

Papama's Puri

by Jay Colond



In 1981, air traffic controllers went on strike, James Brady and President Reagan were injured in an assassination attempt, and the first IBM PCs went on sale. I was barely nine and my parents achieved the goal, like many immigrants before us, of purchasing our first American house. We settled in East Central Minnesota, in Cambridge, population 3,200. Mom and dad found good jobs. We joined a scant handful of other brown and black families in this very Swedish town.

We'd been in America for five years and Cambridge for two. My dad's father, Xavier Colond, had passed away a year earlier. My dad was estranged for making a series of unapproved career choices, and for leaving the far East. I had no memories of Singapore and hadn't seen either Xavier, or my grandmother Josephine, since leaving as a toddler in 1974. When, in 1981, the local AFSCME council went on strike, my parents found themselves putting in long hours at the state hospital. It was a perfect confluence, and they sent for Grandma Josephine, who we called "Papama" to come and stay with us through the school year.

This was thirty years before *Crazy Rich Asians* had been written. In our little families' mythology, Singapore was a land of hawker stalls and shopping, a multi-ethnic Hong Kong. To hear my mother, it was everything Manila was not, orderly, clean, disciplined. To hear my father, it was a shining example of the success of "benevolent dictatorship." When we picked up papama from the airport, I looked at her face and some deep memory of comfort and familiarity floated up for me.

Papama had gone from Singapore to Regina, Saskatchewan to care for my cousins -- and she spent the summer educating me on Canadian politeness, telling me to pray, and pinching my dad's cheeks. She also spent the summer punching down batch after batch of puri dough, because I discovered I loved her 'dal chaa' even more with fried bread.

It wasn't until many years later, long after she passed, that I heard stories of her making food for small armies of family in Singapore, living in two-room flats, and mixing everything by hand because in 1960s Singapore, Kitchenaid mixers might as well have been sold on the moon. Our stories of the family overcoming adversity didn't lift up her labors of love. Even the language of finding a home for papama was about caring for her, and not about how she cared for us. I still hold my love of her puri, and, I hope, the resilient pieces of her love of family. We were never crazy rich, although we were and are still very proud of Singapore. I'm glad my daughters and son see themselves reflected a little in movies and TV, and I hope I see a little reflection of her in them. It's so long ago and far away, I hope they get a chance to bring her story to their dinner tables, if even only reflected imperfectly in fried bread