned across with far more comfort. Still, this is one of the things that makes us human. Our deep and sincere dependence on word passed from mouth to mouth. Spittle-coated words that have travelled the distance.

The train gathered momentum and increased speed as it took a curve that led it out of the station. The Kompleks Tun Abdul Razak to my left and the Lumba Kuda flats on the right. The weather outside was in that undecided stage,

whether to remain sunny or switch to rain. Wind blew against my face and I shut my eyes for a moment.

I was lucky to get a window seat and one which was far enough from the toilets. The woman beside me was already fidgeting. Automatically, and although we were barely out of the station, she began to unwrap a sodden sandwich that smelled suspiciously of sardine. There's always at least one on board. The one who waits only until the train leaves the station before ripping open a bag of potato chips or as in this case, a sticky, pungent sandwich. I watched as she tried to balance the food in one hand and a magazine in the other. Scraps of bread and sardine dotted her black skirt like a kindergarten child's art offering.

There was nothing to do, now that the train was on its way, except think of Li Lian. And the letters that she had written to me, now lying folded in my bag. Read and re-read until I almost knew them by heart now. She wouldn't have minded all this. She wouldn't have eaten while on the train for she could not bear to have anything deflect her from the sheer pleasure of being in one, but she wouldn't have minded my neighbour's compulsion to eat and keep eating. She is, I have always felt, kinder than me and more tolerant of the failings of others. No, she would not have cared about the fallen scraps, nor the screaming baby from across the aisle. Or the stench of sweat and that underlying odour that I could not place.

It was this odd difference about Li Lian that had worried my mother. My mother, who kept her social circle tight and was very careful about who could and could not be admitted into that circle. My mother, who had married slightly below her station, and who was desperate to push herself and her husband back into the station that she had left. While Singapore was pushing their "Two is enough" campaign, it was the height of fashion to stop at one. So, in spite of my father's half-hearted hints at trying for another child, she determinedly stopped him at one.

I was, therefore, an only child. Used to private rooms and the sound of my own voice. Demanding attention and getting it. I have never experienced the irritation of finding a sister's leg on mine in the middle of the night. Nor the exasperation of having to share favourite toys and foods with one who shared my blood. Though I was frequently lonely, in a deep, secret place, I was also pleased. There would never be anyone else to compete with me for my parents' affection. But selfishness was not a failing I associated with myself. It was always other children who were selfish. Children with siblings to get selfish about.

It shocked me then, to find out that there were people like Li Lian who not only had to share whatever they received, little as that was, but that they had to do it with good grace. Selfless, awkward Li Lian who never knew the right things to say and whose innate honesty precluded sycophancy. If she had tried sucking up, she might have had more success in school.

Little surprise then, that the teachers in school didn't like Li Lian. It's no use trying to convince me that teachers don't favour certain students or that they treat all their charges the same way. It simply is not true. They're only human themselves and why should they like a particularly beastly child just because her mother was a teacher in the same school or because her father made large donations every year? Because munificence is required of teachers, nurses and welfare workers?

Li Lian reminded the teachers in school of the child that could have been theirs but thankfully, was not. There but for the grace of God and all that. A child who puzzled her teachers and alienated her peers. A child who didn't have to be, but who painfully was.

When we first became friends, my father asked me what she was like. He was curious and pleased too. She was the first real friend that I had made and it was obvious to

him that she had made a deep impression on me. What was she like? Like the spikes on a porcupine. Like a raindrop at the tip of a leaf. Like a smooth pebble from the sea bed. Like no one else I have ever known or am ever likely to know.

My earliest memory of her has her placed across the train tracks that separated her world from mine. We studied at the same school but once we went home, our tracks parted. The train I detested and the train she loved were one and the same. It passed in front of the block of flats where I lived in reasonable comfort and behind the railway quarters where she lived in relative squalor.

Li Lian and I had our first, really bitter argument when we were both eighteen, in the year 1982. Whether we made it to sixth form and more schooling depended on our SPM results that had just been announced; results that surprised both of us. I had done better than I expected and she had done worse. I was set on the road to Further Studies and Stability. And Mediocrity. But Li Lian wanted to soar and leave Studying behind. To take the train for as far as it would take her, even if it took her years to complete her journey.

"What if there are no trains at some point?" I had wanted to know.

"There are always trains," she replied dreamily. "Everywhere you go. They link the most exciting cities in the world!"

Her eyes were sparkling but her idea of an exciting city was not Paris or London or Geneva. She was only interested in the colourful and the exotic. Ankara, Calcutta, Leningrad. I could only wonder about proper toilet facilities which made her angry.

