

## Kacang Puteh Flurry

**Clara Mok**

Gopal rubbed his eyes. He woke up before dawn to roast *kacang puteh* and he yearned to wipe away the weariness consuming him.

He stood by his *kacang puteh* cart on the designated spot at the sidewalk outside Emerald Centre. It was mid-morning. Gopal folded sheets of old magazine pages into cone shapes and stacked them upwards. His brows tightened into a crease when he peered into his pushcart drawer. Only two cones of steamed chickpeas had been sold the entire morning. With the easing of Covid restrictions, he was counting on the crowd coming out in full force for better takings. However, customers dwindled from the pre-pandemic days and still remained an abysmal trickle.

To attract more customers, he repositioned his cart at 90 degrees to the glass door to face Z Hub Mall. He also rearranged his airtight plastic containers with the most popular white sugared nuts and cashew nuts placed right in front where customers could see them. Sweet tapioca fritters, satay broad beans, prawn sticks, green peas, tepung peanuts and murukku were placed on the second row among twenty varieties. Lightly-salted boiled chickpeas and peanuts were placed in a double-tiered steamer to be served warm.

Office workers in stylish long-sleeved shirts scuttled past, paying no heed to Gopal and his pushcart. They were transfixed on their devices, clutching their shiny leather bags. Gopal thought that his son would look smart carrying one of those in future.

He felt something slipping out from his polo shirt pocket and he fished it out. Back at their flat earlier, Priya was mopping the floor and handed Gopal the bill. “Later you go pay up.”

Gopal opened up the envelope and gasped, “Whoa, so high?”

“Go ask your son.”

Gopal walked into Vikram’s room. Vikram’s face was hidden behind the rectangular screen of his laptop. “What are you doing?”

“Social media, Pa.”

“What’s that?”

“Pa, I use it to connect with friends,” Vikram explained. “I can help you open an account to take orders.”

“How do I deliver to customers?”

“Arrange with a courier company. Some fruit sellers sell online and make big bucks.”

“Customers buy without seeing the fruits?”

“Yes, online purchases are popular now.”

“I don’t understand how it works...Err, Vikram, this month’s electricity bill is up. Switch off your computer when you finish using it.”

“Yes, Pa,”

“I go Emerald Centre now. Bye!”

Emerald Centre used to be a hive of activity in the 1980s to 1990s. Movie goers streamed in from Chempaka Cinema after movie screenings. The shops stood frozen in time. They had not been renovated since the building was erected in 1973. In recent years, the far side of the building near the junction of Marlin Avenue and Teck Kim Street came alive in the

evenings. Glitzy lights of the nightclub flashed in an array of neon colours. Women of the night in tight skirts sauntered past. In the day, Emerald Centre's nondescript, dull brown façade paled in comparison to its chic neighbour Z Hub Mall, whose colourful façade and modern-concept eateries drew in the office lunch-time crowd.

Gopal stood barefooted on the pavement. Behind his heavy moustache and bushy eyebrows, his expression was grim. He wrinkled his nose as the smell of rain wafted by but he stayed put as he was nestled in a sheltered porch, two metres from the main road.

The wind howled and exhibited its prowess, causing Gopal's sarong to flap wildly. Gopal adjusted the flap of his colourful checked sarong, a contrast to the white dhoti his dad used to wear. Passersby scrambled for shelter. Rain turned the walkway into a canvas of dots, the dots joined to form patches and the patches merged into puddles.

"*Aiya!*" Gopal exclaimed. His heart plunged in an instant as he was numbed by the inevitable: he would not be able to sell even two more cones in this weather. The raindrops inched nearer, spraying onto his containers of nuts, beans and peas.

Frantic, he spread a sheet of plastic over them. The wind lifted the sheet off and it floated away. An elderly Malay lady caught hold of it and rushed forward with it.

"Thanks, *Makcik!*"

"How's business?" Cik Aminah asked, straining to make herself heard above the roar of the rain.

"Bad..."

"What do you mean?"

"One week, earn \$900. Now, only \$400."

“*Alamak!* Why so little?”

“Last year April to July close due to lockdown,” his voice mellowed. He drew a long breath, gazed far into his youth to preserve the last remnants of a valuable memory. “Last time, many years ago, I follow my father around Margaret Drive. On his head, he balanced bottles of *kacang puteh* on a tray.”

“Margaret Drive? My mum sold *lontong* there.”

“Oh! The lady with a flowery *selendang* and gave lots of chilli?”

“Ya! That’s her!”

“Your mum’s *lontong*, *bagus!* You can make?”

“Can.”

“May I try?”

“No problem, I’ll bring some next time. How’s your father?” asked Cik Aminah.

“He went back to his hometown in Tamil Nadu.”

“I remember his business used to be good.”

