



"NOIR THRILLER
AT ITS BEST!"

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A NOVEL

AS COARSE AS EMPORIUM

HUNTER NG



WINNER OF THE 2019 ASEAN-KOREAN
ACADEMIC ESSAY COMPETITION



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J JETTISON
BOOKS

SINGAPORE'S FAVOURITE PUBLISHER

AS COARSE AS EMPORIUM

INFORMATION PAGE

Jettison Books Pte. Ltd.

756 Upper Serangoon Road, #04-33

Singapore 534626

www.jettisonbooks.com

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First edition 30 March 2022

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ISBN 9789811840098

**As
Coarse
As
Emporium**

A NOVEL

Hunter Ng

Being lost is a privilege.
It means you are not chained.
A chained person cannot be lost.
Thus, lose yourself in this novel,
As I once was lost in the Emporium.



PREFACE

This book is coarse literature. There is a reason why some books are considered classics. Not this. I did not follow any style of writing nor converge to typical, prescribed narrative plots.

It is coarse. It is uncouth. It is noir. It is a thriller. It is Singaporean.

Each of us has many stories to tell. Some of us are more grounded, some of us more whimsical. The whimsical ones have it worse, because with it comes imaginativeness. This is the magic of all stories. Facts of life roll out every day as they are, but these realities enter our minds, and the imaginative ones will add their ego, their circumstances, their upbringing into them.

Some of the best stories come from these minds, borne out of overactive imagination. Some are harmless, some serve to teach lessons, and yet, most are lost to our limited memories.

This is a story about different tenants in a building. As time passes, businesses come and go. Many colourful characters enter and exit the doors. Yet, the emotions that they invoked, and their personalities will be remembered.

I hope you enjoy this story, told from the eyes of a ten-year old.

THE BLURB

“

Hunter has devilishly captured a piece of Singapore history and its seedier side in this debut novel. A ten-year-old boy's innocence is rudely robbed by the tenants of The Emporium, each having an ominous lesson to impart to the protagonist. This is a series of dark tales, spun to force little Bee to grow up faster than he should.

”

-- **Anonymous**

“

We all have places that we know even as children, places that were there even before we were born, places that have so many memories that they seem to have a life of their own. Hunter Ng's “As Coarse As Emporium” recalls the memories of a particular mall in Singapore, along with the various quirks and ways of life of its past and present occupants, through the eyes of a child and a man. It is a story that can make one feel nostalgic for a place and time and people that you may have never met, even though not all of the memories are sweet or good.

”

-- **J. Deytiquez, winner of the 2019 ASEAN-Korea Academic Essay Contest, and author of “Gold” and “Clavitas: I Just Want to See You Again”**

I WOULD LIKE TO THANK THE FOLLOWING PERSONS FOR THEIR INVALUABLE HELP TO THIS BOOK

Nicholas Phua,

Founder, *The Mentor*

Prateek Anish Potdar,

Poet, *The Vulture Flies at Midnight*

many unnamed friends who wish to stay anonymous,

and lastly, The Emporium,

for its many wonders and stories, without which this book would not have been conceived.

1

THE EMPORIUM

“Let’s commence the meeting. The time now is 12.16pm. All the members of the committee are present ...”

Robert, the manager for The Emporium, rattled off the agenda for the day.

I stared at the window glass panels to the condominium next to The Emporium. It was a downcast day, with gloomy clouds hanging overhead. There were children playing in the rooftop pool of the condominium, and their pink flamingo floats were drifting aimlessly in the pale blue waters.

It was the quarterly meeting for the committee of seven. I had been elected in the annual general meeting to the present committee, with the duty of overseeing key matters for The Emporium. It was an honour and privilege to serve the building.

Out of the blue, Henry burst into the meeting room, interrupting Robert.

“Sir, Sir, the police are here”, Henry was panting and struggling to catch his breath. He was our long-serving security guard of 30 years in The Emporium. From a junior security officer, he had risen through the ranks to become chief security guard today.

“Calm down, Henry, we are in a meeting.” Robert barked.

“No sir, you don’t understand. It is a massive operation. There are almost twenty policemen here!”

With that, the committee was now stirring in their seats.

It didn’t make sense for this many policemen to swarm the building. Unless ...

I didn’t wait for Henry to finish. Together with Lucas, my fellow committee member, we headed out to find out what was happening.

The policemen had gathered around one of the shops in The Emporium, and they were blocking the sole exit. Something major was going on, and it was not a good sign.

As I went forward to understand the situation, Henry grabbed my arm.

“Mr Bee, it’s one of the KTV lounges. I saw many packets of white powder. A few people were standing on stools and putting nooses around their necks. I …” Henry seemed to be gasping for air between his frantic account.

In my thirty years in The Emporium, I had seen many cases, but nothing as grave as this. If what Henry said was true, then could it be a collective cult suicide? Or something more sinister?

As I walked over to the site of the scene, I thought about Helen, my adoptive mother.

She had raised me up in a salon on the 3rd storey of The Emporium. Over the years, we had overcome many odds together. It was nothing short of a miracle that I would now be on the committee, safeguarding The Emporium’s interest.

There were several KTV lounges in the Emporium that catered to the patrons of the shopping mall. The one that was involved in the mass suicide pact today was *Dorothy’s KTV*.

Dorothy’s KTV was a massive unit that was located at the end of a corridor. The signature black-frosted glass walls separated the serene walkway outside from the dark and dank interior. Rainbow silhouettes of the illuminated disco balls cast a bright, cloying mixture of colours on the white tiles outside of the KTV. The faint smell of alcohol and vomit lingered around the exterior walls. The thick glass doors also muffled the booming music that emanated from its Hi-fi systems.

Today, the scene was starkly different. As I neared the KTV lounge, a crowd had already formed in front of Dorothy’s. The police were taking down notes from nearby passers-by. Several of The Emporium’s tenants were already there, curious to catch the latest gossip.

There were also several blue-white tents set up around the entrance.

DOROTHY'S

POLICE

It was unmistakable.

Those were standard-issue, police body bags used to conceal corpses.

I retched, clutching my mouth and stomach. Even after all these years in The Emporium, I could not stomach scenes of death like this.

My head spun. Henry grabbed hold of my arm before I fell face-first into the concrete floor.

“Are you okay, Bee?” Henry asked, concerned about my sudden stupor.

I nodded and stood back up, still reeling from the shock of the ghastly sight.

The memories of The Emporium had gushed to my head immediately. Over the years, I had seen so much happiness, sadness, tyranny, anger, bitterness, excitement, all sorts of emotions and people in these four walls.

These images were now coming back to me. I can’t quite remember most of what happened, but it was right around ten years old that I started to become more sentient and observant towards my surroundings. It was also in that year, that a giant inferno had consumed The Emporium.

All the black, charred walls and scenes of death.

I felt *déjà vu*.

I took a deep breath.

Everything was coming back to me, but nothing would faze me.

Nothing ever had.

And if they did, I knew I was right at home.

In The Emporium.

2

THE SAUNA

A sauna used to be a straightforward construction in the past. The oldest saunas were simple spaces heated to a high temperature by fireplaces. People went in, sweated, detoxed and had a refreshing shower thereafter. It was a sensual experience, but not sexual.

When I was ten years old, Helen, my adoptive mom earned a meagre income working for June, her mom, at her salon. Helen and I led a frugal life. In the daytime, nobody was home to care for me, so Helen brought me to the salon. The salon was located in The Emporium, a commercial building in the heart of Singapore. When I was old enough, I took public transport to the salon after school. While she was busy with customers, our neighbours from other shops would take care of me. I became very good friends with most of them.

The most notable or perhaps, also the most inconspicuous business in The Emporium was the “De Sauna”. From our salon, if you turned right and walked to the end, you would see it. The bright red neon light-board that screamed the words “De Sauna” was the only indication that it even existed. Most units in The Emporium maxed out at about 250 to 300 square feet but this behemoth business had combined eight smaller units and had hacked down their respective walls to create a large and uninterrupted space for their operations.

Our salon was located on the 3rd storey. The 3rd storey had two toilets and one toilet area was located just beside De Sauna. I always got a glimpse of De Sauna when I wanted to pee. Many strange men lurked outside De Sauna and so, I always did my business and quickly ran back to the salon. I did not want to find out what they were there for.

There was only one nondescript entrance for customers. Five vases of exquisite two-toned purple moth orchids sat on the counter-top. Other than this, there was another off-limits side entrance. It led to the girls’ private rooms, where they rested between breaks. On the few occasions that I had passed by to head to the toilet, the door was ajar and I peered in.

It was a dimly lit room, but I could make out the many beds and vanity tables strewn haphazardly in different corners. Many of the female masseurs took short naps when business was in a lull. Other than that, I only saw men going in and out of the nondescript main entrance, nothing more nor less.

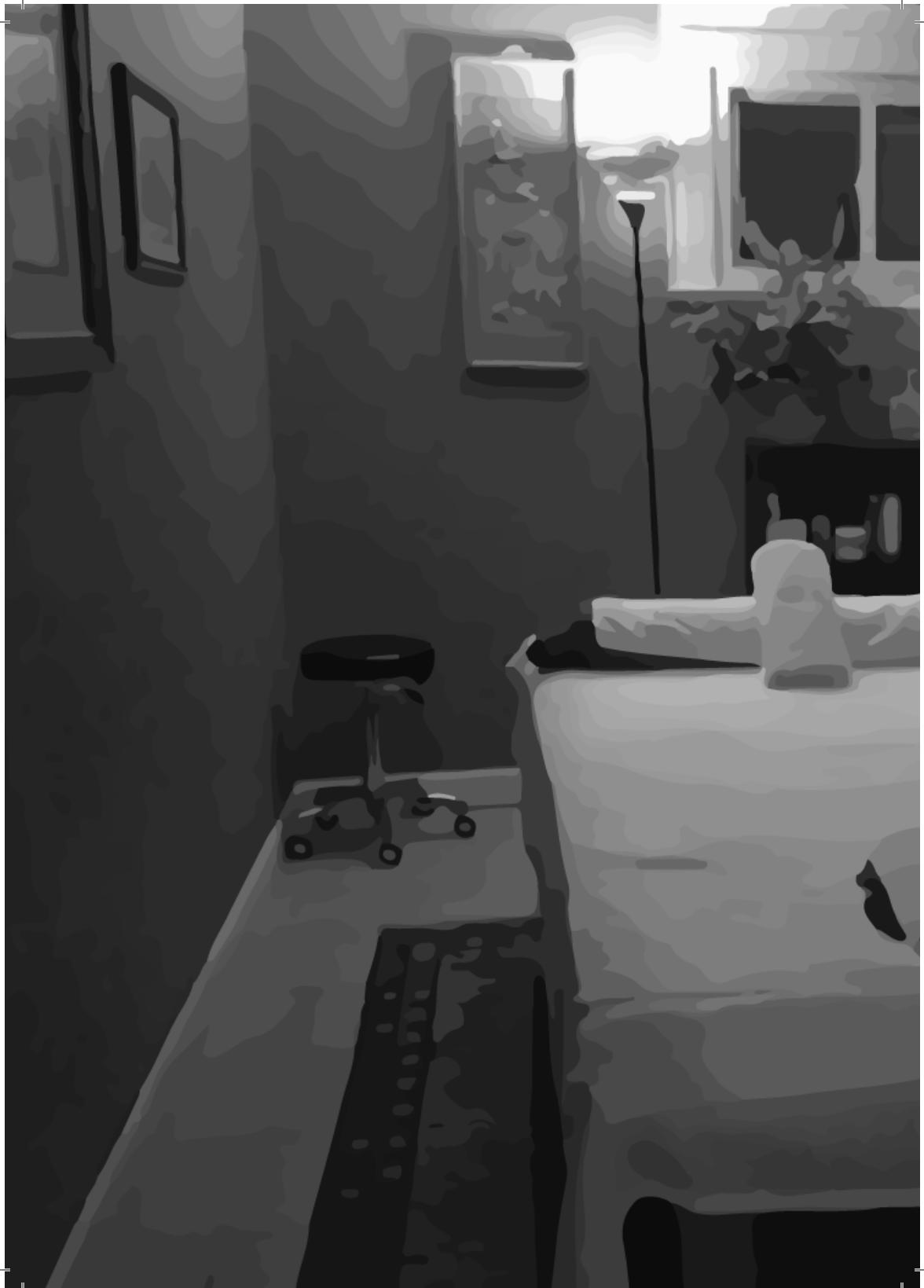
Helen always had this love-hate relationship with the masseurs. On some days, she would lament to the salon customers that these women spoilt relationships and seduced many men. However, behind their backs, she would always teach me that all the stupid men were also to be blamed. If a man had a wife, he should not give in to temptation. She also taught me that “prostitution” was the oldest trade in the world. Even till today, this trade has continued, and not vanished like other lost trades such as exquisite *Hakka* tailoring or the *Kacang Puteh* (mixed nuts packet) in Singapore. For a trade to have survived this long, and still continue to flourish, was plain evidence that there was strong business need for such services. And men’s physiological urges weren’t going to disappear anytime soon.

