

(A Modern Woman Called) ANG TAU MUI¹

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I) Letters to a Movie Queen

Dear Lin Dai,

You don't know me but I know you. My name is Ang Tau Mui and I am 12 years old. My father is a blacksmith and my mother is a housewife. I have 4 brothers and 5 sisters. I live in Malaysia, in Malacca, in Kappan Road, house number 18. I am studying in a Chinese primary school. I like to see movies, especially your movies. I have seen all your movies and I like them very much even though they make me cry. You are so beautiful. I think you are the best actress in the world. The movie people should give you an award for every movie you have acted in....

Dear Lin Dai,

I think you are the most lucky person in the world. You have everything you want. One day I will get money and go to Hongkong to see you. Can I stay with you?

Dear Lin Dai,

Why you never reply to my letters? I have written I don't know how many times to you already. I know you are very busy. But please write to me. Please send me a picture of yourself and please sign it. I want to show my friends your picture...

Dear Lin Dai,

Did you get the picture of myself which I sent to you last month? It was a picture of me sitting under a tree holding an umbrella. It was a very hot day and I was sweating. My friend's uncle took the picture. He bought me ice-cream and took me to the cinema because it was my birthday. I look older than my age. I look like I am 17 or 18. Don't you think I look like one of your pictures in the Movie News magazine? I was in the park by the sea, near the children's playground. It is a

very beautiful park. When are you coming to visit me? I will take you there to take pictures when you come to Malacca....

Dear Lin Dai,

You look so beautiful in your wedding dress with all those silk roses sewn on it. You look like the daughter of a king. I hope your husband is a nice man. I hope he won't beat you. I hope he won't go to amusement parks and look for girls. I hope he will love you very much and take good care of you....

Dear Lin Dai,

Yesterday I bought the Movie News magazine to look at you wearing all types of *cheongsam*. You said you like to wear the *cheongsam* because it is so elegant, but it mustn't be too tight and the slits at the sides mustn't be too high. You are a pure woman. You don't show your body to men.... I am saving money to make one, even though my mother won't allow it. She says I am too young, although I am already 15. So I am telling only you my secret.

Dear Lin Dai,

I have become an actress. Not in movies like you, but on stage in the opera². Already I have been acting, sometimes as a maid and sometimes as a soldier. My make-up and costumes make me look very beautiful. As you can see from the address, I am not staying at home any more. I am now in the big city. I am now a married woman like you. And I want a baby boy and I want to become good at acting. My husband is a very good actor and when I become good at acting, I will partner him on stage. I know you are even more busy now that you have a little baby to look after. But please don't ever stop acting....

Dear Lin Dai,

Where are you now? Come and see me. I am not afraid of your ghost. Please come and see me.... I feel very sad that I couldn't help you. I am very sorry. I didn't know about your unhappiness. I understand everything now but it's too late! In your last letter you said: "Dear husband, if you should come home and find that I am still not dead, and you wish to save my life, then please send me to a private hospital. Don't let the public know. I don't want people to laugh at me should I not die. But if you should come home and find me dead, then please take care of my mother for me, she is old now, and please look after our little son. If only I knew when you are coming home...."

Dear Lin Dai,

I went to see your last movie, *The Magic Lantern*. Even though it has a happy ending, I cried and cried. I wish you had finished the movie before you died. They got Tu Tier to act your part in some scenes. But no one can take your place. You are special. You are a real movie queen. I dream about you.... I will never forget you³.... I will never forget you....

II) Ang Tau Mui Goes Shopping

On the day she died, Ang Tau Mui went shopping.

It was a Sunday and Sungai Wang Plaza in Kuala Lumpur was packed. Millions of things for sale. All kinds of colours, all kinds of shapes, all kinds of uses. All kinds of prices.

Buy! Buy! Buy!

Through the noises, smells, things and people, Ang Tau Mui went running, looking for something to buy.

Ang Tau Mui ran amongst all kinds of people: eating, drinking, becoming tired, becoming excited, becoming older by the second, decaying, digesting, coping, looking, choosing, unable to choose, buying, buying, buying....

She ran and sang in her heart:

“I want.... I want.... I want....”

