

Sunday, February 25, 2007

2007.01.18: My Grandmother - Completing the Story

January 16th through 30th of 2007 was supposed to be a retreat from the daily rigors of being a fashion/glamour photographer . . . you know, things like shooting beautiful, barely-clothed women and other similar annoyances that would plague any heterosexual guy. While I did have some shoots and administrative stuff booked, this entry, along with the few that follow this entry, will discuss subject matter that varies greatly from what I normally write about and what I normally shoot. My father's mother passed away the end of last year. Apparently my father saw a psychic reader that told him that his late mother was "doing okay" and to take his time bringing her ashes back to Malaysia. She also suggested that I accompany my father thus the family mandate for me to leave work in Edmonton for two weeks. We depart Edmonton on January 16th and arrive about midnight, the start of January 18th in Penang via Kuala Lumpur and, before that, Narita/Tokyo, Japan. Upon our arrival, we visited my grandmother's (and father's) old home in Penang which, when it was their primary home, was a well-known boarding house. #27 Goddib Road is now Carlsberg Beer's distribution office for the region though the building is now owned by my uncle in Toronto. At 7am we would make a trip to Sangai Patani, crossing Penang Bridge which connects the island of Penang to mainland Malaysia to visit my grandmother's birth place. It was my grandmother's final wish to visit the place where she was born and grew up. We carried her ashes to her old home. As the story goes, my grandmother and her siblings found a black pearl on the banks of this river. The pearl would change hues with the tides. A trader had once offered 60,000 ringgits over fifty years ago for this pearl and my grandmother's father refused the offer. At this point, the story diverges and develops two different versions. The first version is that while on his death bed, my grandmother's father realized the risk to harmony between his children and took the pearl and swallowed it. The second version is that the siblings gave their father the pearl and requested that he put it in his mouth as such pearls are believed by the locals to have some sorts of healing powers. Shortly after giving their father the pearl, their father was believed to have accidentally swallowed it and it is also believed that traces of the pearl may be in his burial urn. This bridge spanned the banks of this river. My grandmother's two sisters reminisced about how they remembered the bridge being so big and grand. I doubt that the width of the bridge is much more than six feet. Many of the boards have rotted through and with some effort one may be able to find a way to fall through the bridge and into the river. Here's a better view of the river as it crosses under the bridge. Many of the trees along the banks of this river have been cut down for fuel allowing for erosion caused by the torrential rains of South East Asia to wash a lot of the soil from the banks into the river, making it very cloudy. There are now some Malays living in the old house. The house has been upgraded from wood to brick. We left Sunai Patani and after about an hour and a half of driving arrive at the Buddhist burial temple. Behind the temple we see Penang Hill. The hill is almost like a mini mountain range that divides the island of Penang. One of the temple's caretakers arranges some of the items within my grandfather's and grandmother's "plot". A soothing wind blew gently through the area the entire time we were there. The view when you look up from where my grandparents' ashes are kept. Light streams into the temple above the balcony across from my grandparents' burial plot. At the end of the day, the main burial process is complete but we revisit the temple some time after to complete a prayer ritual and to request a blessing.

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