“Very good! From 20 cents, it rose to 30 cents, but too bad *lah ...*”

“What happened?”

“He cannot sell door to door anymore. My father got six mouths to feed. No business, *susah*. He begged shops in Little India to take his *kacang puteh* but they say no,” recounted Gopal.

Cik Aminah sighed.

“Lucky he made this,” Gopal said, his voice tinged with pride as he placed his hand over the pushcart. “With it, he sold *kacang puteh* at the cinema, then here at Emerald Centre.”

Cik Aminah held up a thumb.

“Yeah, I’m proud of him. All his hard work!” Gopal said, drying up the rain splashed on the sides of the cart. “Last week I changed the wheels of the cart. See, she’s a beauty, isn’t she?”

“*Cantik!*” agreed Cik Aminah.

“Come, try this,” said Gopal as he opened up the red cap of the container and scooped some sugared nuts into Cik Aminah’s open palm. He watched as she popped them into her mouth.

“I remember the taste!” she said, her mouth full. “*Mak* bought this for us at Mex Cinema when we’re young.”

“My father’s stall!”

“Then why you’re not selling at cinemas?”

“Youngsters prefer popcorn. What to do?” said Gopal, his voice resigned. “Here I have old customers. Last week, an elderly couple from Queenstown bought 50 cones. 50 cones! They bring to old folks’ home. I made few trips from here to their car!” Gopal smiled for the first time that afternoon.

“*Bagus!*” cheered Cik Aminah.

“Yah, but the cost of raw materials is going up...” said Gopal, his mood mirroring the dark clouds floating by.

"Then how?" Cik Aminah asked.

"No choice. Maybe one day I have to close... "

The lines on Gopal's forehead deepened. The old lady clicked her tongue.

The rain lightened into a drizzle. A crisp feeling of freshness lingered in the air.

"Last time, I dream of opening up more stalls."

"Where?"

"At bus stops," Gopal mused. "People munching on my snacks on their way to work. . ."

Gopal sighed deeply. Both watched the rain, letting the wind blow away the despondency.

"I *balik kampung*, cook for my grandchildren. Next time, I bring *lontong*," she said.

Like sunshine, Cik Aminah's generosity warmed Gopal's heart.

"Come, bring back for your grandchildren." Gopal handed her two cones of sugar-coated peanuts.

Gopal smiled. He watched Cik Aminah's receding figure as she shuffled down the pavement, two cones in one hand and an umbrella in the other.

The cool aftermath of the rain brought a trickle of pedestrians plodding down the pavement in their colourful umbrellas but none bothered to look at Gopal's pushcart.

A youth on a gleaming red racer whizzed down the walkway from the Cathay Building towards Emerald Centre.

"Hey, watch it!" shouted an elderly man, waving the sharp end of his umbrella towards him.

Dodging the umbrella, the speeding youth swerved and crashed right into Gopal's *kacang puteh* pushcart. It toppled backwards onto the pavement with a sickening thud. Gopal moved away in time or his legs would have been crushed. A shower of nuts flew into the air and landed plop plop plop into the puddles.

Gopal's eyes widened in disbelief. His body slumped, neck bending forward, then stiffened back up. His father's wooden cart lay on its side. What pained him was how his cart broke into half right in the middle like the Titanic. Splintered wood jutted out from the centre parting. One wheel of the cart spun like crazy, detached on its own and rolled away.

His hard work for the day was gone. His long rows of folded paper cones were crushed and soaked in a mushy mess. Several plastic containers gave way and the peanuts were strewn on the ground.

Clenching his fists, he wanted to scream, but no sound emerged from his mouth. He clutched his heart as if an arrow had pierced it. No cart, no more sales for today and possibly no business for many days after this. He could feel tears streaking down his face. Crouching down on all fours, he threw away his dignity. "Pa! I failed to protect your cart! Forgive me, Pa!"

Traffic slowed as drivers craned their necks to look. Pedestrians slowed their steps to take in the scene before them. A teenager was taking a video of her friends at the site and recorded the entire sequence leading to Gopal's agony. She zoomed in on the face of the reckless youth who was busy examining his racer for scratches, oblivious to the devastating scene and outraged glares of pedestrians. The elderly man with the umbrella came up to the youth and scolded, "Look what you've done! The *kacang puteh* man so poor thing. You youngsters are all like that, never watch your way."

The youth shrugged and turned his attention to his bicycle. With the edge of his shirt, he wiped at a razor-thin scratch running across its glinting frame. His face turned pallid when he saw someone filming the scene. He locked his bicycle before he headed towards Gopal. “Uncle, are you injured?”

Gopal’s mouth opened, then closed. No words could describe the anguish of possibly losing his livelihood. Gopal could trace his ancestry to a long line of *kacang puteh* sellers hailing from Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu. In the 1960s, his grandfather used to peddle *kacang puteh* around the kampongs in Hougang. His father continued the business and sold *kacang puteh* to cinema patrons at Mex Cinema. In 1996, the cinema was demolished, and he moved his business to the current location.