Ang Tau Mui ran, once in a while, pushing someone out of her way, and looked at the millions of things on sale in the shops, once in a while, pushing someone out of her way, singing:

“I want.... I want.... I want....”

Briefcases, men's wallets, costume jewelry, smooth skin, winter clothing, silk lingerie, designer T-shirts, men's underwear and trousers, glue, car shampoo, a touch on the knee....⁴

She ran and sang in her heart of hearts:

“I want.... I want.... I want....”

At one shop, Ang Tau Mui stopped and looked at something for a long time. She touched it. She even took it up for a closer look. It was a small bottle of perfume. She did not know the brand, but she liked the shape of the bottle -- a little ball of twisted glass. And she wanted to try it to see if she liked the smell. If she liked the smell, she would buy it.

But she did not like the smell. The smell made her dizzy. She felt sick.

[Song: The Sweetest Smell]

The sweetest smell on earth
 Was the smell of my mother
 When I laid my head
 When I laid my head
 On her lap, on her lap
 The sweetest smell

When she was young, Ang Tau Mui sold red bean soup after school. That was how she earned money to buy the things her mother would not give her money to buy, and once in a while, to see movies, especially Lin Dai's movies.

At night, she did her homework. She did her homework every night. Her father and her mother wanted her to be clever. And she? She also wanted to be clever. She wanted to grow up and be different from her mother who was always tired and unhappy, always quarrelling with her father. But her friends in Kappan Road laughed at her.

[Childhood chant/song]

Oi! Oi! Ang Tau Mui
 Oi! Ang Tau Mui
 What have you done?

Oi! Oi! Ang Tau Mui
 Oi! Ang Tau Mui
 Where have you gone?

We wear flowers in our hair
 You wear grass
 We slaughter chicken for dinner
 You slaughter dogs
 We sit and drive in shiny cars
 You putt-putt in the *tong sampah*⁵

Oi! Oi!
 There is a joke
 From Kappan Road
 From Kappan Road
 The bride was married
 Without flowers in her hair!

Ang Tau Mui ran and sang in her heart of hearts:

"I want.... I want.... I want...."

Toilet brushes, curly hair, sleepy eyes, crystal glasses, clean teeth, flea collars, baby dolls, dancing cheek to cheek, children's bicycles, bread, a lively tongue, denture cream, firmness, strong fingers, hairy legs....

"I want.... I want.... I want...."

At one shop, the security guard who looked like someone's uncle, who had been keeping an eye on her, wanted to check her bag. Ang Tau Mui gave him her bag to check. He found nothing. Then he wanted to check her purse. Ang Tau Mui gave him her purse to check. He found nothing but money inside.

"Where is your identity card?"

*"It's at home."*⁶

"You know that's against the law? Every time you go out you must carry your identity card with you. If the police catch you, they will fine you one hundred ringgit."

"Why did you stop me? Do I look like a thief?"

"You look clever, you speak well, and you look like you have money. But then not all people who steal are poor or uneducated, you know. The trouble is I cannot see your mind, and when you rushed about and stopped and looked and touched and put back the things, I didn't know what you were trying to do...."

"You have no right to stop me. I have done nothing wrong."

"Ah, I couldn't see your mind, but I could see your behaviour...."

"But you found nothing!"

“True, true, I found nothing in your bag. But so what? It proves nothing. Maybe I should have waited a little longer. Who knows what you would have done then? It’s always hard to decide when to move in in a situation like that.”

“You are not a policeman. You have no right to check me for my IC.”

“Let me tell you the truth. I think you are not a normal woman, giving me your purse just like that. Most people would have protested. It’s some thing very intimate after all. A woman’s purse. And I am a man. A stranger to you. But you didn’t mind. You knew I was looking for your identity card – which I have no right to, I know, I am only a security guard. But you allowed me to look. You know what I mean?”

“Who are you?”

“What’s your name?”

“Where do you live?”

“Are you married?”

“At least tell me where you work.”

“I clean toilets at the Batu Complex.”

“A toilet cleaner? You don’t look like one at all. You look like.... oh, I don’t know.... After all, you don’t have to tell me the truth.... What are you doing here?”