As a kid, I never really knew what business they were doing till much later. I also didn’t know why so many women were employed. On several occasions, I saw the girls running out of the unit into the toilet, wrapped only in white bath towels. However, I was more interested in playing my Gameboy and doing well in my studies. I didn’t once ask why they were scantily-clad nor what they did to the men who went in.

De Sauna was run by Mrs Kiyomi. She was a tall and imposing Chinese lady, and her hair was always impeccably combed into a high, elegant French Twist, held in place by an oriental long chopstick. She had a thick, translucent green jade bangle on her left wrist. Rumour was that she used to be the head of a secret society, and that she was a blackbelt in Aikido.

Mrs Kiyomi employed at least twenty “girls” under her. Helen knew most of these girls, as our salon was quite popular back then and most of them also came over for hair-dos.

The girls were often well-mannered and paid lip service to everyone. As a “masseur”, the last thing you wanted to do was to offend anybody. Singapore had strict laws on massage parlours and such services so if





you were to offend certain people, it became immensely difficult to earn a living doing what they did.

One of the ways to judge how good their business was, was by counting the number of large orange gurney sacks of towels outside their unit. Mrs Kiyomi employed a full-time staff, a woman whose son, Mark was the same age as me. We never knew her real name so we would call her Mark's Mom. Mark's Mom was employed as a full-time cleaner cum attendant. Every morning, after my morning kindergarten session, I would head over to the salon. Whenever I went to the toilet, I had to pass by De Sauna and Mark's mom would be bringing out baskets of towels and dumping them into the large orange gurney sacks.

On good days, one could see at least fifteen gurney sacks of white towels. The laundry company guy would collect the gurney sacks for washing twice a day – once in the morning and once in the evening. Almost every day, was a good day.

Mark's Mom was an uncouth woman in her 40s. As with many other Singaporean women in her generation, she had only received very limited education and came out to society to start working. At that time, only less than 10% of each cohort went on to university and so, having a degree was a prestige beyond prestige. Mark's Mom had hands full of callouses, probably from handling all of the chemical detergents cleaning De Sauna. I imagined it must not have been easy to clean all those white towels that were stained with fluids.

Helen would always run into her along the corridor and the two of them would start chatting. In some ways, they had much in common. Helen had been employed by June to work at the salon since young, while Mark's mom was also a worker under Mrs Kiyomi. Both women shared certain similar struggles in their work life, and related well.

Mark's Mom's pride was naturally her son, Mark. From my many years observing and listening to women at the salon, most women in Helen's generation only enjoyed talking about one thing – their children. If there were big data collected on this, I was sure that over 90% of the topics broached in the salon were about women extolling the achievements of their sons. As the world modernised, I also realised that this trend slowly eroded over time, as more women had others aspects to

life other than just their children.

One particular day in December, Mark's Mom had been excitedly talking to Aunt Helen. I was only ten years old by then but I could understand most of what grown-ups were talking about. My teacher had commented to Helen that I was a "precocious" kid but I didn't know what it meant. I pretended to hold Helen's hand but was actually listening in on the conversation.

"Isn't it the time for primary school registration? Which school did your son get into? I enrolled Bee into a neighbourhood school near my house."

"Oh? I enrolled Mark into a top school!"

"Really? Which school?"

"My husband and I put his name up for Tao Nan School (a top primary school in Singapore). The balloting was 80 children to 1 slot. Our Mark managed to get in! I must pray to *Guanyin* ("Goddess of Mercy") tonight!"

"Congratulations!"

I could tell Aunt Helen really didn't care which school I went to. She always taught me that if I had the ability, I would do well in my examinations and go on to do whatever I wanted in life. She never believed in the rankings of top schools nor that state-sponsored schools couldn't produce top scholars. In short, one's success was always in one's hands, and your environment did not determine your worth.

Mark's Mom was overjoyed and was only too eager to flaunt this piece of news. From another perspective, women at Helen's and Mark's Mom age didn't really know what else life could offer them. They worked for a living, and there weren't any real progression opportunities. Their eggs were all in one basket, and their hope in life was entirely in their children's successes.

One of the girls Mrs Kiyomi employed was Eileen. Eileen was a busty, well-endowed Chinese lady. Whenever she came in the early morning, I would see her wearing office wear with a dark-framed spectacles. She would then change into an off-shoulder, red one-piece dress that

revealed her tall legs. It would be many years later, that Helen would tell me that she was actually married with children. The reason she wore executive was that her husband didn't know that she was doing such a job. And the man probably was incompetent financially and thus never wanted to question her income. A pretty wife who brought back the bacon – could he question what she did in the daytime? It was probably better that everybody stayed a little ignorant.

I would only see Eileen once every morning, when she walked by the corridor past our salon. For the rest of the day, she was behind the walls of De Sauna, hidden from view and busily raking in the cash.

She came to our salon on her less busy days. Most of the other customers were in awe of and often, jealous of her great figure and curvaceous chest. As a child, I used to take long naps in the beauty bed reserved for customers doing facial. Our salon offered facial services for some of the older customers but as time went by, more specialised facial businesses opened and customers flocked there. The beauty bed was resigned to an unassuming corner of the salon. Yet, it became my favourite resting place. Whenever customers were in the shop, they would pour out their hearts and stories to June and Helen. I often listened and was fully aware of their conversations but most of them paid no heed to me and thought I was just a small boy who didn't understand whatever they were sharing.

One day, Eileen came in with a slightly frazzled look. I had a certain intuition about people after spending so many years in a salon observing customers. Her eyebrow was slightly squeezed and her nostrils were widened. She sat down and asked for a seated shampoo. Aunt Helen quickly started lathering shampoo on her head. With the deft movement of her fingers and palm, one hand squirted water out of a water bottle while the other worked on lathering. In no time, foam enveloped Eileen's head and Helen got to massaging and working the scalp in a pleasurable manner.

In a soft but firm whisper, Eileen spoke to Helen.

"Shit, I recently got into a fight with the Cashier".

"Huh? Why?"

De Sauna was known for its formidable and intricate system of allocating masseurs to customers. All this was done via the all-important Cashier, a lady who reported directly to Mrs Kiyomi. The Cashier single-handedly controlled the business, as well as the fate of the masseurs. She was the one who would refer customers to the masseurs. Unless the customer knew which masseur he wanted, they were likely to listen to the Cashier's recommendations and settle on someone. As a girl, if you offended the Cashier, you were practically finished.

"The other day, I bought some laksa ("a spicy thick rice noodle dish") for some of the girls. I forgot to get one for her. Turns out that laksa is her favourite food and that she took offence when she saw the other girls savouring the famous laksa that I bought. This morning, she was quite rude to me. I saw the other girls having constant referrals but I got none."

"Aiya, just get a laksa and something extra for her. This time, buy it specially for her only, so she knows that you are going all out to please her."

Eileen thought about what Helen said. A slow smile creased her sullen face.

"Ya, I think you're right. I better do it tomorrow."

Eileen seemed satisfied with the advice that Helen had given, and she began to relax. I could tell that Helen was secretly, triumphantly proud that she had served another customer well by proffering her splendid and well-thought advice. Many hairstylists played the role of stylist and therapist concurrently. If they didn't do so, the job would get mundane very quickly, as it was just a repeated movement of one's hands on the customers' scalp. Interaction elevated the experience, both for stylist and customer.

Later that day, I went to play at the Four-Faced Buddha temple. This was a section on the 3rd storey of The Emporium, next to De Sauna.

I often went to the altar area to play. There was a large man-made pool next to the altar and there were fishes and frogs in it. I loved watching the fishes swim into various nooks and crannies of the man-made feature whenever they saw me approaching.

That same day, while I was playing, I overhead noise from outside De Sauna. I pretended to loiter around the area but actually wanted to listen in.

“... Who the hell are you to stop my customer from finding me?” it was the shrill voice of Eileen.

“Don’t you know the rules? I control who sees who in this place. And today, I’ve decided that nobody should see you,” The Cashier’s firm, low voice rang out.

At this point, I saw a man hastily running out. The man must have been a customer of Eileen’s but The Cashier had told him that Eileen wasn’t in. Somehow, Eileen found out that The Cashier had lied to the man and was confronting her.

Eileen was starting to kick up a fuss and threatening to make The Cashier pay for what she did. The Cashier wasn’t one to be trifled with, and summoned De Sauna’s bouncer to restrain Eileen. I saw Eileen being escorted to the girls’ room and I too quickly ran back to the salon. I didn’t want to be a part of any of the mess. I didn’t tell Helen about the incident that day.

After that episode, I never saw Eileen again. Some of her male customers, who were also customers here at the salon, asked Helen if she knew what had happened to Eileen. It was strange for a popular masseur like her to suddenly disappear without a trace one day. Nobody had a clue about what had happened. But I had a feeling The Cashier knew.

A few years later, the beginning of the end was soon in sight for De Sauna. The police had stepped up their anti-vice raids and these happened more often and with shorter intervals between them. It became harder and harder for Mrs Kiyomi to continue the business, as customers scurried out the doors whenever they saw the police coming. The news started spreading and many of the patrons feared that they would be implicated in the investigations. Insider sources say that business shrunk by up to twenty times.

De Sauna soon folded. On its last day of operations, most of the masseurs had already left. All the tenants and proprietors in The Emporium were aware that the sauna had become defunct and would soon be

returned to its landlord. Like eager vultures circling their prey, once the announcement had been made, all of these tenants and proprietors in the Emporium waited for Mrs Kiyomi to formally announce the closing. It was at this time that all of them could rush in and take whatever furniture they wanted. This worked for both sides – Mrs Kiyomi had already transported most of the fixtures she wanted to her warehouse and whatever was left was to be disposed. The more things she had left to dispose, the more costs she would incur when she engaged the disposal company. It made sense for her to let others take what they wanted.

Helen and June also rushed in to grab whatever items they deemed were of value. Mrs Kiyomi had always been a fan of the occult and she had collected many strange items. One of them was this creepy-looking wooden tortoise that had all sorts of strange weapons fixed to its back. Supposedly, it was thought to bring wealth to the worshipper. I remember that there was a strong smell on the tortoise when Helen brought it back. I couldn't quite put my finger on what smell it was until I got older and learnt about the smell of another white protein.

Another chapter had closed in the memorable history of the Emporium with the closing of De Sauna, after 26 years of operation. And like nature, not a trace remained. Once it went bust, everything was cleared and the new tenant subsequently hacked down the walls and converted it to an Indian restaurant.

At a time when the internet was still not rampant, De Sauna only lives on in the memories of many of these promiscuous men.

3

THE SALON

“PPPPPPPPPHHHHHHHHHZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ”

“PPPPPPPPPHHHHHHHHHHZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ”

“PPPPPPPPPHHHHHHHHHHZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ”

Each time the hair-dryer cried out, my eyes shifted a little. The sound was loud, but tolerable. I squirmed in the beauty bed where I had just enjoyed a ten minutes nap, and looked up. Helen was spreading layers of mousse on the customer's curly locks, whilst blow-drying it to perfection. Beside her was June, Helen's mother, and my de factor grandmother, who was perming another customer's head.

