

## BETTER RED THAN BLUE

by

RENA GRAHAM

A month after I return from Singapore, my friend Ginene and I are slumped in her car in the rain. We're lined up to board a ferry that will glide across Puget Sound from Seattle and take us to a very different island. Bainbridge, roughly ten percent the size of Singapore, appears in front of us through silvery mist. The gentle berm of green, sandwiched between the grey palette of water and sky is dark and dense in a way that tells me anything with color will be trapped underground for months.

Since coming back, I've felt something missing from my world and can't figure out what it is. It's left me with an itch and a sadness that occupies land somewhere between irritability and melancholy.

I anticipated what I would miss even before leaving. Socially, luck had been with me in Singapore, and I made close friends I will treasure forever, regardless of the geography between us. Long weekends in Indonesia and Christmas holidays in Thailand; they are missed. As is my apartment, traditionally styled so the breeze blows in one side and out the other, dragging orange-sherbet petals of bougainvillea along the white tiled floors. I miss the smells of the tropics, so rich and verdant—birth and decay. Afternoon rains that drench me to my underwear before I can find cover. Waiting until the heat of the day dissipates to sit outside and eat *laksa*, chili crab or *nasi lemak*. Even the sound of the sing-song “Singlish” spoken by so many. All those things I was right about missing. But there is something more.

How had Singapore seeped so deeply into my consciousness? I'd only lived there for two years when my job ended and hiring came to a standstill. Without a work permit, it was impossible to stay. This is the gamble expats make in uprooting themselves for adventure in Asia. You can find yourself addicted to surprising aspects of life there and suddenly be forced into withdrawal.

A professional designer in my early forties, I am guilty of falling in love with exotic locales. I had made Singapore home in the same way I make each new place home. But the deadline for shipping goods and purchasing airfare forced me towards new commitment. I considered throwing a dart at a map to make my decision on where to go next but then Ginene called, begging me to come

back to the Pacific Northwest, a land she's connected to, in all the ways I am not.

My gaze turns away from the window to meet hers. "I had a dream last night." Ginene tilts her head towards me and I continue. "I was trapped in an Eddie Bauer clearance outlet, engulfed by discouraging shades of brown, dismal shades of green and more navy blue than anyone should have to suffer. I was a rare plant of some type being plowed under by piles of dreary fabric. Fear of suffocation woke me up."

"Yeah," she said, "winter can feel like that here."

Then it hits me.

"Oh my God, Ginene! I miss red!" My emotions collide into a fit of jagged laughter and tamped down tears. How could I have missed the fact that this is what I miss? Her head jerks slightly, a tentative smile working its way across her face. "I feel like I'm half alive without it. Or half dead. Red dead. Red dread. Red... fled."

She lays her hand on my arm but I can't feel her touch through the layers of quilted coat and sweater. Struggling against her own confining rain jacket and gloves, she fishes out a tissue and tells me she's never seen me cry before.

I wipe my eyes, blow out a huge sigh of relief and turn back towards the glass and write RED in the condensation. A veil between the two of us and the outside world.

"Tell me about red." Ginene's dark curls frame her winter-white complexion and her smile blooms into a rose of wonder.

"Lanterns." I wipe my eyes and swivel in my seat. "You just wouldn't believe the lanterns. They're everywhere! And you never see one without seeing a hundred. They're like rows of cherries hanging from the sky. And temples! Chinese temples, where every surface is red, as if they've been dunked, rather than painted. And flowers—so many flowers. Red orchids, roses, cockscombs and daisies. Periwinkles, petunias and violets. And crazy looking things like red ginger and those oddly phallic anthurium."

Ginene laughs. "It sounds beautiful." A large white boat is slowly making its way towards the dock. "What else?" Her voice startles me out of my memories. "What else is red?"

"Signage, banners, the national flag. Red envelopes stuffed with money for Chinese New Year. And festivals! From dragon boat races to food and music and art events. Brides who still wear lavish red outfits for traditional Chinese and Indian weddings. From across a park, they look like red hibiscus flowers upended on the grass. That's my favorite flower of all. And occasionally, you'll see Chinese funerals with red caskets."

"Blood red. The color of life itself. I see why you miss it."

"There are red tile roofs on the old buildings. Hawker stalls and street dining decked out with red plastic tables and chairs. Shanks of dried meat hanging in Chinatown windows. At first I thought they were firecrackers." It feels good to laugh.

Throughout most of the Western world, red is associated with danger, passion, anger and even sacrifice but in many Asian countries, it's the color of happiness. As the Chinese national color, it also represents beauty, success and good fortune. Their philosophy relates it to fire, one of the five elements. The other elements of metal, wood, water and earth surround me in the Pacific Northwest but the fire element, the color red, does not.

Ginene cranks up the car and turns the heat on high. We creep along the route into the maw of the great white ferry. One of the first cars to settle itself, we jump out and race up to the cafeteria. Hungry from shivering and happy for the steam heat of the kitchen, we order platters of salmon burgers and fries. Tall cups of strong, black coffee. After sliding our trays onto the patterned Formica tabletops, we strip off our extra layers and slip in to the attached seats.

I raise the salmon burger to my lips. The smell makes my stomach jump in anticipation and

once I've swallowed my first bite, I set it down and take a quick slurp of coffee.

“Oh my God, that's good.”

Ginene wipes her mouth, returns a radiant smile and says, “Better fed than red?”

“Better red than blue.”