“I am looking for something to buy.”

“Then how come you haven’t bought anything?”

“I can’t find anything I like.”

“Look at all the people here. They are all looking for things to buy and they are buying them. Why can’t you be like them? After all, shopping is a very easy thing.”

[Song: Dream⁷]

People say life is like a dream
 I say a dream is like life
 You feel happy
 You celebrate a moment
 A moment later
 You're grieving, you're all alone....

High-heeled shoes, hurricanes, slippers, raincoats, Mercedes Benz, contorted dreams, panadol, pillow cases, four quick kisses, curry powder, a knock on the door, KY jelly...

[Song: Dream, continues]

The emperor's glory
 The beggar's misery
 Snow on the hilltops
 Treasures in the deep seas
 When you awake from dreaming
 Your moment in life is over....

Green lights, monsoon rain, air bubbles, two rainbows, strong winds, flapping wings, dreams of flying, diving, drowning, newspapers, a gold ring, pink and purple gauze, shouting, laughter, a sprig of white silk flowers, a blunt knife, houses on fire....

Ang Tau Mui ran to all the shops in Sungai Wang Plaza, she ran to all the shops in Jalan Bukit Bintang. She ran to Petaling Street but there was also nothing she wanted to buy. She tried the shops in other places – she ran to Cheras, she ran to Kajang, to Seremban, to Mantin, Tampin, Alor Gajah, Malacca town, and there, in front of their shop house in Kappan Road she saw her father striking a red hot piece of iron with a heavy hammer.

He was working hard to tame the iron, to beat it flat and thin enough to be turned into a *parang*⁸. At each blow of his hammer, red sparks jumped out of the iron and sweat poured down his face and back.

At the back of the shop house, her mother sat on a low stool washing her father's clothes. She scrubbed carefully to remove the dirt from his shirts, singlets, trousers and underwear. After they were clean, she used the same water to wash her own clothes.

“I want.... I want.... I want....”

Money, dreams, restless sleep, bananas, sweet-sour smells, panties, black iron rings, long knotted hair, twisted journeys, boats, books, drums, milk, children's voices screaming, singing...

Ang Tau Mui ran back to Kuala Lumpur. She was very tired. She wanted to have a cup of coffee. She wanted to have a little rest....

A big man, with curly brown hair, wearing a sleeveless T-shirt, batik shorts and rubber slippers, asked if he could share her table because the other tables were all taken. He looked interesting.

[Song: Abra's Song 1]

I like your country very much
I like Penang and Kuala Lumpur too
Formerly I was from Israel
But I have been staying in Switzerland

He said he made his living smuggling silver jewelry from Thailand and selling them at Sunday markets in Switzerland. The money was good, he said.

"What is your name?"

"Ang Tau Mui."

"Ang Tau Mui? Ang Tau Mui, my name is Abraham. Friends like to call me Abra. I am on holiday here. Then I will go to Bangkok by train. You have been to Bangkok?"

"No."

"I am by myself in Bangkok. You want to join there for a holiday?"

"I don't know."

"You will like Bangkok. Everything is so cheap. Good shopping. Many men go there to buy girls, but not me."

"What do you buy?"

"I buy silver rings, earrings, necklaces, bracelets, chains, pendants, belts, you know, things like that. Cheap and light, easy to carry, easy to sell... Your hands are very beautiful."

[Song: The Perfect Stranger¹⁰]

The sun also rises
The seas are never filled
In countless day dreams
The perfect stranger...

"I am a free man. I left Israel because I was not happy there."

"The country was too small."

"I went to school for many years. Then I joined the army."

"To serve my country."

"I did many things in the army."

"Like house-cleaning."

"You know, operations against Arabs who shouldn't be there."

"It's not what you think. You should not believe everything you read and hear."

"But I was a soldier then. I had to make my country safe to live in."

[Song: Abra's Song 2]

As a soldier I had to kill
But now I am a free man of good will
I am not a heartless cavalier
Come with me to Bangkok
Do not fear....

"I want.... I want.... I want...."