It was a typical afternoon at the salon, chockful of customers with another two waiting outside. I had just turned ten that year and life was lazy. Extremely lazy. It was the December school holidays and I had already completed all my assignments. I stared at the white pastel foam board ceiling and started to count the number of holes in this one particular square panel.

“PPPPPPPPPHHHHHHHHHZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ”

The hair-dryer bawled again, and I was briefly jolted from my thoughts. This time, it seemed to accompany some slight sniffing. I peeked from the beauty bed at the customer that Helen was serving. It was a short lady in her mid-forties, wearing typical housewife attire – baggy t-shirt and a black pants. I knew she was a regular here but was always very reserved.

Helen asked her softly “Why are you so stupid?”

“I suspect my husband has an affair.”

With that, the short lady burst into a steady rivulet of tears. Helen put down the hair-dryer and squeezed her shoulders. At this time, other customers sneaked peeks but were too shy to engage in the conversation.

“Sighhhh, men these days. Don’t cry. Your children are already in secondary school – 15 years old. If he wants to see other younger women, you can see other men too.”

Typical Helen advice – always a fighter. And it was a refreshing perspective. The ordinary counsellor or psychotherapist would probably be there to offer tissue and psycho-analyse the reasons behind the adultery.

Not here. Our salon was different. We empowered women from all walks of life. June, our founder and Helen’s mom, started out selling beansprouts at the local wet market. After accumulating some money, she took advantage of the cheap rental policy during Lee Kuan Yew’s time to start up her own hair salon.

“I smelt perfume on his clothes and he always returns home very late in the evening. What am I to do?”

“Aiya, think about your kids. They are of an independent age. If your husband wants to find other women, do you want to consider a divorce? It would be a hell lot of trouble. Or you could pretend not to know and put less hope in him. Place your energies in other stuff. Do things you like, such as yoga or floral arrangement.”

Upon hearing Helen’s no-frills advice, the short lady customer’s tears seemed to stop almost on magic. I thought hard about what she said. I could never understand women. This poor lady probably married her husband, and gave up her career to tend to the house and the children. And after a good 18 years of servitude to the house, what did she get? A cheating husband.

Yet, I was also discerning. My English teacher in class had always taught me about the need to look at all the facts first. Looking at the way she dressed, I could not sympathise much. Her face showed faded vestiges of her youth, and she had not bothered to put on any make-up. Her hair was cut to a short bob, and blown to a puffy sphere. The entire attire made her the titular housewife, one who had given up all fashion in pursuit of household pragmatism. Compare this to the female “masseurs” which were operating just a few units away from our salon, with





their voluptuous figures, smooth and cajoling voices, and it became understandable why her husband had cheated.

So, in the end, whose fault was it? Was it the fault of the man, who gave in to his physiological needs, chose a younger woman, and forgot about his wife's labours? Or the fault of the woman, who completely abandoned all notions of beauty to serve the house?

“PPPPPPPPPHHHHHHHHHHHZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ”

Helen's hair-dryer sounded again. The short lady customer had calmed down considerably and was putting away her tissue. She had probably decided on a course of action. I could hear Helen telling her to think about her kids and to pursue her interests instead of being bound to her husband.

“... you don't need your husband. You can still do what you like. The younger woman may have an affair but who had his children? You. So do what you must...”

Helen started applying the finishing touches to the hair. The bob was now blown into place, held together by the previous jetting of salon-grade mousse. Due to the short lady's own natural make-up free look, Aunt Helen went for a less over-the-top style to complement her plain demeanour. With that, the short lady paid us \$15 before exiting.

On normal days. Helen would have sat her in the chair and gave her more “advice” but today, there was a long line of customers.

“PPPPPPPPSSSSSSSTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTT”

I heard June's hair spray being used. I rose from the bed and headed outside the shop. I had always resented the chemical smell of hairspray, which I knew was bad for brain development. Holding my breath, I waited till I exited the salon before inhaling deeply.

Outside the salon, we had a makeshift table for meals and some roller-chairs for customers to wait. This was a time when phones were still pre-3G network. The only things I could do was stare at pretty girls or read a book. Nothing else. I stared into space, wondering about what would happen next in life.

The salon was founded in 1970 by June, Helen's mother. June was born to a pair of immigrant parents from China, as with most early Chinese Singaporeans. She worked as a vegetables seller and met her husband during that time, who was thirteen years older than her.

June started saving some money and soon rented half a shop in the downtown area of Singapore. Having completed a short hairdressing course from a Japanese teacher, she started out on her own business journey as a salon catering specifically to women's cut.

The business did well and June amassed a considerable fortune. After moving three times, she finally bought a unit on the 3rd storey in The Emporium, which was the final location of the salon. As she grew older, the scale of the salon was also reduced. From a staff strength of ten, it was now only her and Helen.

"Thank you for choosing us! Please come again!" June's voice rang out from inside the salon. A middle-aged lady emerged from the salon; her hair newly permed with many medium-length curls. Her front fringe was blown into a wispy, asymmetrical slope which extended across the length of the forehead. June's hairspray had hardened her hair, holding it in place against gravity. She was probably going to attend an event that evening, as she was wearing a neatly-ironed floral-print dress. As hair stylists, we always made a point to ask customers whether they were going out for an event that night. If they were, it was advisable to wear their dresses first, as changing in and out of different attires might disturb their delicate hairstyle.

The smell of winter melon soup now wafted into my nose. I looked in the direction, at a small heat conduction plate on the table outside the salon. A large metal pot was balanced precariously, its bottom surface area much larger than the heating plate it sat on.

"POOOOOP"

"POOOOOP"

The lid kept bubbling up and down, as the steam pushed against it. Among the smells, another distinct fragrance of steamed fish and rice was also interspersed with the soup. June came out to check on the food by lifting the lid and inspecting the insides.

“Another 5 minutes!” she shouted and impatiently commanded me to watch the pot.

It was like this every day. June would prepare lunch daily for the 3 of us. It was an unspoken custom for bosses to feed their workers while at work. And Helen was her worker.

June led an extremely miserly and frugal life. She would always use this giant steel pot to cook food. The bottom was filled with some kind of pork bone soup, and she had improvised some metal clamps to create two more layers to support metal bowls which cooked the rice and meat. If you’ve used a 3-layer food steamer before, the concept was the same, except that June had invented this before them.

I looked at the clock on the wall inside the salon, making a mental note of the minute-hand. I did not dare to look away for a second, fearful of June’s temper. She was in a bad mood every day, especially during lunch. Helen and I knew that she didn’t want to feed us. She only had a responsibility to provide lunch for Helen, but not me. I was not her worker. She regarded me as nothing more than her employee’s adopted son.

As soon as five minutes passed, I called them both out. Helen and June quickly wrapped up their work and told the customers to wait for them while they had lunch. There were still a few people lining outside but it was already late past 2 pm. In Chinese culture, eating was more important than anything else, including work. One had to eat to have enough energy to work.

The three of us sat at the table. I had dutifully extricated the dishes from the steel pot, settling them into cheap porcelain plates. The soup was poured into another shallow bowl, from which we drank. We thanked June for her food and started eating. Helen only had about five minutes to eat before she resumed her work. It was not nice to keep the customers waiting for too long. Sometimes, I wondered whether she chewed before she ate. All the food went down her throat at an absurd speed. Or perhaps the meal was also too small in portion.

“What’s the matter, Bee?” Helen asked me softly. I was spooning rice into my mouth slowly today, while thinking about what I wanted to

do for the rest of the school holidays. Today's meal was a single small steamed yellowtail fish, white rice, and winter-melon soup. June had used her chopsticks to grab the fish first, taking one entire side of the fish. As soon as she was done eating, she flipped the fish over and passed it to us. Helen removed the meat with her chopsticks and passed me generous portions, only taking a small bite of parts which had more bones. I was still not very good with fish bones and Helen did not want me to choke on any.

"How's the fish?" June smirked at us. Helen replied that it was soft and tender. I wanted to protest that she should have prepared two fishes but Helen stepped on my foot, a signal to stop complaining. It was like this every day. June prepared barely enough food for two people, and took the lion's share. Whatever she ate, she gave the same portion to the two of us. We were used to it, but the unfairness of it all often simmered in our heads.

"CCCCLLLLLLAAAAAANNNNNNGGGG"

June smashed her bowl on the table. She was done for the meal and signalled Helen. Helen caught it and quickly swallowed the rest of the soup and rice. It was time to resume work again.

"Finish the fish, Bee. You need to grow healthy and strong. Fish is good for the brain." Helen caressed my soft hair and headed back to the salon.

"Take your time lah, Helen. I am alright with waiting." The customer waiting at the salon chair bantered but Helen said that she was done. Most customers pretended to be okay with the wait but I knew that they were just being polite. It was typical Singaporean mannerisms – say nice superficial things but actually mean something else.

Today, the customer waiting for Helen was an Indian lady. I had never seen her face before so she must have been a first-timer. About 70% of our customers were regulars. 30% were first-timers who came on their friends' referral. It was a testament to the standards of the salon.

The Indian lady had a red *kumkuma* on her forehead head, which was a single red dot made from coloured turmeric. In the Indian culture, it is believed to be a mark which enhanced the third eye chakra and

increased its receptivity towards divine energy. Her thick black hair was set behind her back, rested on the white salon apron. I saw the chemicals that Helen was mixing and knew that she was here for rebonding.

Rebonding is a process where the hair straightened. By using chemical relaxers to break the disulfide bonds, the hair was straightened with a hot flat iron, and then reconditioned to an unnatural straightness.

Helen looked a little uneasy today. She had done rebonding a few times before but not many. We had an older clientele who were more enamoured of perming. Rebonding was still a new technology at that time. This meant that the success rate was not always guaranteed. Some customers had very damaged hairs that were not receptive to the straightening.

After two more hours, the customer was done. Her hair was now fairly straight, a significant difference from her previous state of loose curls. She preened herself in the mirror while Helen held up a hand-held mirror for her to see her back. She handed Helen \$70 for the service, begrudgingly.

“It’s not very straight, but it will do.”

The Indian lady did not seem that contented. Helen explained to her that the hair was now recovering slowly from the rebonding and it would take some time before it became even straighter. The customer was not assured but nonetheless, accepted the explanation and left. June and Helen both sighed in relief. Some customers could be very fussy and difficult.

June signalled to Helen and took her cut of \$35. In the salon, the money was split half-half. Whatever Helen did, it was halved with June, who paid for rental and electricity and supplies. What Helen earned was definitely much more than the overheads June paid but we had no choice. June was the boss and we were at her mercy.

It was soon 6pm and time to go home. Just as we were closing, a group of Indian guys started to head towards the direction of our salon.

I alerted Helen, who came out to take a look. It was an unusual sight of several burly men, covered in heavy tattoos and blingy gold chains.

The chains clinked and clanked as they walked, reminding everybody of their weight in gold.

“Who is the boss here?”

One of the Indian guys questioned in a deep low voice. It bordered on hostile, and I knew that these people were not here for a cup of tea nor a haircut. It was trouble.

“Is anything the matter?” Helen quizzed the guy in as polite a tone as she could muster.

The Indian guy chortled and from behind him, another Indian lady stepped up.

It was the Indian lady that Helen had done the rebonding for.

“You see my girl’s hair? She came here to do rebonding, you think its straight?” The Indian guy started to raise his voice slightly.

Helen looked at the hair and felt it with her hands.

“Rebonding is to straighten the hair. This is already the best we could do based on her previous condition.”

“What kind of shop are you all? You cheat customers and tell them to straighten their hair but this is not even straight!” Another guy, possibly the brother of the Indian lady, screamed at Helen.

By this time, June had come out of the salon to see what the commotion was about. The group of Indian men were now shuffling about restlessly. They did not seem too patient.

When June saw the group of big-sized men, she stood her ground.

“What do you want? Don’t make trouble here. We already did the rebonding. What do you want?” June retorted.

The Indian man kept his request short.

“You did not straighten her hair and made this mess. You have to compensate us.”

The man seemed to place heavy emphasis on the need to for some

34 As Coarse As Emporium

form of monetary remuneration. It had been clear what their intention was. The only question was – how much to compensate.

