

The Phareng

I think of the Phareng everyday. I think of his white skin and his cheeks that would turn something between pink and red whenever Mei-Duh lit the third fire.

I think of his scent, his hair, and his promises. He smelt of pine trees and foreign made Indian liquor, and his hair was thinning, curly and golden. I'd only seen golden hair on television. The people with golden hair on television seemed otherworldly with their white skin and their whiter teeth. My hair is black, my skin brown, and my teeth are something between-dark-and-light yellow.

There's nothing that I can do about my skin and dyeing my hair a different colour is above and beyond the less-than-agreed-upon wages that Mei-Duh pays me. I have noticed a pattern. A few days before the end of every month, Mei-Duh and her eldest son do one of these three things:

1. Mei-Duh shows me a copy of the electricity bill and claims that I and my TV-watching ways are responsible for the hike.
2. Her son and his friends use the cups that I wash and put away after closing hours to drink their liquor from and any missing cup is blamed on my carelessness.
3. Mei-Duh and her son speak loudly about a relative of theirs whom they wish they could employ in their 'Khasi Sha & Ja' shop instead.

I say nothing when Mei-Duh or her son hands me my salary. It's always in an envelope, and when I count it in their absence, I do a little dance when it's in the correct amount. I count my salary and blessings anywhere I can.

The whitening of my teeth, however, I can do a lot about. I brush four times a day on the advice of an older friend. I rub them vociferously with

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turmeric on the advice of a regular customer who eats his all of his meals in the shop and watches an evening episode of my favourite show with me.

“But wouldn’t turmeric only make my teeth more yellow than they already are?”

“At first, yes.”

“So why would I rub it on my teeth?” I countered. “The goal is to turn them white, Bah-Rit, not another shade of yellow.”

“They will turn white,” Bah-Rit assured.

“How long might that process take?”

“Sooner rather than later.”

I am fond of Bah-Rit and the clichés that make up much of the way he converses with people.

It was a different kind of rainy weather when he walked in. Our collective heads turned and there was exclamations in excited and hushed tones.

“U Sahep, peit!” A white man, look!

“U rung u Phareng!” A foreigner walked in!

The Phareng walked up to the counter and asked for a towel. I looked at Mei-Duh and she at me. He spoke English and it sounded exactly way the people on TV spoke. Between my awkwardness and Mei-Duh’s staring, we did not give what he asked for.

He asked again and Mei-Duh said that we didn’t have any towels to give away to strangers. Mei-Duh can answer in English with a confidence that I don’t have. She lived and worked in the capital city for twenty or so years before taking over the reins of the shop from an ailing aunt who had since

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passed away. In the city she worked in a government office and served tea, Khasi cakes made of rice, and English-style plum cakes and biscuits that were too sweet to overpaid government servants who used the majority of their working hours to gossip, lose important files and documents, and forget deadlines. Mei-Duh learnt to speak English and Hindi, both broken, and I wish to be able to do the same soon.

The Phareng smiled with a smidge of annoyance. Bah-Rit gave him his handkerchief and the Phareng wiped his face, rinsed it, wiped his hair, and rinsed it again.

“Ai ja bad sha sieh ia i, sngewbha.” Bah-Rit asked us to give the Phareng rice and tea. Ja is rice in the Khasi language and Ja is lunch or dinner. Ja is rice and meat and vegetables and fermented fish chutney. And Sha is tea. With and without milk. The latter preferred by people like me for the obvious. It quenches one’s thirst without adding rupees to my weekly budget.

“But, Bah Bit, he’s not ordered anything,” Mei-Duh replied.

“Do you want to eat rice and drink tea?” I said to the Phareng in Khasi and pointed to the counter.

For Ja there was white mainland-India rice, red locally cultivated Khasi rice, dark-yellow rice cooked in chicken blood, beef stew, burnt pork, pork cooked with sesame seeds, gravy and oily chicken, fried fish, potatoes cooked in refined oil, potatoes cooked in unrefined oil, cucumbers, tomatoes, and a diverse offering of fermented fish chutney.

For Sha, there were rice cakes of diverse texture, taste and colour. And of course, your choice of tea with milk or without.

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The Phareng choose white mainland-India rice, gravy and oily chicken, and tomatoes.

I and the entirety of the 'Khasi Sha & Ja' shop fixed our gaze on this exotic gentleman who asked for seconds and then another. He drank two cups of tea. The first with milk and the second without. He and Bah-Rit engaged in (some?)what boisterous conversation and Bah-Rit loved the attention his conversation skills in the English language garnered from the rest of us.

Everyday after that for the next week, the Phareng ate his lunch and dinner in our shop. I served him all of his meals and tea.

"How are you doing today, my love?" was his greeting.

The nods and self-conscious giggling soon turned into "Good, yes". The confidence I gained was liberating. I take pride in the small steps I am able to make, in the ounces of progress that I am able to witness.

The Phareng taught me to say a number of things with conviction and belief.