On Friday nights, Ang Tau Mui did not want to study hard and be clever. On Friday nights she wanted something else. She told her mother, "I am going to study at a friend's house", but she went to the New World Amusement Park wearing pink nail polish and lipstick, a gold chain, bracelets, rings and earrings, and a pretty dress. And the sweetest of perfume.

There, it was just like a movie, so beautiful. Full of fairy lights, full of music, dancing, laughter, sweetness. People who were in love went there holding hands and whispering, and touching, and doing things that people in Kappan Road dared not do.

Ang Tau Mui sat with the men as they drank. She did not know what to say to them, so she listened to them and laughed with them. Sometimes she went into a small dark room with them, and they always gave her some money afterwards as a present. She imagined they were kings in disguise who were in love with her, but she knew they would forget about her when they left for their faraway palaces, leaving behind a poor girl with a broken heart. And even if they really loved her and really wanted to marry her, there would be no happy ending, for life was like that in Kappan Road and in Lin Dai's movies.

"I want.... I want.... I want...."

Happiness, holidays, rice porridge, friends, jokes, the pain of jealousy, dressing, undressing, fresh coconut water, broken umbrellas, kites, a flowering mango tree....

Ang Tau Mui ran to the cinema and bought a ticket, just so she could sit down for a while. There were pictures on the screen and voices talking in the dark, there was a story being told, but Ang Tau Mui could not pay attention. She closed her eyes and slept for a while. And she dreamed of children flying kites in the park by the sea. She dreamed of shining boys and girls leaping into the river from a wooden bridge, to swim in the green waters flowing into the greener sea.

[Song: Once Upon A Time]

Once upon a time
There was a garden
Unlike gardens on earth
Unlike gardens on earth

Once upon a time
Children could fly
Fly to highest heaven
Or dive into deepest sea

Once upon a time
 Pure air
 Pure water
 Ah-oo-oooo
 Ah-oo-oooo

Ang Tau Mui remembered all the people she knew who had died – her grandfather, her grandmother, her other grandfather, her other grandmother, her aunts, her uncle, her friends who died when young, and some people she did not know well.

“I want.... I want.... I want....”

Heaven, mother, life, waterfalls, whales and dolphins and jellyfish, mountains, a rock, a black furry blanket, love stories, excitement, falling off a cliff, electric shocks, tightness, lightness, sighing, sitting side by side...

Ang Tau Mui went on running. When the burning sun was about to set, she came upon a small temple built around a giant tree. She took off her shoes and went in, and felt the cold tiles under her feet. Four tall red candles were burning at the altar of the compassionate Lady Kuan Yin¹¹.

In a corner sat an old woman wearing a faded blouse and *sarong*. And she looked very old, with thin white hair, and loose flabby skin on her face and arms.

“What do you want?”

*“I don’t know.”*¹²

“Do you want to see the Old Nun?”

“No, no, I don’t want to see anybody.”

“Then what do you want?”

Wrinkles, dust, deafness, stiffness, forgetfulness, a pair of scissors, remembrances, voices whispering, a rope, pajamas, slowness, alarm clocks, spider orchids...

When she was 16, Ang Tau Mui wanted to join the opera and become an actress like Lin Dai. A special opera troupe had come to the New World Amusement Park and there was a man who always acted as the hero. He was different from the other men she knew. He was always a scholar or a prince. Every night she told her mother, "I am going to study at a friend's house", but she went to see him act. She wanted to marry him and act with him. But her father and her mother beat her when they found out, and so she ran away with him.

When she was 18, Lin Dai died. Lin Dai was desperate to die. She cut her wrists. She tried to poison herself with gas. When these would not kill her, she swallowed a lot of sleeping pills and went to sleep.

Ang Tau Mui also wanted to die like Lin Dai. But how to die like Lin Dai, the movie queen? She did not know where to buy sleeping pills. And who was going to send her flowers? Who was going to print her pictures in the newspapers and magazines? Who was going to cry for her?

A chair, a bed, a red candle, a wine cup, a white room, a cool cover, a blue dress, a long thunder, a sea of grass...

An old woman dressed in white came in and looked at Ang Tau Mui. Ang Tau Mui looked back and saw with a shock that her head and eyebrows were shaven clean. She gave Ang Tau Mui a cup of warm water to drink.