"Is that all you can think of? How can you think about mundane things like toilets when I'm talking about Turkey and India? Don't you long to see the world?"

"I do but I'm thinking about the things you've obviously forgotten. What about money?"

She shrugged. "I thought we might work along the way. Do odd jobs and make enough money for food and travel costs. I read a book two weeks ago about two women who did just that. They were only slightly older than us."

"And they didn't get raped or anything on the way?"

She laughed. "Beech!"

She had begun to call me Beech when we were about fifteen and although it appalled my mother and made me slightly embarrassed when she used it in public, I secretly liked it.

"Raped? That only happens in old Chinese and Indian movies. Girls don't get raped nowadays. It's more fashionable to go to them willingly."

"No thank you!"

"I'm joking. Come on, Beech, think about it. It won't be as much fun if I go alone. We'll enjoy it so much and think of how much our minds could be broadened by the travelling!"

It was an enticing prospect, of course. Who doesn't want to travel the world and see all those places that you only read about in books and travel magazines? To actually pick up a snowball or a handful of desert sand? To eat strange foods in faraway lands with unusual customs and beliefs? To sleep under the stars on the slopes of the monumental Everest?

My reluctance to drop all caution and run away with her had nothing to do with my lack of imagination or thirst for adventure. There was just this small lump inside me that cried for prudence. Anchored firmly to the ground, my feet refused to allow me to fly with her. I was still young, no doubt, but a big, rational part of me felt the need to lay down a foundation of some kind first.

Even if running away was not something that I could do, I understood very well why that might have been the answer for Li Lian. Life in her uncle's house was suffocating.

She and her sisters were squeezed into an oppressive little corner with barely enough room to breathe. For her, there were not going to be an opportunity to study further; no open doors leading to stairways that went as high as she hoped. Only your parents can open doors like that for you, the way mine had.

All Li Lian had was a future that looked as bleak as her past. No comforting mediocrity even, to disappear into, the way her sisters had. Reassuring little machine operating jobs in Singapore factories that swallowed girls like them every month like a big, yawning mouth. Every month, her sisters paid their uncle his share and saved the balance faithfully, dreaming of a day when they would move into a house of their own. Never expecting more; never dreaming there would ever be more. Their past had taught them not to expect, just receive whatever was handed out.

Realising that Li Lian would never be happy in a factory, her uncle offered to pay for a secretarial course.

"That's great, isn't it?" I asked her when she told me.

"Yes, I suppose it is."

"You don't sound very happy."

"No, it's hard to be happy when you've just watched your dreams shatter into a million pieces."

"Li Lian, you're being silly. When you've saved enough of your pay, you can travel in comfort. All over the world if you want. You have no other commitments, after all, and no one to question your movements."

She smiled faintly. "Travel in comfort? Fly from London to Rome you mean? Shop in Paris? Lean back in a gondola and glide through Venice?"

"You make it sound cheap and ..."

"Trite? That's because it is, Beech, that's because it is. If that's the kind of travel I have to do, I would rather not do it. I thought you, of all people, would understand why."

I shook my head, obviously not as close to her as I thought I was.

"I don't understand, Li Lian. If I had to travel, that's how I'd do it."

I was angry with what I assumed was her smugness. She smiled sadly.

"I'm sorry. Didn't mean to put down your own dreams. It's obvious to me now that you and I will never travel together."

From that moment on, I sensed her withdrawal. Slow, yet discernible. Discomfort and awkwardness creeping in to sit over our bond with determination. Two years passed without our meeting each other more than five or six times. Both of us cited exams and were grateful to put the telephone down on our uncomfortable conversations that were becoming more and more short.

My mother saw me moping about one day and demanded to know what was wrong. I had just received confirmation that I had been accepted to do a Bachelor of Arts degree at the National University of Singapore and she was more excited by this than I was. My sullen mood therefore jarred with hers. When I told her about the widening gap between Li Lian and me, I saw her relief clearly. Lifting the frown from her brow and turning up the corners of her mouth.

"School friendships rarely grow into adult friendships, Bee Chin. I ought to know."

I looked at her still youthful face and could almost see the teenager she would have been. She had the sort of face that manages to age without actually looking old. A spare face with good bone structure that masks the ageing process. I was a lot like her in appearance with the same short stature and bone structure.

It is, however, my father who's really responsible for the person I've grown up to be. My peculiar way of thinking and mulish opinions are his and so is my passion for the things that I believe in. I can never be lukewarm about important