I saw Helen now almost on the verge of tears.

Our salon had always ordered supplies from well-known US brands. Over the years, the cost of hair products had risen due to inflation, but June did not increase her prices. She started to buy batches of lower-quality, less-concentrated hair products from China and Malaysia, and mixed them in with the higher-quality ones. This kept her bottom-line, while still being able to brag to customers about using high-end hair products.

Because June had never taken formal lessons on rebonding, she did not serve any rebonding clients. Helen had gone for a short training by the supplier on the usage of the chemicals but that was about it. June did not want to invest in a service that wasn't really the main draw of the salon. And since she wouldn't be able to get full fees from Helen's customers, there was no business need to use top-grade rebonding chemicals. She had bought the cheapest product there was on the market. They were cheap because they did not guarantee results.

June had done us in this time.

“Auntie, don't give us bullshit. You see her hair. You think this is straight meh? You all should close your shop now lah.”

By then, the other customers in our salon had fled hastily, afraid of what the group of burly men might do.

Without warning, one of the Indian guys made a sound.

“HHHHHHHHHHHAAAAAAARRRRRRRKKKKKKKKKKK”

“PPPPPPPPPPPUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUU”

A ball of spit flew out from his mouth and landed squarely in a spot in front of the shop.

“Helen, come here.” June shouted.

Helen approached them meekly.

“You did the customer, you compensate them.”

June’s request was absurdly unreasonable, and simply used Helen as a shield.

Helen took out her \$35 share from the rebonding.

“Here, I only have this. Please take it.”

Helen replied in a whimper, like a goat who had just seen a terribly fierce wolf and was scared out of its skin.

“Auntie, you think this is enough? You destroyed her hair, we want \$200.”

\$200? It was daylight robbery.

Deep down, I wanted to help Helen fix these unreasonable people but I too was transfixed with fear. At only ten years old, I was nothing compared to the towering figures of these gangsters. It was right to call them gangsters now as they were here to simply extort money. The Indian lady’s hair was straight and passable for a rebonding treatment. These people were obviously here to make trouble. I could smell the heavy and unmistakable pangs of alcohol that clung to their t-shirts.

“I don’t make a lot, please don’t do this.” Helen cried. She started to break down in tears, and begged the Indian guy to let her off.

“You all run a shop and you have no money? Close down lah!” the Indian guy started burst into a berserk.

June was unusually quiet. The Indian guy’s attention was now wholly on Helen. There was no reason for her to get involved.

Quietly, Helen complied with the Indian guy’s request. She switched off the lights and pulled down the metal roller shutter. By then, all the customers had already left, out of fear for their lives.

I could tell that Helen did not want the situation to spiral out of control anymore. June was clearly not going to help, and who knew what these thugs could do. Fishing into her work apron, June took out whatever was inside, which was her full day’s earnings.

The Indian guy commanded one of his lackeys to grab the cash and count it.

“Close your shop now, don’t do business anymore.”

Helen started to pull down the metal roller shutters from outside. It signalled that the shop was now officially closed, and the lights were switched off. The Indian lackey counted the money and said a number to his boss. The Indian guy made a hand gesture and they left. The Indian lady quickly followed along. Out of the corner of her lips, I caught the slightest smile escaping. They had accomplished their goal. Yet, we were now left broken.

Helen was frightened with hot tears.

About a few minutes later, when we were sure the gang had left, June opened the shutters again. Her relief now transformed into anger.

“You stupid woman. You can’t even do a simple rebonding. They chased away my customers. You better pay me back. \$20, and I will call it quits.”

June’s change in behaviour was fast and furious. A few moments ago, she was still quiet in front of the gangsters but now, she was seething like a thunder god. She needed to vent her frustrations.

Helen had no choice. She went to her purse and painstakingly took out the \$20. We were already behind on our monthly mortgage. That money meant nothing to June, but a lot to us.

I wanted to say something, something to defend Helen and to berate June.

For her selfishness.

For her timidness in front of those gangsters.

For her evil extortion from Helen.

But who was I? I was just a small bee in this vast expanse of treacherous jungle, where human hearts were dangerous places festering in The Emporium.

4

THE TOILET

“ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ”

The hand dryer came alive as I pressed on the big red button. Hot air blew up from the big nozzle, which quickly evaporated the water from my hands. I exited the toilet and made my way back to my friends.

The Emporium had three storeys of shops in total. Our salon was on the highest 3rd storey. Each storey was shaped like a rectangle, and had two toilet areas, one at each corner of the building.

The toilets in The Emporium were built in 1980, when the building was erected. One of the hallmarks of toilets here was the long, expanded urinals in the male toilet. These were single sheets of steel folded into a long rectangle shape and men would stand along the urinal. This made for easy plumbing because the entire urinal only had one outlet to the sewer, and it made sense for designs at that time. However, the long trough design sacrificed privacy, as you could see and hear other guys peeing beside you.

Because I grew up in the salon and used the toilets in The Emporium, I never once found them strange. Gradually, as I went to school and other malls, I began to find that these urinals revealed a little too much.

“Hey Bee! We are waiting for you! Quickly please!” Adrian, one of my good friends in The Emporium, rushed me.

I was playing with my group of friends at that time. One of our favourite past-time was playing catching in the building. At that time, The Emporium was experiencing a dismal decline in its crowds and more and more businesses had folded or moved out. This meant that the entire building had very few tenants operating and with that, it also became a paradise for children. The unobstructed corridors, coupled with hidden alleys into the carparks, toilets and fire escapes made for a perfect maze.

At that time, there was a shop on the 2nd storey called “Sunny and Rain Photos”. The owners were, you guessed it, Sunny and Rain. They





were a Singaporean Chinese couple with two kids. Back then, photographs weren't as easy as today. People had to buy cameras and film reels. Once they took enough pictures on their cameras, they would pass the film reel to photo shops like Sunny and Rain's to develop the film. Business was booming for them. Their daughter, Tanglin, was 1 year older than me and often played catching with me and a few other children in The Emporium.

"Okay, so today, let's play a more complicated version. Normally we would restrict ourselves to only Level 2 and 3 but let's do the whole building plus the carparks. This would make for a much longer and more fun game." Tanglin was reciting to us the rules for the upcoming catching game.

I was excited but nervous. The expanded map represented more opportunities for hiding but for a ten-year-old me at that time, the full building's floor area was rather overwhelming. Despite having spent so many years in the building, I still had not explored the full layout with all its hidden wonders. I was also the youngest in the group of seven and so naturally, one of the slowest. All these factors made my head dizzy.

"So, let's play scissors-papers-stone to decide who gets to be the catcher." Tanglin added.

Unlike the normal game of catching, us children in The Emporium had invented a much more fun version of catching. There would be a designated safe spot in the building known as the *jail*. Once the catcher caught his first target, the "prisoner" would have to sit at the *jail* and wait out the game. The other players who were still free would then hide but if the catcher left the *jail* empty, then other players could run to the area, free the prisoners, and thus render the catcher's efforts futile. The game ended after a certain time limit. The things that children could come up with our imaginations were simply fascinating at that time. We spent much time maximising our surroundings and extracting as much fun as possible.

Fortunately, I was not the catcher. I heaved a sigh of relief. It was difficult to be the catcher, given the expanded "map" that we were playing. Furthermore, I was often not good at outrunning others so I did not like being the catcher.

“I’ll count to hundred so quickly run!” Yao, the designated catcher, the son of an electronic games shop boss on the 2nd storey, and five years older than me, exclaimed.

All of us started to run in different directions, each of us already with an idea of our desired hiding spots.

For me, I was a little undecided but I made sure to get to the lower storeys. We had started our game on the 3rd storey so it was wise to get further away first. Some places such as the internal area of shops and restricted access areas were off-limits to the game. This was to give the catcher to have a fair chance of catching the victims.

I reached the 1st storey in no time. At that time, the 1st storey had two hidden corridors of shops hidden from the main view in the building. There were also hidden alcoves along these corridors and one had to physically walk to the alcove to see the inside. This provided much cover from the catcher because he had to move in to exactly in front of the alcove before being able to spot me. If I heard his footsteps, I would have time to run in the other direction and shake him off. It was quite a safe place, at least to a ten-year-old me.

I quickly stayed there and looked at a clock in one of the shops. It had been ten minutes since the game started. The only disadvantage of this spot was that I did not have the *jail* in my sights so I had no way of knowing the progress of the game. I also had no clue where my other comrades were hiding. I heard running sounds and shouting now and then but there were nowhere near me. Phew, I had picked a right spot this game, I thought to myself.

And then, I had the urge to pee. We were not allowed to hide in toilets because this represented difficulties to the catcher. One could lock himself up in a cubicle indefinitely and the catcher would be powerless. However, I really wanted to pee so this was definitely allowed.

I had never used the toilets on the 1st storey so I was taken aback when I entered. The layout was larger than the one on the 3rd storey, where our salon was. It seemed a little too big, and there were two separate partitions inside, forming a zig-zag configuration.

Just as I entered the toilet, I heard the sound of quick footsteps from

42 As Coarse As Emporium

outside. In a heartbeat, I knew it was the all-too-familiar sound of my friends running. The flip-flops that they wore slammed the ground with a distinctive sound. Nobody ran like that in The Emporium, except us.

I quickly went into a toilet stall to hide. I knew it was not allowed, but nobody had to know. The footsteps slowed down, and I heard the flip-flops now enter the toilet. It was obviously Yao. If I had not gone into a stall, I would not be able to exit the toilet. Yao would simply have to wait outside the toilet entrance, and the moment I exited, I would go to “jail”. My heart raced.

Even though we had already decided that toilets were off-limits, from previous catching games, I knew that the older kids still hid in them. The logic was simple. The catcher could never truly know whether you were inside or not. Everybody relied on implicit trust for the game to run smoothly. However, some of us took the easy way out. When the time limit was up, they would come out of hiding and falsely declare that they had hidden in an allowed area, even though the catcher had gone past that declared place many times.

Yao was obviously one of these unscrupulous players. I heard the slamming of a door. In the 1st storey toilet, there were a row of 8 consecutive toilet stalls with doors. I had hidden in the fifth one. Yao must have been opening the doors to check if anybody was hiding in them.

It took a cheater to know a cheater.

Just as the first door slammed wide open, the second door started to bang open as well. I panicked. I didn’t want to be caught hiding in the toilet. Even though it was just a game, we treated it very seriously. When the countdown started, each of us became immersed in this surreal reality, where not getting caught was paramount. It was only by treating the game as life-and-death would these games come alive.

Beads of perspiration started to trickle down my forehead. By now, my heart was palpitating incessantly. The fear of getting caught pounded against my head. I had to think of something. And quick.

The third door slammed wide open, its frame hitting the inner toilet stall wall and rebounding back. Yao’s playstyle was cutthroat. He would not leave any stones uncovered. He wanted to win. Badly.

The fourth door now swung open. Yao's flip-flop had paced over to the fifth stall. If his hunch were correct, one of the players had hidden in the toilets. Yao had combed the usual spots and hadn't caught anybody. He was bound to find someone here.

"PPPPPPPPPPPPP IIIIIIIIIIIIIINNNNNNNNNNGGGGGGG"

The fifth door slammed wide open.

There was nobody there. Yao scowled and continued to slam the other doors.

He was unsuccessful. Perhaps they were hiding in other toilet stalls. Yao had only combed the 1st storey's toilets. There were 2 more storeys to scour. He left the toilet and the sound of his flip-flops evaporated into the distance.

I heaved a heavy sigh of relief. In the brief moment that Yao was opening the fifth door, I had managed to squeeze through the slit in between the toilet stalls back to the fourth one. My small frame provided an advantage in this area. Yao had not noticed me. The game was still on.

I clutched my bladder. I had forgotten that I needed to pee. I couldn't hold it anymore. I went out of the toilet stall, towards the urinals. It was late in the afternoon and the cleaners did their rounds only once in the morning and once at night. The toilet stalls were full of discarded tissue paper and urine stains. The toilet bowls were also besmirched with traces of sticky faeces. The smell was getting intolerable. I wanted to just do my business at the urinal and exit.