"I was out all day, looking for something to buy, but I could not find it."

*"It's all right."*³

"You don't think it strange that amongst the millions of things in this world, there is nothing I really want?"

"It's all right, it's all right."

"You don't understand. I can choose. I am not like my mother. I am a modern woman..."

"You can choose."

"Then why aren't I happy?"

"You are very tired, that's all."

"I don't know what else to do. I have no more places to run to."

"Then stop running."

"But I will go mad if I stop. I will die."

"Stop running and see what happens."

III) Ang Tau Mui Stops Running

Here I am, home at last.

One of these days I will never get home. The mini-bus drivers drive as if they want to die. If they die, I will die also. Yes, the mini-bus will crash and I will die, just like that. The end of Ang Tau Mui. Finish. End of show.

The police will come and take away my body. But when they want to find out who I am, they cannot find my identity card. There is nothing to tell them who I am. No identity card, no bank cards, no passport, nothing. Just a body without any information. They won't even know my name.

Maybe they will take a picture of my dead face and print it in the newspapers...

"Does anybody know this woman? She is dead, killed in a mini-bus accident. She is between 35 and 55 years old. A Chinese woman. In her bag is a packet of *chap fun*¹⁴. In her purse there is a lot of money, but no identity card. Nothing to say who she is. If she were alive, she would be fined one hundred *ringgit* for not carrying her identity card."

But if my body and face are all smashed up, they can't print any pictures in the newspapers – will frighten everybody.

I purposely don't carry my identity card when I go out. It is always there, in that drawer. I know who I am – I don't need an identity card to prove who I am. I was born here. My parents were also born here. They were legally married when I was born.

Anyway, my identity card is useless. I have never changed it. It's the same one which my mother took me to make when I was 12 years old. The picture shows the face of a smiling girl with a dimple in her left cheek.

I know, I know the girl is not me any more. But never mind, let the police catch me if they want, I am keeping her picture.

Anyway, when you are dead, how can the police catch you for not changing your identity card or for not carrying your identity card when you go out?

Die means die. Good bye. See you later. Take care.

But sometimes when I see a policeman I am scared he will ask me for my identity card.

"What is your name? What is your IC number?"

"My name is Ang Tau Mui. I don't know my IC number."

“Ang Tau Mui! What kind of name is that?”

“It’s what my friends called me.”

“What does it mean?”

“The girl who sells red bean soup.”

“The girl who sells red bean soup? We have been looking for an Ang Tau Mui who sold red bean soup in Kappan Road. Every Friday night she used to go to the New World Amusement Park. She was a bad girl. She ran away from home to get married.”

“That girl was not me.”

“She broke her mother’s heart. Later her mother told everyone that Ang Tau Mui had died. So Ang Tau Mui could not go back home after that.”

“That girl was not me.”

“Later she quarreled with her husband and ran away from him.”

“That girl was not me.”

“Then tell me, what is your real name? What was the name your parents gave you?”

“It was so long ago. I cannot remember.”

“You must remember!”

“I have been Ang Tau Mui for a long, long time.”

I make sure I am always well-dressed when I go out. I don’t look like the kind who will steal things. I don’t look like the kind who will hurt people. I don’t look like the kind who will kidnap babies. I don’t know how those people actually look, but I imagine I don’t look like them.

I look like... like... an auntie!

Oh!

I hate to bathe with cold water. Especially at night and more especially when it is raining. Is dying like that – bathing with cold water?

I am scared of the cold water, so I am very quick. Pour water. Quick soap, soap. Quick rinse, rinse. Very quick but very clean. Then I feel like a new woman.

Husband! Come and smell me. Ummm.... Lux! Touch me.... My skin is as soft as silk.... I am young again....

Where are the lights? We need twinkling lights. And music.... and laughter.... and talking in whispers.... Why don't you sing to me....

Go, then, go! But this time, when you come back, I won't be here any more.