"I am doing very well, thank you."

"I live in Sohra and I manage a rice and tea shop."

"My name is Phibaker and I am 18 years old."

"I want to go to the United States of America."

"My son is two years old and I love him very much."

I practised these and some other terms with a dedication that I wish I'd given my studies. I practised these with an optimism that I wish for my son. I practised these because I believed in the Phareng and all that he taught and

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told me. I asked him about his country and the places he'd visited. I asked him about his family and the work that he did.

He was born and brought up in the United States of America and left school at sixteen to travel across the country. He worked odd jobs everywhere. As a cleaner in a motel owned by immigrants from the opposite end of this country. As a waiter in a fast-food restaurant. As a drug dealer where he made more money in three months than most people with regular jobs did in two or three years.

I was fascinated by his stories of America and his past. That he lived in a country where you could travel the length and breadth of it, and make money doing anything you wanted was fascinating and as true as the shows I watched on television.

He was the eldest of three children to parents who loved Jesus, guns and freedom, in that order.

"Why did you leave your family?" I asked.

"I wanted to see world," the Phareng said. "And when I left, I left everything behind, Jesus, guns, and freedom, in no particular order."

But four years and a few months after he'd left home in search of debauchery and another kind of freedom, he re-discovered Jesus and guns. A drug deal in a fast food restaurant had gone awry and the Phareng was shot at. When he awoke from a 48-hour surgery, the doctor who operated on him told him he'd survived three bullets to the chest and abdomen. A fraction of an inch either way or paramedics arriving a couple of minutes later, and he would

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have died. When he went back home, his mother welcomed him back and never mentioned his leaving. She forgave and forgot.

“What about your father?”

“He had passed away while I was gone and my mother did not have an address or phone number to write or call.”

The progression to preacher was only natural. His mother and other members of the church carved out a plan. The Phareng would study in a seminary and on the completion of his course, would undertake a year-long missionary project in a developing country. The Phareng chose Northeast Tribal India.

The Phareng ate a different meal everyday. If lunch was red locally-cultivated Khasi with beef stew and cucumbers, dinner would be dark-yellow rice cooked in chicken blood with burnt pork or pork cooked with sesame seeds. On a number of occasions after closing hours, the Phareng, Bah-Rit and Mei-Duh’s son drank locally-brewed rice beer. Neither Bah-Rit or Mei-Duh’s son overdrank for fear of embarrassing themselves in front of the Phareng. A man whose approval we all sought for no other reason than the exoticness of his skin colour.

The Phareng spent three months with us and not a day goes by where his name, a thing he did and said, an anecdote he told is not retold. Each day a thing he did and said, an anecdote he told is retold with features removed and/or added. Each day a thing he did and said, an anecdote he told moves further from what the Phareng actually was.

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When he said that he wanted to meet my son, I recoiled for fear of the Phareng seeing the condition of my two-room house. In the safe space and comfort of where I work and serve people food, I could live in my tiny fantasy. In the warmth of the three fires that cook food everyday from seven to seven, I could lose myself in my TV shows and the lives of others. In the aroma of Mei-Duh's 'Khasi Sha & Ja' shop, I could stay fascinated in the life and story of the Phareng.

But he persisted and I said yes. No sooner had I finished closing the shop than I rushed to my mother's to pick up my son and cook for the Phareng.

When I opened the door, the attention of every house in my vicinity was on the white man at my front door. In my love for clichés I wished the earth would have swallowed me right there and then.

The Phareng brought gifts for my son who fell asleep as soon as I finished breastfeeding him.

It delighted the Phareng when I served him roasted chicken with bread I toasted and boiled vegetables. I called it a Ja Phareng. He did not want any Sha.

Two months and three weeks after he left without a goodbye or a warning, without a phone number or address, I cried. I did not need to go to the doctor's clinic. I did not need my mother to tell me so. Bah-Rit and the regulars at the shop remarked on a glow my face had assumed. They complimented the sparkle in my demeanour. And I craved the food that the Phareng loved.

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I did try. I searched for clues, for things that he left behind. I went to the church and asked about the Phareng. The church leaders had no relevant information to pass on. I spoke to the landlord of the house he rented. I spoke to his neighbours. They could not tell me anything that I did not already know.

My mother was helpful and non-judgmental. Bah-Rit and the regulars at the shop as well. And to my surprise, Mei-Duh and her son, too. They let me take days off and did not skim off the top and bottom of subsequent salaries.

It was a Sunday when I held her for the first time. She was beautiful and my mother said that she looked like me when I was born. Her hair wasn't as white as her father's and her little bit of hair wasn't as golden, either. She was perfect.

The hospital was a shared room and I awoke from a round of sleep to the sounds on the television that the patient in the bed beside mine had settled on. I recognised the show. It was a park overlooking a magical bridge and neat and colourful houses. A father and mother were holding their young daughter and the father promised his wife and daughter that he would always be there for them. The day before he left without a goodbye or warning, the Phareng promised the same.

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