

Mister World and his Magical Box

The world is round and my father had gone around it.

For so many months he would be away, sailing the Seven Seas, docking in so many ports.

Our neighbours and relatives called him Mister World. They teased that he was like a contestant in a beauty pageant.

“Guten tag! I had just come from JEHR-many!” he greeted everyone after he came home from Hamburg.

“Bonjour, mesdames et messieurs. Vive la France!” he called out, after he had been to France.

Other times, he greeted with words that he learned from his friends.

“Hola! Buenas dias!”

“Namaste.”

“Ohayu gozamaisu!”

“Hallo!”

Father collected so many wonderful things that he brought home in his Magical Box. Oh, the colorful things he took out from the Box!

“A poncho from Peru for you!” and Father pulled down a bright-orange and blue striped cloth over my head, which made my arms disappear.

“I gift you with a shawl from Bali,” and he lovingly draped a golden, silk shawl on Mother’s shoulders, which made her eyes sparkle.

“These are water puppets of Vietnam,” he presented three small, chinky-eyed wooden puppets to my sister: a drummer, a woman with a basket, and a fisherman. Tsetsen tugged at the strings and the tiny man raised its tiny fishing pole, with a tiny brown fish at the end.

And oh, the varied tastes of food from the Magical Box!

“Try these chokoreto from Japan!” said Mister World as he offered a box of reddish-brown, rectangular chocolates, covered in chocolate powder.

There was also the maple syrup from Canada that made our pancakes smell and taste so good! The stroopwafels of The Netherlands stuck in my teeth but made me crave for more. The macadamia nuts from Hawaii were Mother’s favourite, as she always cleaned up a whole canister.

Father also taught us about the currencies of the world.

“This is a yuan from China. This is a rand from South Africa. This is a bolivar from Venezuela,” he would show off crispy, pastel-colored bills, with images of animals, leaders or heroes of other countries.

My little sister Tsetsen didn’t care, and just tossed the bills away.

My father was Mister World, and along with the goodies from his Magical Box were his amazing and funny stories about the friends he made from different nations.

There was Mister Melle from Holland who has twin blond boys of my age, Mister Jahid from India who used to be a snake charmer before he became a seafarer, Señor Miguel of Chile who painted scenes at sea (Tsetsen and I loved the jumping dolphins best), and Mister Chang who had a pet rat on the ship.

Those were the short, happy days of summer in between the long months when Father was away.

Most days, there was no Mister World to fix the leak in the roof, to help me repair my bike, to be funny and make Tsetsen stop crying when she scraped her knees. No Mister World on our birthdays, no Father even on Father's Day.

But we were contented with the occasional phone calls, when Father would greet us in strange words, ask about how we were doing, tell us mind-blowing stories about other lands, and be hilarious and comforting. We would laugh and cry, feeling strangely happy and sad at the same time.

Then one summer, Mister World and the Magic Box failed to come home. Instead, there came bad news. Father's ship was taken hostage by pirates. When the rescuers came, the pirates got angry and started shooting at the hostages. Father was hit and fell overboard. Rescuers did not find his body.

Days and weeks passed, and there was no news about him. Authorities said Father did not survive. Mother, Tsetsen and I cried and cried. Every day was heavy, with a feeling of doom that you get before a strong typhoon, as we waited with uncertainty for Mister World. Is Father really gone?

Then one day, a big box much like Mister World's Magical Box arrived. It was heavy.

"Maybe Father is inside!" cried Tsetsen.

Mother hurriedly opened the box. It was filled with goodies, stuff that Mister World would bring home to us.

There was no Mister World inside, but Mother's hands began shaking as she opened a letter:

"Dear Mona, Mien and Tsetsen, we are sorry for your loss. Minggo (my father) was a good friend to all of us. We sent you these gifts hoping that these will bring some cheer today, just like how Minggo brought joy to us by always being such a cheerful, helpful friend."

The letter was signed by many seamen just like Father.

"Mother, look – it's the doll that I asked from Father!" cried Tsetsen.

The box contained food, clothes, and things that we love and need, which the other seamen could not have known, if Father had not told them.

"Oh!" Mother gasped, cupped her hand to her mouth and started to cry. She was holding a canister of macadamia nuts, one of the dozens from the box.

"Oh, Mother look!" I pulled out an envelope filled with paper bills from the box. And Mother cried even harder when Tsetsen started identifying the different currencies: "This is rand...this is franc... this is lire..."

It was not the last box to arrive. In the next days, my father's other friends sent us "magical boxes." Others also sent money, but it was the letters that brought the sunshine in.

They were stories about how my father shared his meagre food, how he lent money, how he covered for a co-worker who was sick, how he comforted others with stories and jokes. They said Father was their adviser who listened to their problems, and brought many ship workers together.

Most of all, they wrote about how Minggo, my father told them about how I did well in school and my dream to be a doctor, of Tsetsen and her follies, of how mother took care of us while keeping a part-time job. He was so proud of his family. Of us.

Even from across the oceans, we were always with him.

The world is round. And my father, Mister World, had tied a string around it, and brought it to us. Now, his many friends around the world had brought him home.