You think I will die without you? There are many things I can do. I can wash dishes. I can wash clothes. I can sweep floors. I can sell things. There are many things I can do. I will not starve. You looked so beautiful even when you were dead. Your eyes were closed and there was a little smile on your red lips. You were smiling while all around you, people were wearing black clothes and sunglasses and holding handkerchiefs and crying. And flowers every where. Flowers and tears for a movie queen....

What were you dreaming about? Something nice? Someone nice? Was that why you were smiling like that?

Why did you go and die like that?

Didn't you know how much we loved you?

As if you didn't know! You broke the hearts of thousands of girls and women!

But you were loved by so many people! What did it matter if you didn't know them!

Didn't you know you would really die?

That's the problem. You had done it so many times already. That was your job. To give us dreams that were sweet and sad. Ah, a woman's life, you showed us, a woman's life was sad, if not at the beginning, then at the middle, or else at the end. Oh, it was so painful and so wonderful when it happened at the end – the end was where the pain would be the most hopeless and the most sweet....

How I mourned for you. I wanted to die too. I didn't care about mother or father or sisters or friends or husband, no one at all....

I cried and cried, and I went on living. And now I am older than you!

Ah, what to do. Life is like that, isn't it?

The landlady likes me. Because I never waste water unlike the other tenants.

"Mui," she said to me only the other day, "if only everybody is like you, no problem."

She said that only because she does not know me. She does not know me at all. She tries to find out things about me.

"How many brothers and sisters have you? How come you are not married--you are so old already. Where are your parents? Where do you go to on your Sundays

off, dressed so nicely from head to foot, with your jewelry, pink nail polish and lipstick, and sweet perfume? You go and visit friends or what?"

I tell her the truth.

They are all dead.

"Huh? Who is dead?"

All of them.

"You mean your husband is dead?"

Yes.

"You mean your children are dead?"

Yes.

"You mean your parents are dead?"

Yes.

"You mean your sisters and brothers and cousins and relatives are all dead?"

Yes.

"You mean all your friends are dead?"

Yes.

"What about you? You mean you are also...."

Yes, I mean I am also dead.

"*Aiyoh! Choi!* You mean I have a ghost living in my house! You are a joker!"

I have got nice dishes today. Come and join me! A bit cold already, but never mind.

Delicious pork! Fat pork cooked in *tau yu*¹⁵.

Wah! Look at this! The skin still got the pig's hair on it!

Ummm.... very good, very fat, very juicy.

I swear to you, pork is the nicest meat in the world! If one day I don't eat pork, I have no strength to work. I feel unhappy. People say pork is not good for health. I don't care. Follow my stomach. Eat and be happy. Tomorrow, who knows, the mini-bus will crash and I will die. What to do? Pork or no pork I will also die. So eat pork and die-*lah*.

When they cut open my stomach at the hospital, all they will see is pork! All right then, let them see what is inside me. No problem. I didn't steal the pork to eat. There is no need to feel ashamed. I have done nothing bad.

What am I talking about! Of course they will find nothing bad. How can anyone find anything bad in a dead body! They will find the usual things you can find in a cow or a pig or an elephant. Heart, lungs, stomach, womb, intestines, gall bladder, liver, pancreas, kidneys... Maybe not exactly the same, but nearly the same anyway....

[Song: Dream]

People say life is like a dream
I say a dream is like life
You feel happy
You celebrate a moment
A moment later
You're grieving, you're all alone....

So when I die, only my body is left here for people to see. They can do what they like with it. Like what they did to your body. They combed your hair and made up your face. And they painted your eyebrows the way you always wore them – like flying swords. They folded your hands like this and put flowers all around you. You looked as if you were sleeping and dreaming a good dream.

But let them do what they like. They can bury our bodies or burn them or throw them into the sea – let the fish eat our bodies – we don't care. We are not like other people who are scared about ghosts coming back to haunt them if they don't respect the dead people. We don't believe in ghosts. We are modern women.

[Song: A New World]

When I die....
I will be born again
A new body
New parents
New brothers and sisters
New everything....
New, new, new world....

Whoever I become
Starts life again
That person's got more chance
To have a happier life
That person will learn
From my mistakes
In this life....

