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Brown Paper Package

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ELITA SURATMAN

BROWN PAPER PACKAGE

- *Runner-Up: Big Sky, Small Prose Flash Contest* -

EVERY YEAR AN oversized parcel arrives at my doorstep. The white twine, once girdled tight around its bulk, is slack and sluggish from the long journey. The kraft paper wrapping desecrated with postal markings to officiate its passage from Singapore.

Every year, this package signals the month of Ramadan, when strict fasting is observed by Muslims from dawn to dusk, a tenet I had long transgressed since moving to the U.S.

Every year, this brown paper package reminds me of the life I chose to leave.

With the flick of a knife, I would unwrap my father's annual care package, arranging its contents around me on the kitchen floor, one by one, like jigsaw pieces to a puzzle I used to know. Festive cookies separated by parchment in see-through containers. Malay spice packets, rubber-banded together like flat hour-glass bundles of instant culinary gratification. *Kek lapis*, a multi-layer spice cake, nestled in its glossy, heavyweight box.

Ever so often, this traveling delegation suffers a casualty. Once, the brittle *kueh bangkit*, a cookie made of tapioca flour and icing sugar, was pulverized

during its travels, coating its companions with a dusting of white powder. On another occasion, the short crust pastry of the pineapple tarts had crumbled into a million buttery pieces, rendering its sweet fruit centers in jeopardy.

Yet these casualties are no fault of the cookies. A pilgrimage from Singapore to the U.S. was never their original intent. Handmade from recipes passed down through generations, these cookies were baked to adorn coffee tables during Hari Raya, a day of celebration after the month of fasting.

They represent bite-size symbols of reward for Muslims and their dedication to Allah throughout Ramadan. They are meant to be delicate. Elegant. Earned.

Instead, every year in their unceremonious travel plastic containers, these cookies end up on my cold, linoleum floor, expected to recreate the holiday exuberance in the quiet meagerness of my college dorm. My apartment. My house.

The far away world I now live in.

I display the cookies on plates lined with paper doilies. And serve them to friends. Family. Sometimes with a cup of hot sweetened tea, like they do back home. Sometimes, with iced soda in a tall glass. But always with a side of stories from my childhood.

Stories I retell every year. Repeating. Retaining. So my body might think it remembers. Like playing the piano. Like riding a bike.

And, for good measure, I scrutinize the pictures on the spice packets each year, looking for something new. Studying the Malay words on the crumpled newsprint stuffed in between the contents of the box. Scanning for stray information as if eavesdropping to uncover new secrets I can keep.

Because after the novelty of sharing with friends and family, after every perishable cookie is eaten, after Hari Raya is long over, there is this. Lining the back wall of my pantry, behind the Del Monte's and San Marzano's, are boxes and boxes of vacuum-sealed *lapis* from years past. On their sides. Unopened. On the floor of the pantry buried in an army-green plastic bin, a horde of spice packets. A secret stash long past their expiration.

This is my private cultural cache, stockpiled to replenish what has begun to disintegrate. A million tiny pieces. From a journey not meant for the ordinary. So in an emergency, I could break open the vacuum seal preserving the spice cake and release the cinnamon, cardamom and cloves of my birthright. Like an elixir, I could inhale this magic.

And, for a moment, I could believe I remember the taste of who I was.