Once again, I confirmed that the coast was clear before exiting.

The standing urinals were located in the innermost part of the entire toilet area. I went to it and started to do my usual business. There were two other men standing at each corner of the long urinal so I had no choice but to stand in the middle.

Perhaps it was because my senses were heightened during the catching game, but as I peed, I became keenly aware of the two men's' eyes being trained on me. If you're a guy, you would know that this was not a comfortable feeling. I looked at my own crotch and started to see if I was aiming correctly and I was, so I was puzzled as to why the two men

were staring at me.

Strangely, they were holding their crotches out but not peeing. This was even more confusing so I became worried at this point. Helen had told me that there were often gang fights happening in the dark nights and I was scared that these two strange men would cause harm to me. Worse still, they could kidnap me.

I tried to stop my pee. I wanted to run out and make a beeline from there. It didn't matter whether I had a full bladder or not anymore. All I wanted to do was run out of the toilet.

Out of the blue, one of the toilet doors opened. I saw a guy, in his fifties, with a balding scalp, not wearing a shirt and wearing only denim jeans, standing at the urinal. Another guy kneeled down and had his face against the older guy's crotch. I could not see clearly what they were doing. I imagined the guy must have been pretty uncomfortable on his knees. And yet, his mouth seemed to be full of something. His face looked slightly high and his eyes were rolled back.

"Boy, you like that? Wanna join?" One of the men at the other end of the urinal started to address me. He then made a motion of flicking his crotch in my direction.

I quickly ran out of the toilet at breakneck speed. If this were a sprint with Usain Bolt, I would certainly be a close second behind him. I just wanted to get the hell out of that place, out of the confused mess.

The catching game ended, with the runners winning and Yao losing. But from that very day, I became scared of secluded toilets. I told Helen about what happened and she brought me back to the toilet but I never saw such a scene again. There was no topless man nor man exposing their crotches. I had doubts in my mind whether I had seen ghosts. I began to question my sanity slightly.

Years later, after I became familiar with Internet forums, I began reading those reminiscing about The Emporium. An anonymous guy had written that he had made a police report about outrage of modesty. He was also in the toilet on the 1st storey.

I heaved a sigh of relief.

I had not gone crazy.

I had only seen a thin slice of the wonders in The Emporium.

5

THE GAMEBOY SHOP

One of the favourite pastimes of the Chinese Singaporeans in the past was gambling. At a time when there were no Pokémon Go nor Candy Crush, people only had a few select entertainment choices. One of them was betting on 4D, which was a legalised form of betting in Singapore. Other types included horse-racing and soccer results, but these involved more research and daily follow-up, making them prohibitive for new-comers.

4D was a simple game where the punter simply shaded a 4-digit number and placed varying amounts of bets on it. On every Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday, Singapore Pools (the only legal operator for gambling in Singapore) would release 23 award-winning numbers. Of the 23, 10 were consolations prizes, 10 were starter prizes and three were top prizes. Placing \$1 SGD *big* could win you \$2,000 SGD if your number was the top prize. At that time, buying a decent house only cost \$60,000, so it was quite an easy way to get rich.

Toto was the other game where punters picked 6 numbers from 1 to 45. They could choose to buy more than 6 numbers by placing bigger bets. The results were announced every Monday and Thursday. If you hit all 6 numbers, you would take the grand prize of \$1 million, which was a significant sum at that time.

The Emporium had another moniker – “The Gambling Capital” or 賭城 in Mandarin. Many of the tenants and proprietors were avid gamblers. At that time, much of the community in The Emporium were uneducated and built their businesses with their years of experience in particular trades. There were salons, florists, restaurants, manpower agencies, photocopying businesses, pubs, uniform shops, tailors, etc. Each of them brought their own trade to the building and it was a one-stop service for many residents in the area. However, all of them shared that one belief, which was gambling.

There were pros and cons to gambling. Most people frown upon gambling today, as it is construed as a wanton vice that will ultimately

exhaust one's wealth. Yet, placing a few dollars of bets represented hope for many of the tenants, away from the daily mundane routine of business. That sweet excitement of watching the results being announced, and checking your own bets against the winning numbers, was divine for them. It was exhilarating. Almost like watching a live wrestling match and your favourite wrestler taking down the opponent.

The monetary reward felt good, but for many, the hope and excitement of possibly becoming a millionaire was even more attractive than the actual money.

Of course, many people also fell prey to their compulsions and lost money over time. Over the years, some people sold their houses and businesses to fund their gambling addictions. To me, it was a fine line between treating it as a hobby and turning it into an addiction. Yet, the latter always seemed to be the ultimate end for many.

Due to the rampant demand and interest in betting, many people saw this as a perfect business opportunity. Bookmakers or bookies started to appear in the building. Some punters believed that Singapore Pools had a system of controlling winning numbers and minimising the amount of pay-out to punters. Others thought that the format of 4D and Toto were restrictive and wanted other ways to place bets. Whatever the case was, there was certainly huge demand for such illegal bookies.

Being a bookie was risky business, but the rewards were great. Bookies offered punters security in the bets in that because they were not the ones determining the winning numbers, there was no way that they could rig the system. Bookies also offered creative ways of placing bets such as just taking the last three digits of winning numbers.

One of these bookies was Big Backside.

Big Backside was an average-height lady who ran the electronic games store on the 2nd storey. She often sported her favourite orange floral print cotton shirt and black pants. She was affectionately given the name due to the enormous size of her rear. Sometimes, she had trouble walking and often wobbled unsteadily from side to side. The lift doors barely fit her unbridled bottom.



Her main business was selling electronic devices such as PlayStations and Gameboys. At that time, the first Gameboy Colour had launched and was a big hit globally. Many people queued up, wanting to get a slice of the new games. Business was brisk for a while.

Yet, while the craze continued, more and more people started to import the Gameboys to cash in on the market. Everybody vied for a piece of the pie and Big Backside's business steadily declined. There had to be another way of making her business flourish one more time.

Big Backside wracked her brains and thought for a long time. In the April when I was ten years old, I pestered Helen to buy me a Gameboy. I had been quite a nerdy boy in school and when I saw the amazing graphics on the Gameboy that my classmate had, I could not control myself. I kicked up a fuss and wanted Helen to buy me one.

Aunt Helen did not earn much at the salon but whatever she had, she often spent it all on herself and me. I am grateful for the love she has shown me, even though I am adopted. Miraculously, in the same week, Helen had betted on her usual go-to numbers and one of the them had turned out to be the first-prize. Both of us cried out in joy. Helen collected her winnings and then brought me down to Big Backside's shop.

The Gameboy Colour was released in 1998 October. It featured a colour screen with an 8-bit processor and offered flagship games such as Pokémon and Super Mario. The way to use the Gameboy Colour was simple. Much like mobile phone games, each game title was offered as a separate cartridge and one had to buy the Gameboy Colour hand-held console, as well as the cartridge to play the game.

I had sat in my classmate's mom's car a week ago and he was playing the Gameboy Colour. He had loaned me the console and those five minutes was all the time needed to persuade me to want it at all costs. I had watched the Pokémon shows on the television and was already a big fan of Pokémon. I did not need much more convincing.

When Helen brought me down to Big Backside's store, I was dazzled by the array of game titles on display. The possibilities and the fun and challenge each game title provided swamped me. The cover art of each title was also expertly printed with bright colours and powerful anima-

tions, all working together to persuade the customer to buy them.

And then I saw it – Pokémon Yellow. It was the flagship and most ground-breaking game at that time. If you are foreign to the concept of Pokémon, I can only best describe it using the analogy of the zoo. You were like a zookeeper who could buy new animals and train them for competitions. Whoever could train the strongest elephant or the fiercest tiger or the biggest whale to compete with the animals of others won the game (no, I am strongly against animal cruelty).

One of the top draws of games at that time was that there was no Internet. In short, when you played the game, you had to fully understand and grasp everything on your own. There were Pokémon guidebooks being published and these sold like hotcakes. It was the equivalent of a modern Wikipedia, where you were given instructions and advice on what to do in the game to progress. But the mystery of not knowing everything in the game only added to the appeal of the entire game. Even till today, I could not replicate another game experience like my first time playing the Gameboy. Gone are the days where one had to use his full intellect and mental capacity to meet the challenges of the gameplay. Today, we all simply watch YouTube for game reviews and read wikis before purchasing the game. There is less excitement and enigma.

Big Backside looked happy to serve Helen and me. She asked me what game I wanted. ten-year-old me pointed eagerly to the glass display cabinet where a copy of Pokémon Yellow sat. However, Big Backside did not take out the game. Instead, she ushered Helen and me into a concealed backroom and produced a huge red plastic bag. Inside the plastic bag, I saw so many game cartridges that there must have been hundreds of them. Yet, I also noticed that they did not have any original boxes on them, nor were the cartridges game-specific. Instead, they had a small information sticker pasted on them that indicated the big titles in the cartridge and how many games they contained.

Big Backside explained to us that 1 cartridge contained a hundred plus games and that we would not have to spend money again to buy another cartridge. Aunt Helen did not quite understand so Big Backside used the analogy of a DVD player. The Gameboy is like a DVD player and we need to insert movie DVDs into the system. However, imagine

an omnibus DVD that contained a hundred movies. You would spend hours watching that one DVD. It was value for money.

The concept here was similar, one cartridge contained many games but it also cost a bit more. However, the total savings was much more than buying the hundred games. I really wanted the Gameboy at that time, even though it was a big-ticket item and we were barely making ends meet. I told her I wanted it. I could see Helen bargaining with Big Backside for a while before handing over several wads of \$50 SGD bills.

“Ah Bee ah, Mommy buy this game for you. You promise to be a good and obedient boy, okay?”

I promised.

I was ready to promise anything for the game.

I even wanted to sell my soul, if it was needed.

However, at that moment, I felt an acute tinge of pain in my heart. I knew how much Helen made from each customer at the salon. She had been a hairdresser her whole life and if one knew the industry, one would also know that most hairdressers had very damaged hands. Round-the-clock exposure to the harsh chemicals in shampoos, perm lotions and hair sprays had caused the epidermis of the hands to disintegrate over time. Helen had no finger prints as the skin on her thumbs had been so badly defaced that it just felt like crumpled paper. June also took half of whatever earnings Helen made at the salon for the salon’s expenses, so for Helen to part with that hard-earned money to satisfy my needs was heart-wrenching. Yet, I also wanted to play the game and at that moment, nothing more mattered to me than this.

To the outsider and to us, nothing seemed wrong with the transaction. Yet, the cartridges were actually contraband goods. Programmers had managed to get hold of the data of the original games and then amassed them into these counterfeit cartridges. The game cartridges were playable and cheap, but selling them was illegal. It was my first brush with the wrong side of the law, at ten-years-old.

I had a difficult time playing the games at first. I spent every day and

night playing the Gameboy Colour. Right after school, I would return to the salon and sit in a corner to play. This also became the reason why I needed glasses a year later, as my sight worsened from staring at the small, 8-bit coloured screen.

However, the silver lining was that because of the difficulty of the games in the Gameboy, I also became a little more intelligent. In the world of games, I had to solve problems on my own. Helen could not afford a guidebook for me so if I didn't know how to play a part of the game, I would ask around. Whenever I was stuck in a difficult round, I would try to solve it. It taught me the powerful of resourcefulness and to never be afraid to approach others to ask.

I also began to know what a bookie did and appreciated Big Backside's sideline job. I often saw Helen and June write numbers onto a piece of paper and wrapped them together with wads of cash and a rubber band. They then took the escalators down to the 2nd storey to pass it discreetly to Big Backside.

2 months after I bought the Gameboy, there was news that the police were starting to watch the bookies in the building. Big Backside was one of the more prominent bookies as she enjoyed considerable business in the building.

One of the problems of betting with bookies is that in the event that you really won a lot of money, these bookies could disappear overnight and without a trace. There was absolutely no recourse for punters because buying from bookies was illegal in the first place. As such, there was a big problem of trust. Big Backside overcame this because she owned a unit in The Emporium, which was her electronic games store. Thus, punters were assured by the “collateral” provided by her business.