My toilets are the cleanest in the world. The girls who work here in the shops like them very much. They have good hearts. "If only the other toilet people are like you, auntie, no problem", they tell me, and I say to them, "If only the other people who come to use my toilets are like you, also no problem."

But even though I put up many signs telling them what not to do, they still want to throw their cigarette butts into the sinks, they throw their dirty pads into the toilet bowls. They step on the toilet seats and make them dirty with their shoes. They break the locks, they break the handles, they break the hooks, the tiles. Sometimes they don't flush after shitting. And sometimes when they run out of toilet paper, they even rub shit on the toilet walls. They just don't care. And why don't they care? Because it's not their toilet!

They do things here they wouldn't dare do in public or at home. They leave behind condoms and needles, clothes and underwear, stains and smears and bad smells, blood, and vomit.... They just don't care. They want to get away as quickly as possible. Like as though nothing has happened. Why are they in such a hurry? Are they scared? Are they ashamed of what they have done? They leave it to me to clean up. They know I can't check after each of them has used the toilet. They know they can get away with it.

But so far no dead body. Yet. But one of these days, for sure one will turn up, you just wait and see. In this line of business, it cannot be avoided. It is only a matter of time.

It used to make me so angry. "Why are people so like that!" I complained to all the salesgirls when they came to use my toilets. "Why are people so like that!"

"*Aiyah*, auntie, never mind, people are like that," they said to comfort me.

That was in the beginning, when the sight and smell of other people's pee and shit and things made me feel sick. Couldn't eat anything. Only drank kopi-O.

Why are people like that! Why are people like that!

But people are like that.

So whenever I smell something bad, I stop doing whatever I happen to be doing. Even if I am talking to someone or watching the TV, I just stop. I lock the main door and I go in and clean everything inside. Then I spray every where with nice rose-smell air freshener.

When I finish, the whole place is so nice, you can put tables and chairs inside and eat your dinner there if you like. The first person who gets to use it is very lucky. It's the cleanest, best-smelling toilet in the world, until it gets dirty again and then I go in and clean it again....

Who would have thought things would turn out like this for me....

People say life is like a dream, I say a dream is like life. You feel happy, you celebrate a moment, a moment later you're grieving, you're all alone....

When you awake from dreaming, your moment in life is over.....

If the policeman asks for your real name, what are you going to do?

Your real name -- the name your mother gave you....

[Song: The Sweetest Smell]

The sweetest smell on earth

Is the smell of your mother

When you lay your head

When you lay your head

On her lap, on her lap

The sweetest smell....

IV) Ang Tau Mui Goes Home

Ang Tau Mui opened her eyes. The candles were still burning. A rooster crowed outside in the darkness.

“Is it already morning?” she said.

“No, the night hasn’t passed,” said the Old Nun.

“I had been to many places and I was with many people,” said Ang Tau Mui. “I wasn’t dreaming although it was something like that. It was like I was thinking or imagining. It was like having a very clear dream, I was awake and knew what was happening. I was in another world I had never been before, and I saw them, her, my mother, and her, and friends, people, lots of people, thousands of them, and him, my husband, my father, and some one else, and strangers, and people I knew who had died, and, and, my grandmother and my grandfather, and her, and all of them, I saw my life again, I lived my life again. Where are they now? Where have they all gone?”

“It is as you say, they’re not here. They have all gone, gone forever.”

And Ang Tau Mui said, “Ah, aaaahhhh...”

The Old Nun looked at her and said, “Ang Tau Mui, listen to me while you still have the time. Open your eyes wide and see properly. This is how it is. This is how it has always been. You have been asleep all your life and dreaming. Now is your chance to wake up. Wake up! Don’t cling to anything. Don’t try and hold onto them. Open your hands and let them go, while you go on to look for what you have always been looking for.”

Ang Tau Mui stopped crying. She looked at the Old Nun and then bowed to her. She put on her shoes and walked out of the temple. It was a long way back but she did not hurry. She walked one step at a time. She saw the moon. Dogs barked at her, and one rushed up and bit her shoes. She kicked it away. Cars passed by now and then, shaking her up, blowing hot wind and dust all over her. But they passed away, or else she left them behind. A soft wind came up and walked with her. It followed her all the way back to her landlady’s house. She had to leave it outside when she closed the front door.

