

Market

Liew Suet Fun

This morning, I went to the market. My weekly habit. I relish meandering through the entire street where makeshift stalls find home. I always leave by seven, just before light because I love the coolness and the quietness of the streets on Sunday mornings. I also love the way the first morning light filters through into the market, tiny rays that reach in between the tall trees, between the large old umbrellas that shelter the stalls. I start my short sojourn at the entrance of the market in the lifting darkness and know that when I return to that same point later, it will be bathed in light and life would have taken a busier turn. By then, the crowd will also have grown in earnest proportion.

I often frequent the same stalls although the offerings are almost always similar. Vibrant green leafy vegetables piled high, nestled next to carrots, chillies, eggplants and every imaginable form of gourd and root vegetable. They bring freshness and colour to the eye. Raw meat is less palatable. Pale de-feathered chickens lie limp and close together. The thigh of a pig ending in its trotters stares you in the eye. Seafood of every variety lie in wait to be caught again. Sometimes, the lone fish struggles amidst his departed companions. It is as fresh as your heart desires.

Each hawker courts you in a different way. Some affect great familiarity, calling you sister or aunty. Some extend respect calling you lady boss. Some are curt and indifferent. I look for friendliness without the familiarity. I prefer a straightforward approach over an obsequious one. I expect no favours, neither fondness, only fair play. But sometimes, I must confess I deign to defer my preferences or play the fool for the sake of a fine fish or a sprig of elusive herb. The necessity of compromise.

The noise grows with the light too. As the shoppers begin to crowd the narrow lane that passes in between the stalls, the voices rise higher and higher. Women walking around with a concentrated look on their faces, bargain unendingly. Men sometimes are seen with the shopping baskets, but often move briskly and buy quickly, and rarely pursue this battle of wits. Then, there are others. The designated drivers who stand around on the edges, leaning against a car smoking a cigarette, drinking a cup of coffee or just waiting at a corner while someone else trundles through the narrow lane on their behalf. Patience is their virtue.

This morning, I bought fruits and vegetables. The luscious dragonfruit. The fleshy red jambu. The short purple eggplants that will be stirfried with fresh basil and soya bean paste. The yam that will

be sliced and stewed in five spices. And then I bought two flour sticks—yew char kueh—fried to a crisp. They will be eaten with a mug of steaming black coffee, the perfect Sunday morning breakfast.