“Uncle...” Gopal was alerted to the cyclist stood before him, putting his weight on one foot, then the other. His pubescence was apparent on his pimply face. Gopal’s eyes narrowed. He thought of making him pay for his losses. How much is enough? What about the hours of hard work he put into seasoning and frying the peanuts? Removing the skin from the peanuts was time consuming enough. He got Vikram and Priya to help while he prepared the seasonings of satay sauce, sugar and salt to be coated onto the nuts. After that, he fried different batches of nuts over high heat. By the end of two hours, his shirt was completely drenched. Moreover, the sizzling oil splattered and left burn scars all over his arms.

He closed his eyes to gather his thoughts. The cyclist had to bear responsibility for his recklessness, no doubt, but the destruction of his pushcart was an accident. With a heavy sigh, he waved the cyclist off. The youth, visibly relieved, sped away.

Since the pushcart was beyond repair, the question was how he could he remain in business? It would take weeks to order a customised one due to Covid restrictions. With shaky



hands, he salvaged whatever peas and nuts he could and threw the rest away. As for the debris of the broken cart, he left instructions for the building cleaners to dispose of them early next morning.

Gopal trudged home. On the way, he noticed two pieces of discarded plywood near a construction site and lugged them home. “I can convert the side table in my kitchen into a makeshift cart,” he thought. His footsteps were lighter. Without delay, he took measurements of the side table and sawed the plywood into long strips. After that, he laid out twenty containers of *kacang puteh* on top of the side table. They simply would not fit as the table was too small. Left with no choice, he switched some less popular varieties into smaller containers. Furthermore, the side table did not have wheels. He would need Vikram’s help to load and unload the table onto the van.

Later that night, Vikram ran panting towards Gopal with his laptop. “Pa, look what I found on social media!”

“Can’t you see I’m busy?” Gopal’s eyes were focused on hammering nails into the sides of the table to secure the plywood.

“Pa, you’ve got to see this!”

Gopal glanced at Vikram’s laptop from the corner of his eyes. The video showed the bicycle crashing into his pushcart and breaking it into half. The screen zoomed in on Gopal’s tear-streaked face as he knelt on all fours.

“How...how?”

“A passerby was taking videos when it happened. See, you even received ten thousand ‘likes’ within four hours! You’re famous, Pa!”

Gopal waved off his son.

“Mmm...this will do.” Gopal checked the stability of his makeshift table by shaking it lightly. Satisfied, he made arrangements to transport the makeshift *kacang puteh* stall to Emerald Centre.

The newspapers picked up his trending video on the news, headlined: *Kacang Puteh Man's Pushcart Broken*.

When the first few customers streamed in, Gopal was shifting the table with Vikram's help.

“Excuse me, Uncle, we're waiting for your *kacang puteh*.”

Vikram nudged Gopal. “Pa, they are here for your *kacang puteh*.”

“So early? Cannot be...”

He raised his eyes to see a long queue waiting to savour his treats. The queue snaked around Emerald Centre, all the way to the traffic light and back. Gopal's heart soared at the show of support. Business was so brisk that extra *kacang puteh* roasted by Priya and Vikram depleted within a few hours. Gopal scooped cone after cone of his snacks with tears rolling from his eyes.

For safety reasons, security guards diverted the queue to the other side of the building, which extended all the way to Chempaka Cinema. A carnival-like ambience filled the air as people feasted on the broad beans, chickpeas and the cashew nuts in paper cones. Crunch! Crunch! Crunch! How he loved the sound! Cik Aminah posed for a photograph with Gopal. Several customers asked him for permission to take photographs with him too. He felt like a celebrity.

While Priya took over the running of the stall, Gopal tucked into Cik Aminah's *lontong* with relish. The light coconut gravy seeped into the bland compressed rice cakes. Long beans, cabbage and beancurd soaked in gravy added texture to the dish, made more fragrant by banana leaves. The flavours burst forth in his mouth, reminiscent of the taste of Cik Aminah's mum's *lontong* of yesteryear.

"Pa, I'll help you to set up a website," offered Vikram.

"How does it work?"

"I'll put a link that connects to a business email. If customers want to order, I'll be alerted. Also you can try crowdfunding."

"What's that?" asked Gopal, scratching his head.

"You can get the public to invest in your new location."

"Really?" Gopal asked.

Vikram nodded. He created a webpage and included his family's history of how his great grandfather started the business and how it survived due to his grandfather's perseverance. He named it '3<sup>rd</sup> generation *kacang puteh* seller's delights' and inserted a photograph of Gopal standing before his shiny metallic pushcart as the wallpaper.