The Emporium was a tight-knit building. Although each business operated in their disparate ways, the love for betting united the entire building. Thus, when people started to notice strangers consistently camping at certain areas in the building, the suspicion that these could be policemen staking out started to float into everybody's minds. An invisible network of informers started to form and many of these bookies and punters were alerted whenever men that could be the police were observed in the building. They signalled each other, and dropped messages

in soft whispers. Everybody avoided transactions when they suspected the police staking out. It was a strange but comforting sign of unity.

Just one week later, one of the bookies was caught red-handed taking bets and both the punter and the bookie were arrested on the spot in The Emporium. For a few days afterwards, everybody was on high alert. Most of the bookies had fled from the building or refused to take bets for a while. Long queues formed at the legal Singapore Pools outlet that was located on the 1st storey of The Emporium. Everybody was scared of getting caught and going to jail.

Real jail this time.

One of our neighbours on the 3rd storey was a beautician called Iris. She ran a reputable business, which offered various types of specialised facial massages. An ornamental golden gourd, strung from many thin strands of gilded copper wire sat at the counter in her shop, together with an assortment of Thai wealth deities. Her shop was constantly bustling with customers and she was also an avid gambler. It was well-known at that time that she frequently placed big bets of \$100 on lucky 4D numbers which she claimed “manifested” themselves to her during the day.

“June and Helen! Come, come! I bought the famous Whampoa oyster omelette for you! Come!” Iris shouted exuberantly, laying down two packets of food on the table outside our salon.

“Come Bee, have some too!” Iris was in a particularly good mood that day. Whampoa oyster omelette referred to a famous hawker in the Whampoa wet market in Singapore who peddled oyster omelette, which was a dish made from fried egg batter and small oysters. Pork lard was stirred-fried into the dish and it made for an irresistible comfort food.

“Wah, Iris, what happened to you?” June questioned but her eyes were already trained on the delicious omelette.

“Aiya June, no big deal lah. I won the 4D yesterday. The Buddha’s number. 8015. Mega big prize! I am going to collect my money later from Big Backside.”

With that, Iris went to the next door and knocked on their door, deliv-

ering the good news and more food.

Both Helen and I knew it. A month back, The Emporium had celebrated the birthday of the Four-Faced Buddha statue and a lavish ceremony had been held. During the ceremony, 8015 was a lucky number that was consecrated by the Buddha. Many people had given up buying the number after it did not appear for week. But yesterday night, it was the second prize. Iris must have won big, given her big bets.

Helen started to open the packet of oyster omelette. The smell was now all over the salon, the crispy fried batter devilishly tempting us to have a bite. I had a spoonful. God, it was delicious. And it was also free of charge. In The Emporium, it was believed to be good karma to share some of your winnings with others. It was the classic concept of give and take. Many believed that by giving a little away, it made you receptive towards more good luck, which created a virtuous circle.

As Iris went round the 3rd storey to deliver food, the atmosphere was rosy and delightful. Nobody the The Emporium had won a big prize for a long time. Perhaps Buddha had indeed revealed himself to Iris.

However, on that fateful night, there was a commotion coming from Big Backside's unit. We went to the glass balustrade and looked down. A group of five policemen had handcuffed her and busted her operations.

The next day, Big Backside did not return and everybody assumed the worst had happened to her. Most aggrieved was probably Iris, who had turned up at the shop to demand that her husband pay her back the money from the winnings. However, he had played dumb and abstained from the matter.

I could see Iris's frustration mounting by the day. \$200,000 in Singapore at that time was an astronomical sum of money.

On the third day, Big Backside returned to the shop. A crowd had gathered to ask her what happened, but she kept quiet. A big sigh of relief emanated from Iris as she quickly rushed down to grill Big Backside about her winnings. Everybody made way for Iris.

"It's good to see you back, Winnie (Big Backside). I won \$200,000.

Here is the ticket that you scribbled and the proof!”

Iris handed the green slip that Big Backside had jotted on a few days ago. It was clearly her handwriting and in her usual style of writing.

Big Backside pretended to take one look at it, and then shredded it up. Iris saw this and went pink in her face.

“Why? What are you doing? You don’t want to pay up?” Iris accused Big Backside.

“As per the policy here, I was caught by the police. All winnings don’t count on that day because I was caught.” With that, Big Backside returned to doing her things, without a care for Iris.

Some of the crowd started to whisper about this unwritten policy of bookies. I had never seen Iris being so angry and humiliated at the same time. It was dirty of Big Backside to play this move, but what she said also somewhat made sense. Since she was caught by the police for illegally book-making, it also followed that her customers’ winnings for that night were rendered void. She was currently out on bail, and her case was pending in the courts. It was unfair, but true.

Iris wanted to kick up a fuss. Like a bull in a China shop, she took one of the display set Gameboys and flung it out of the shop. It landed with a large smash on the ground, and the screen’s glass cover disintegrated into a million pieces.

“Please leave before I call the police. You know the rules, Iris.” Big Backside was calm.

She knew that she had won. Iris could vent and break stuff, but if Big Backside could weasel out of not paying out \$200,000, it was still to her advantage.

Vehemently, Iris stormed out of the electronic game shop, cursing and swearing.

Iris had thought that she was blessed by the Buddha.

Yet, the one having the last laugh, was the one with the biggest and dirtiest backside.

6

THE TATTOO PARLOUR

Getting a tattoo today is a process of Googling other online samples, finding artists with good Google or Yelp reviews, and then heading down. In the past, when there was no Internet, you relied on the recommendations of friends. Once you entered the shop, you were then shown photobooks of designs, which you could choose from.

Helen had always wanted to be a tattoo artist. She told me that when she was young, she only had interest in two things – hair and drawing. Naturally, the path of being a tattoo artist appealed to her. Yet, when she heard the unspoken rule that tattoo artists would only take on students who themselves had a tattoo, she turned to hairstyling. Helen told me that she liked tattoos, but didn't want to get a tattoo herself.

From the salon, if we turned left, at the end of the corridor, there was this famous tattoo parlour.

As a kid, I always spent my excess time wandering in The Emporium. At that time, Singapore was undergoing a modern redevelopment. Newer malls located near subway stations had begun to operate and they drew large swathes of customers due to the convenience and proximity. Malls like The Emporium began on a slow decline, but this turn of events had also breathed fresh life into the building. The newer, contemporary malls charged sky-high rates for their rentals, promising tenants with unprecedented and unbridled footfall. The trades in these malls became more commercialised and expensive over time. Older businesses and crafts tended to shift towards the older malls, which meant that The Emporium contained services that you would not find in a newer, modern place.

The tattoo parlour was one of these master craft services.

I was ten years old when they moved in. After the shop was renovated, small crowds of tattoo-covered youths started congregating outside the unit, awaiting their turns to put ink to their bodies.

From the looks of it, one knew it was a tattoo parlour. The transparent

glass walls were adorned with many pictures of past works of its customers. These ranged from full-back dragons and buddhas to smaller designs such as skulls, unicorns, motifs on arms and legs. There was one panel of glass solely reserved for their full-body designs, where they pasted A4 photographs of men with sceneries painted from the top of their neck all the way to their butts and to their feet. I was always in awe of the elaborate designs, which had to wrap around the contours of the back, butt and the arms to form one full-fledged piece. Some of the pictures had perkier butts, while some had flat ones. The contours of the butt provided additional inspiration for the designs, as I clearly remember one design where the protruding butt served as a canvas for a drawing of Mount Fuji. They added dimensions and motion to the mountains, making them seem to almost pop out from the cracks of the butt.

The bosses of the tattoo parlour were Rough Face and his wife. Rough Face, as his name suggested, looked very no-nonsense. He suffered from massive acne in his youth and it was evidenced by the copious, unhealed acne scars on his face. His hair was always in a short, curly but unkempt mess. Rough Face's wife was even more hooligan-like, a 30s lady with fully dyed blond hair, and often wearing a crop-top which did little to hide the colourful phoenixes spread across the length of her shoulders.

While there were other tattoo parlours spread out across The Emporium, the strange phenomenon was that Rough Face always had a bustling crowd. It didn't matter what time of the day it was. Most of the people coming for tattoos seemed to be on leave every day, as they strolled into the place in the mornings, afternoons and evenings. Maybe they were big bosses who did their own businesses and could show up at the office anytime. Or maybe they were jobless.

It was only through the rumours and feedback by other salon customers who were also customers of Rough Face that we found out why their business was so good. The prices offered by him were super competitive compared to the rest of the tattoo services in The Emporium.

There was always a reason behind such things. Helen and I wanted to find out why. By chance, one of the workers there was also a customer of Helen's.





“Aiyo, auntie, you want to know why it’s so cheap?” the customer quipped

“Why? Your boss sacrifice his profit margins?” Helen retorted.

“No lah, tell you a secret. I’ve received another offer by my friend who is also opening a tattoo parlour in town. I’ll be leaving in two weeks so I don’t mind sharing with you. You know that for tattooing, we are supposed to use disposable needles, right? Well, Joseph (Rough Face) will tell us not to throw them away after use. The next morning when I come into the studio, the needle box is always full again but the needles are without their original seal. You know why lah.”

I gasped at this. In school, I had learnt that many diseases could be transmitted via blood. If Rough Face were indeed recycling needles, then it would be a clear ethical issue. But then again, the customers should know that there was no free lunch. If they thought they could get something cheaper at the same quality, they were in for a ride.

From then on, I started developing a slight pity for the young adolescents that hung out around the parlour. I shrugged to think about what kind of bacteria and viruses crawled on the sharp points of the needles. In tattooing, a needle is hooked up to a tattoo machine, which has a motor. The motor moves the needle up and down at a fast speed, puncturing the skin constantly. The ink disperses and when the needle leaves the skin, the mini vacuum created sucks the ink downwards, depositing the ink into the dermis. When new skin heals over it, tattoos form. Every single time the needle pierces the skin is a blood transfusion. If the needle isn’t sterilised, you would be literally sharing blood with the previous customer.

Another peculiar trend was that Rough Face’s workers never stayed long at the job. They would always wear a black polo tee with the words “Joseph’s Tattoos” printed on their backs. Once every few weeks, Rough Face would be showing a new guy around the parlour, getting him familiar with the tools, the chairs, the layout.

One of them was Jeron. Jeron was a well-built tattoo artist in his 30s. I remembered him because he looked kind, with his short hair combed back from his forehead and big lips like Angelia Jolie. Jeron always had

a snack nearby so when I passed by the parlour, he would hand me something. I remember one of my favourites was this curry puff (a small fried dough snack consisting of curry with chicken and potatoes) where he bought from a local eatery near his house. The chicken was always in generous portions, tender and super savoury with the curry.

When Jeron was working on his client, I would pass by and he would usher me in to take a look. Rough Face did not like me in his compound but as a ten-year-old kid, I was harmless. Besides, the woman clientele always found children cute and so, Rough Face did not say anything further.

Jeron's customers were mostly young guys and he specialised in tattoos on the back. The back tattoos were massive projects which took a few weeks to complete. Most people wanted big dragons or fierce warriors. They symbolised vitality and courage but to me, enduring so much pain only to be stigmatised by society then, was rather ignorant. But maybe a warrior was courageous and ignorant. Singapore was at a time of cultural and economic reform. There was strong disdain and biases towards people with tattoos. They were considered hippies and associated with secret societies and gangs. However, tattoos also stoked fear in many and one good thing was that people in public transport would automatically give in to you. I imagined that I would like the freedom and fear that they brought.

The sharp round liner needle in Jeron's tattoo machine vibrated mercilessly on the back of his client. I could see the outline of *Guan Yu*, a famous Chinese warrior during the Han dynasty of China. *Guan Yu* was known for his great physical courage and skill. A back tattoo of *Guan Yu* probably meant that this client wanted to exemplify his bravery and loyalty to brotherhood. The outline of *Guan Yu* was done in a purple stencil ink, and Jeron was doing the outlines meticulously. The client's head was face-down on the tattoo bed, and oblivious to my presence.