Ang Tau Mui took a bath and went to bed and she did not rise again.

[Remnants of *Dream* and childhood chant/song]

The emperor’s glory....

The beggar’s misery....

Snow on the hilltops....

Treasures in the deep seas....

Oi.... oi.... Ang Tau Mui....
 Oi.... Ang Tau Mui....
 What have you done....

Oi.... oi.... Ang Tau Mui....
 Oi.... Ang Tau Mui....
 Where have you gone....

Oi.... oi.... Ang Tau Mui....
 Oi.... oi.... Ang Tau Mui....
 Oi...

THE END

Notes

¹ The text was first written in 1993 and has since been revised a number of times. It has been performed under various titles:

- * *Ang Tau Mui*
- * *Ang Tau Mui: A Modern Woman*
- * *A Modern Woman Called Ang Tau Mui*
- * *A Modern Woman*

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Performance history:

- **Feb 1994:** Workshop production, Kuala Lumpur. Director: Krishen Jit. Five Arts Centre production. Performed as a solo by the playwright.
- **July 1994:** At the Third International Women Writers Conference in Adelaide, and in Melbourne. Director: Krishen Jit. Performed as a solo by the playwright.
- **July 1995:** Singapore. Director (and solo performer): Lok Meng Chue. TheatreWorks production.
- **Nov 1995:** Kuala Lumpur. Director: Krishen Jit. Five Arts Centre production. Performed as a solo by the playwright.

- **Dec 1995:** Kuala Lumpur. Directors: Krishen Jit and Wong Hoy Cheong. Actors Studio production. Performed in English by an actor (playwright) and a woman singer singing Chinese songs (Yudi).
- **Sept 1996:** At the Cairo International Festival of Experimental Theatre in Egypt. Directors: Krishen Jit, Wong Hoy Cheong, Rosminah Tahir. National Arts Academy (Akademi Seni Negara) production Performed in English by an actor (playwright) and two singers (a man and a woman) singing Malay songs.
- **Nov 1999:** Workshop production in Kuala Lumpur, New Directors Workshop project. Director: Chee Sek Thim. Five Arts Centre and Actors Studio workshop production. Performed by a 3-member ensemble comprising two women and a man.
- **Feb 2000:** Kuala Lumpur. Director: Chee Sek Thim. Five Arts Centre production. Performed in English and some Malay by a 3-member ensemble comprising two women and a man (same cast as in the workshop production).
- **Jan 2001:** Kuala Lumpur, used in an intertextual project called *Aku II: Ang Tau Mui*. Director: Loh Kok Man. Dan Dan Theatre production. Performed in Chinese by an ensemble of 4 women.
- **July-Aug 2002:** Singapore. Director: Ivan Heng. WildRice production. Performed as a solo by Selena Tan.
- **Dec 2005:** Tokyo. Translated into Japanese and read at a seminar on the playwright's works, convened by the Japan Directors Association.
- **May 2007:** Kuala Lumpur, two short pieces performed as *Water Closet*, on the triple bill *Within Without*. Director: Loh Kok Man. Performed as a solo in Chinese by Lim Tiong Wooi.

² Hokkien street opera.

³ This alludes to the song *Never-Ending Love [Pu Liau Chin]* from a Lin Dai movie.

⁴ This and other 'I want' lists are meant to be indications. They can be replaced by other lists. They can also be used as they are or edited.

⁵ Rubbish bin.

⁶ Ang Tau Mui's lines may be used or dropped. (Which works better, her being 'present' or 'absent'?).

⁷ *Dream* is loosely translated from the song [*Mong*] from a Lin Dai movie.

⁸ A long broad heavy-duty knife.

⁹ Ang Tau Mui's lines may be used or dropped.

¹⁰ This is Ang Tau Mui's song, but it can be used as Abra's too.

- 11 The Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara.
- 12 Ang Tau Mui's lines can be used or dropped.
- 13 The Old Nun's lines can be used or dropped.
- 14 An economy meal comprising rice and a choice of meat and vegetables.
- 15 Soya sauce.