

Adventure that began in a hairdresser's bedroom

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I BEGAN writing this story while sitting in a hairdresser's bedroom, strangely enough.

This is how it began. I accompanied Auntie Ellen to do her hair at Sungai Way in Petaling Jaya. It was Saturday. Adik, my daughter left the house at 9am. Eri, my son, was at work and would only be home at 2pm. Bored, I offered to drive Auntie Ellen to her appointment in Sungai Way, a town off the Federal Highway in the Klang Valley, between Klang and Kuala Lumpur.

So there I was, sitting in a coffeeshop in the middle of Sungai Way, pounding away on my laptop. Auntie Ellen had disappeared up the stairs to the hairdresser's shop above one-and-a-half hours ago.

It was already 11.30am. I began to see chicken rice and steaming noodles being prepared. I realised it was lunch time. Customers were

coming in. Tables were slowly being occupied. Knowing it was not ethical to take up a restaurant table without ordering anything to eat as long as I had been sitting there, I felt uneasy. I looked around guiltily.

Suddenly, a Chinese woman, I presumed the "tauke" (boss) of the restaurant, began yelling at me. She spoke in Hokkien, I again presumed. Her face was fierce, her eyes widened, bombarding me loudly with her words. Immediately I could guess that she was scolding me for sitting there for so long. I replied in Malay that I was waiting for a friend doing her hair upstairs. She realised I was a Malay. Then, even louder, she said, "Bayar sewa laaaa" (pay rent). Frightened, I quickly picked up my laptop. As I turned to walk away I saw Auntie Ellen, her hair covered in a towel, rushing towards me.

I told Auntie Ellen, "Tauke marah

saya duduk lama sini" (the boss is angry I've sat here for so long).

"Aiyaaa" she sighed, "Mari naik, mari naik" (come up).

Customers sitting at a nearby table smiled at me sympathetically. They asked, "Apa pasal tadak tunggu atas?" (Why didn't you wait upstairs?)

Auntie Ellen replied loudly in Hokkien, then hurried me out of the shop. Obviously feeling guilty too, she insisted on carrying my stuff, and both of us quickly ran upstairs.

That's when I realised what Auntie had been saying just now:

The hairdresser's shop was small and there was nowhere to sit. The hairdressing area was only a cubicle, smaller than my kitchen. The hairdresser, a friendly lady, has known Auntie Ellen a long time it

transpired, so she ushered me, to my surprise, into her bedroom adjacent to the "salon". So there I was, typing up the event in a hairdresser's bedroom....

The hairdresser was a widow who had been living above the coffeeshop since she married. The shop belonged to her late husband who had inherited it from his father. When her husband died, she continued living above the coffeeshop with her married son and a grandchild. To earn a living, they built a wooden wall in the middle of the living room, turning a small area into a salon and her bedroom.

From her bedroom, I watched Sungai Way – something new to me. It was bustling with nonstop traffic, busy and noisy, buzzing with happenings. Across the road there was another row of shops, which Auntie Ellen said had been there since before 1966. The place I was sitting in



The writer's 'sweet Auntie Ellen' who shared a nostalgic visit home. — DR MEGAWATI OMAR

now, the hairdresser's bedroom, was almost half a century old! Something rare to me.

Sungai Way was once a poor Chinese area. In 1966, the government built cheap single-storey houses and sold them at RM4,700 each. There was a market nearby. There was also