"Jeron, there is a small mistake here." I whispered and pointed Jeron to a small spot around *Guan Yu*'s face. His nose had veered slightly off the original outline, created a mini-wart on his cheek area. Jeron noticed it

immediately and stuck out his tongue at me. Fortunately, the client had not noticed our exchange. With an expert movement, he moved the tattoo machine up and started to redrew the outline to cover up the minor error. The mistake now became just one of the many creases on *Guan Yu's* tough face. It had disappeared.

Jeron's skills were rather impressive. At that time, only artists of a certain level could embark on big projects such as the back. It was time-consuming and tedious, and one had to spread the project out over a few weeks. The skin also recovered in the meanwhile and created different layers of healing, which made the job even more difficult. I had learnt all of this during Jeron's off time, when he would share about some of his past works. He was proud of his work.

Out of the blue, a large shout came from the distance.

“BBUUUMMM BBUUUMMM BBUUUMMM”

“BBUUUMMM BBUUUMMM BBUUUMMM”

The quick thumping of the floor of The Emporium signalled that somebody was running on the 3rd storey at a breakneck speed. Jeron quickly stopped his needle. Accidents happened when one wasn't alert or when there were disturbances in the environment.

Rough Face started to look out of the tattoo parlour. Immediately, he burst into a chase after somebody. By this time, most of the tenants on the 3rd storey had come out of their units. Helen and June were also outside, with their work aprons still on and hair clumps stuck to them.

A man clad in a black attire was making his way down the staircase, towards the 1st storey and towards the exit. Nobody seemed to step forward to stop him, as everybody was trying to register what had happened. A small duffel bag flapped against the thief's body. It was probably the stolen loot.

“Jeron, should we help Joseph (Rough Face)?” I asked Jeron, wondering whether we could try to block the path of the robber by taking other shortcuts.

“Stay inside, Bee. Don't bother. It's not our business.” With that, Jeron retreated inside the shop, determined to stay out of the fiasco.

I disregarded his advice and went to spectate the chase. As the robber neared the staircase landing, it seemed like Rough Face was almost going to nab him from behind. He was only about 2 meters away.

With a swoosh of his hand, the robber reached into his pocket and flicked a fistful of reddish-orange powder at Rough Face. From afar, it was hard to tell what the mysterious powder was but it erupted in a mist in Rough Face's face. Rough Face stumbled, and the mysterious powder seemed to momentarily blind him. He rubbed his eyes in irritation but continued to give chase.

With one good eye, he was not far away from the thief. As the thief reached the 1st storey, Rough Face lunged forward, and tackled him to the ground. They connected with the brick wall near the lifts with a heavy thud.

The fall seemed to inflict heavy damage to the both of them, as they grimaced in pain. By this time, another two staff from a foot reflexology shop had rushed forward and pinned the black suited guy to the floor. He started to struggle, but to no avail, as his arms were held in an iron grip.

A barber on the 3rd storey, known only as Old Man, caught up behind them, panting.

"He stole my cash! He stole my cash! Somebody call the police!" Old Man shouted hysterically.

As the police arrived a few minutes later, a crowd had gathered. Some people had started to question the thief, but he gave no answers. He had been strapped to a chair with a thick rubber wire provided by the local locksmith. He squirmed but could not escape. A few men guarded the thief, preventing him from escaping.

The stench of curry lingered around Rough Face. He was rubbing his eyes and trying to remove the powder. The thief had reached for a handful of the spicy condiment and intended to blind and disrupt his captors' senses.

I sneezed, my nose catching a whiff of the curry powder.

"Ah Bee, don't stay too close." Helen tried to pull me away from Rough

Face. She had always been wary of guys with tattoos, a result of the stigma in society.

The police took down statements from the relevant personnel. Old Man was thanking Rough Face profusely for his heroic deed. The thief had broken into his shop and threatened him with a small knife. He then scooped thick wads of cash from a few big Milo steel tins where Old Man had stashed money and made it off. Had it not been for Rough Face, the thief would have gotten scot-free with half of Old Man's life savings!

Rough Face's wife had caught up and busy tending to him. He had sustained a gash on his right arm when he lunged forward and hit the brick wall. The police had asked if he needed treatment but he politely declined. The Old Man wanted to give Rough Face a reward but he had also declined.

Rough Face made his way towards his shop. His wife followed suit, the both of them not saying anything. Just like that, nobody seemed particularly grateful towards this tattoo-clad hero of the day.

A few months later, Jeron was apprehended by the police for misuse of drugs. He had also been uncovered to be the one recycling needles and repackaging them for sale to other tattoo places. Rough Face had been wrongly maligned by many.

In a time of need, he had stepped up to stop evil. But had been regarded as the Evil for too long.

All these because of a tattoo.

To society, it was the mark of the devil.

To Rough Face, it was an art, a craft that was to be preserved within the four walls of The Emporium.

7**THE FACIAL PLACE**

“OOWWWWWWWWWWW”

Helen flinched in pain. She was doing her quarterly facial in the Facial Place. Iris was extracting the pimples from Helen’s face with her black-head extractor, which was a round steel hard wire that applied pressured on the pimple, causing it to pop.

“No pain, no gain, Helen.”

Iris talked from behind her face goggles. When the pimples and black-heads burst, they secreted oil-filled pus, which tended to squirt in all directions. The goggles protected Iris’s eyes, so that she could extract them without fear.

I watched this from afar, fascinated by the speed of Iris’s deft hands. They moved in a clock work manner, shifting from using a needle to create a small hole, before pressing down with the blackhead extractor to burst the pimple, and then using an alcohol swab to disinfect the area. She repeated this in a precise manner, unresponsive to the pain that Helen showed.

“Okay, all done. Let’s do the mask now.”

Iris passed Helen a mirror to look into. Her face was now puffy and red from the numerous extractions. But it was a small price to pay for fair skin. She thanked Iris and lay down, preparing herself for the enjoyment of the relaxing and cooling clay mask.

From the salon, if you turned right and walked to the end, you would see a giant sauna at the very end. To use the toilet, you had to walk all the way to the sauna, and make a sharp left.

Before you reached the toilet, there was a corridor of shops. There was another shop that you could not miss. The words “FACIAL PLACE” was cut out of blue vinyl stickers and pasted onto the shop’s signboard.

Facial Place was owned by Iris. From what Helen had told me, Iris had





been the wife of a rich construction boss. She was born in the year of the Tiger according to the lunar calendar. The couple had consulted a *Feng Shui* Consultant, who had warned that Iris's fierce zodiac would bring misfortune to her husband. The both of them had dismissed the advice as nonsense and were happily married for two years before her husband was killed in a fatal car crash.

Iris was originally from the northern part of Taiwan. She kept her impressively long hair about 1 inch past her buttocks and often wore a sexy, tight-fitting crop top. She spoke mostly Hokkien with her clientele in her high-strung and shrill voice.

At that time, most shops in The Emporium had the usual parquet tiles, ceramic tiles or vinyl tiles. Iris's brother was also involved in interior design and had personally rebuilt the entire facade for her. He had also raised a two-inch black granite floor for iris. The shops' walls were then recessed inwards about 2 cm, giving the impression that the shop sat on a premium spread of flooring. It was a rather impressive piece of architecture, different from everybody's units.

Iris received her training from the Imelda Academy in Singapore. At that time, Imelda Academy was the premiere beauty institution in Singapore, where instructors were flown over from US and Europe to conduct the different modules. She had used the insurance pay-out from her husband to attend the expensive training course. After completing her training, she came to The Emporium and enjoyed much success with her ultra-modern techniques. She offered many exclusive services such as chemical-peeling facials, eyebrow-tattooing, and chakra massages. Iris had a daughter from a previous marriage, who lived in Taiwan with her parents.

As Iris's business boomed, she required assistants with her work. Her staff always worked for about a year before leaving and she would post ads in the Straits Times, Singapore's leading newspapers. The last staff she would ever hire was Zoe.

Zoe was a plump and fierce-looking woman from Johor, Malaysia. She was always in thick white make-up, which made her face looks ghastly pale. Her hair was dyed a bright blond yellow, with streaks of natural black in between and cut to neck-length. Her stomach protruded from

the black tight t-shirt that she always wore. It was easy to mistake Zoe as the boss of Facial Place rather than Iris.

She had also previously worked as a hostess in a local social escort service. Taking pity on Zoe, who was a single mother, Iris had taken Zoe under her wing and taught her facial techniques. Zoe's experience with customers in her hostess days made her an instant hit with Iris's customers.

Zoe's daughter, Tina was one year older than me. As a single mother, Zoe was in a similar plight as Helen. Unable to afford the conventional expensive childcare, after Tina's school time, Zoe brought her over to the Facial Place while she worked for Iris.

Tina was a short-hair, dark-skinned girl who often wore off-shoulder floral print dresses. Decked out in her sandals, she resembled the beach girl in those Hollywood movie posters.

Tina kept to herself at first but one day, Helen saw me looking through the Facial Place's glass walls at her and smiled.

"Hey Zoe, how's your daughter? Wanna introduce her to my son?"
Helen quipped.

Zoe was more than happy to introduce a playmate to her daughter as that would keep her busy. I quickly became good friends with Tina. Helen had recently brought me to a departmental store and bought a brand-new Monopoly set. Tina and I would often sit alongside the empty corridors outside the salon, lay out a makeshift mat made of newspapers and start our game time.

Monopoly was, to me, the best board game invented. Before monopoly, I used to play Snakes and Ladders with Helen but Monopoly presented a different kind of challenge. The increased variability of the game, coupled with the ability to feel like a property tycoon made me feel on top of the world. I would often beat Tina in the game after 2 hours of playing, proud of my intellect.

Tina was one of the first girls I had truly interacted with on a deeper level. After Monopoly, we would hold hands and roam the entire length of The Emporium. Helen always gave me an extra coin and we would

also play in the arcade shop downstairs. Life was relaxed and carefree, and Tina's smile never failed to make my heart race.

I often entered the Facial Place with Tina and we would also sit inside and sip on chrysanthemum tea that Zoe made. At the back of the shop, Iris and Zoe would be servicing customers behind a translucent sliding door. On one such occasion, we were in the shop and I overhead Iris ask Zoe in Hokkien.

"Did you see the two fifty-dollar bills in the cashbox? I remembered I put them here."

"No leh, did you put it into your wallet or the cash box?" Zoe asked Iris.

"No, I definitely put it into the cashbox."

I did not think much of the incident as I was engrossed on enjoying my time with Tina but this conversation repeated itself a few more times whenever I was over at the shop.

"Helen, I suspect Zoe is stealing money from me." Iris mentioned to Helen one day while she was cutting her hair at the salon.

Being very careful to thread, Helen did not want to risk jumping to conclusions. She was in the confidence of both Iris and Zoe. If she sided with anybody, it could prove to be disastrous for her reputation. She resolved to played the neutral card.

"Is that so, Iris? You should check properly first in this case. Make sure you have the evidence, before approaching her."

Helen's answer was unsuspectingly smart, steering clear of taking sides.

Iris had begun to suspect Zoe's foul play. Money had never disappeared from the shop before Zoe came in, but it had been happening lately. At first, Iris suspected that it could be the customers who had misappropriated the money but as disappearances started to become more common, Iris finally told Zoe in the face one day.

"Zoe, money has been disappearing from the cash box for at least five times."

"It's not me, Iris. I am here the whole time with you. You know my character." Zoe retorted.

"I know it's not you. But it cannot be me either. The money goes towards paying the operating expenses and your salary. Listen, I do not suspect you but it would be better if you took a break from the business. Take it as a no-pay leave period for us to clear all suspicions."

Later that night, Zoe had given Iris a call.

"Iris, Iris! I've found the hundred dollars that went missing this morning. It was in the cash register all along. You must have missed it." Zoe's excited voice was not about to fool Iris that night.

Having employed so many staff over the years, Iris had tested Zoe on the missing money. Perhaps Zoe had needed the money for some financial difficulties. Since she was voluntarily atoning for the theft, Iris decided to let her off. Whatever the case was, after the incident, the disappearances stopped and things returned to normal, but not for too long.

A month later, Tina just stopped coming altogether. I also never saw Zoe again. I waited for Tina every day, for a week, outside the Facial Place, hoping that the familiar silhouettes of both of them would come out but it never happened.

Helen had found out that Zoe had sold Iris's facial products to clients but did not turn over the money to her. She racked up quite a huge amount of debt and did not pay up. Iris immediately engaged a lawyer for \$200 to issue a lawyer letter, eventually forcing her to cough up half of her stolen earnings.

After the incident with Zoe, something began to change in Iris.

It began to start with her hair.

For the longest time, she had had long, silky black hair all the way to her hips past her butt. Two weeks after Zoe's dismissal, Iris ran hastily into the shop.

June was serving another customer so Helen tended to her.

“Helen, cut my hair, now!” Iris spoke in a hurried but firm manner.

“How much would you like to cut, Iris?” Helen asked her.

“As much as it takes. I have too much hair, just cut it all.” Iris demanded.

Helen was confused, but her years of experience had taught her not to question the customer. Whatever they wanted, we did it. I watched from afar as Helen chopped away 1 inch of hair. Iris had not cut her hair for as long as I could remember. Helen made sure to translate her vague request into something reasonable, careful not to cut too much. Often, a customer would ask for something but after cutting, they would regret and burst into a tirade. Especially since Iris was unsure of how much to cut, Helen spent extra care to just cut a wee bit off.

Iris seemed to leave the salon satisfied that day, but two days later, she returned, requesting to cut more.

Helen complied, cutting a little less than half an inch.

Iris started to come once every three days, requesting for Helen to cut her hair. From hair that reached almost her bum, she requested to cut it shorter every week. It soon neared her hips, her lower back, and then her upper back.

In the basics of hairdressing, we first learn that the hair grows about half an inch every month on average. Some people grow faster, some shorter, but it was a ballpark figure. Iris seemed to have some deep grudge with her hair, and her beautiful locks were shaved off almost about an inch every week.

“Are you sure you want to cut today, Iris? You just cut it a few days ago.” Helen would ask Iris in a bewildered way.

Upon the slightest question, Iris would seemingly fly into a baseless rage.

“Cut it Helen, I don’t want to repeat myself.” She would riposte in her shrill, Taiwanese Hokkien accent.

From then on, Helen did not dare to second-guess her anymore. What-

ever the customer wanted, the hairstylist had to oblige. Iris paid the usual amount, so June and Helen both had no complaints.

Slowly but surely, Iris's hair began to inch nearer and nearer to her scalp. It started to look as if Helen were doing a man's cut now.

The intervals between her visits also reduced from three days to two days.

One day, I was trying to pick a Danish butter cookie from the assortment in the cookie tin when Iris burst into the shop with her 3-inch heels.

"Helen, my hair is very long, cut all of it away!" Iris exclaimed to Helen.

Helen and I both looked at her hair. It was already almost close to a skin cut. Every time that Iris came in, she wanted to see hair on the salon floor. And every time, with her twenty plus years of experience, Helen would try to trim off bits evenly from different parts, making sure that Iris could see hair coming off and landing on the floor, but keeping the hairstyle considerably intact. She made it look like a considerable amount of hair had been shaved off the head, to which Iris would commend her for a job well-done.

When Iris had left the salon one day, another customer murmured to Helen.

"Helen, is that a he or a she?"

Helen replied that she did not know anymore.

From a ravishing beauty just a month and half ago, Iris now had her hair cut to skin, with two long wisps of hair at her sideburns. With her heavy make-up, and dark eye-liners, she looked like a transvestite, the kind that you saw in the shady night streets of Silom in Bangkok. Helen and I were used to her looks now but to the person seeing her for the first time, she genuinely looked like a cross between a man and a woman.

The next day, Iris entered the shop again. The same afternoon, Helen had just received a scolding from June about her excessive usage of colour dye on another customer. She had not slept well the previous

night and had poured too much of the colour dye into the mixing bowl. Whatever was not used represented wastage for June and she was not happy about it. She had taken it out on Helen as usual, berating her for squandering the salon's supplies. Helen was in a bad mood.

"Iris, there's nothing more to cut. If I cut further ..." Helen started to question Iris.

Iris did not wait for Helen to finish. "My hair is so long, Helen. Are you blind? She reached out to her head and stroked her scalp. She seemed to pull invisible strands of long hair out in a motion with her hands. "Can't you see the hair? It's everywhere! If you can't cut it, I will go elsewhere."

With that, Iris did not wait for Helen to answer. She picked up her Chanel bag and stormed out of the salon, cursing angrily at Helen's inexperience and saying that she had bad customer service.

As we looked on at Iris, furiously stomping off, I thought back about all the thick, black locks of hair that Helen had chopped off her head

For Iris, it wasn't her hair anymore.

It was a way of life.

Her life in The Emporium.

8

THE FOOT REFLEXOLOGY SHOP

There is a smell associated with every shop in The Emporium

The restaurants produced delicious fragrances of stir-fried fish, pork, chicken every now and then.

The salons smelt of dried powder, which was used in copious amounts to soothe customers irritated skin after the haircut

The interior design shops smelt of high-class perfume, which was either notes of orchid or roses. It signalled to customers the luxury of renovation.

And then, there was the foot reflexologist, from which you could smell that distinct combination of Chinese medicinal oil and freshly laundered towels several meters away.

Several of these foot reflexology shops operated in The Emporium. It was a lucrative and novel business at the time. Sales staff who were weary from a whole day of standing under the elements were in severe need for a foot massage. These foot reflexologists had further enhanced their craft by combining pseudo-science from western chiropractors and Chinese *tuina* (a massage technique based in Traditional Chinese Medicine).

It was a winning formula. Customers were sold on the health benefits. It was touted not only as just a massage to soothe tired feet, but also a way of improving blood circulation to the whole body, and stimulating endorphins. All kinds of dubious health benefits were roped into the promotion. It was suspicious, but the customers seemed to lap it all up.

One such shop was “Wonder Feet”. It was located a few units away from our salon, on the 3rd storey. There was only a single entrance, leading into a dimly lit room. There was a large, bright neon light signboard of a foot with its acupressure points outside the shop on its wall. The feet’s outline was in blue, while the pressure points were circled in red.

Inside the shop, there were two rows of seats facing each other. The seats had a low wash basin in front of them, which was used to rinse the clients' feet clean.

Wonder Feet was owned by Han, a middle-aged man with long curvy black hair down to his neck. His eyes were droopy and large, and he often wore a loose white striped shirt that was unbuttoned at the top.

Han hired many staff at his small shop. During peak hours, every seat was full, and his staff worked tirelessly to service his clients. His clientele consisted mostly of office workers.

Han often boasted of his skills. He had picked up the ways of the traditional massage from a highly revered master in Shanghai, China. After three gruelling years of perfecting his craft and lots of money, Han finally graduated. He moved to Singapore, where his sister resided and started his business just a few units away from our salon. The local newspapers had run several articles featuring his unique and top-notch techniques, and he was feted in The Emporium as one of our top businesses.

The same could not be said about his staff. At a time when Singapore had a much more relaxed immigration and employment policy, many women from China, known as “陪读妈妈” or study-along-mothers accompanied their children to Singapore, who had enrolled into the local education institutions. A grey area at that time was whether these women were allowed to seek employment given their visas.

Perhaps Han pitied them or that he felt more comfortable with people from his own homeland, but he hired such women in copious volume. After a two-hour crash course, he let these women handle their own clients.

In foot massages, most clients do not actually know what the foot masseurs do. They simply sit back, and the masseur would twist and turn various points of the feet. As long as the pressure was adequate and at a pain level that was tolerable, these clients happily handed money over to Han.

With his face plastered as a poster-boy, business boomed at Wonder Feet. Customers lined up outside and Han often prepared long rows of

stools for them. The stools stretched out for several meters, encroaching to the space outside our salon. June often got into an argument with Han over this, forcefully removing his stools and telling him to keep to his own area. As a result, we did not talk to Han nor his staff much.

As Han's business grew rapidly and money flowed like water into his pockets, he grew increasingly disenfranchised with the business. Han would often leave the operations of the shop to his trusted manager, another Chinese woman whom he had hired for a year. He would often head downstairs and make merry with other tenants and proprietors, often drinking himself to a drunken stupor before lumbering back to his shop to collect the profits. In the hands of the manager, more and more Chinese masseurs started to fill the shop. Han expanded and took down another unit next to his. The new unit shared the same signboard, but now, there were several massage beds, separated by partitions. It remained dimly lit, and filled to the brim with different customers at all times of the day. The smell of medicinal oil was stronger than ever, and clung to my skin and bag every day.

A peculiar guy, whom I liked to call Fat Boss, was a customer of Helen's. Fat Boss was an authentic Chinese guy who had lived in Eastern *Guangdong* when he was a child. He only spoke the Teochew dialect, and always wore a loose-fitting white t-shirt above a white-singlet. His paunch hung out generously from above his black pants.

Our salon was situated in air-conditioned The Emporium. Smoking was already prohibited in all covered buildings in Singapore at that time but Fat Boss could not give two hoots about that. Every time he came, he would always wait outside, ass slumped into a yellow roller chair. He would then whip out a cigarette and start puffing heavily. Our salon mostly served women so even if anybody objected to the smoking, nobody wanted to approach the burly man. Besides, most people did not seem to mind cigarette smoke nor were aware of the adverse health effects. Fat Boss would then start perusing the Chinese tabloid outside the salon.

One of the most fascinating things was the manner which we served him. Whenever it was his turn, Helen would come out to assist him to take off his shirt, leaving only his white singlet. It was a most humorous sight for me, seeing a woman helping a man to "disrobe". I felt like





I was peeking into the operations of a massage parlour. Fat Boss also liked to call Helen “Ah Nia”, which meant pretty lady in Teochew.

What was even funnier was that Fat Boss always came for a haircut and shampoo. The crown of his head was almost bald and yet, he had long locks of sparse hair all around the side of his head. They splayed out in all directions, adding to the entire eccentricity of his look. There was frankly, little to cut nor shampoo, but Fat Boss had money to spend here.

Fat Boss also did not want his shirt to be wet during the seated shampooing, so he always asked Helen to help him take it off. Whether he wanted Helen to do so in plain view of customers or why he couldn’t do it himself, I could not pinpoint even till today.

Even at that age of ten, I always knew that Fat Boss was a lascivious man. The way he expected Helen to take off the shirt and then addressing other women affectionately was strange but also comical.

That day, I could tell that Fat Boss was not his usual laid-back self. I could hear him telling Helen that one of the construction workers at his company had been giving him problems. As Helen snipped off hair expertly from his scalp, Fat Boss’s eyes were furrowed in deep thought, and the edges of his lips folded downwards in a subdued sulk.

As he left the salon, I saw him making a sharp right turn towards Han’s shop.

Our salon is situated in the middle of a long stretch of walkway in the emporium. Han’s shop was located three units to the right of ours.

That fateful day, Fat Boss turned towards the right, unlike his usual direction of left. I paid no heed because by now, I had started on my Maths assignment. The deadline was tomorrow and the Maths was difficult as hell. We were doing fractions in class and I often struggled with the complex questions. Helen could not afford a tuition teacher and I was left to my own devices to solve the problems.

Fat Boss was now outside Wonder Feet. The manager had assigned a well-endowed Chinese masseur to Fat Boss.

“Big Boss, come, come, let me serve you.” The foot masseur chirped in

a strong Chinese accent. Her fingernails were painted blood red, together with her crimson, thick lips. The English sounded horrendous, but her suggestive gesticulations was instantly understood by Fat Boss.

“Ah Nia, so pretty.” Fat Boss smiled lustfully at her. I rolled my eyes. He was at it again.

Then again, the same scene rolled out once more. Fat Boss made a motion and the Chinese masseur’s fingers started to run to his buttons. One by one, the buttons of his white, oversized shirt came off and the Chinese masseur went to his back to remove the shirt. His white singlet was revealed once again.

It was the most curious sight, and the many customers who were waiting in line were also staring at this spectacle.

The Chinese masseur then led Fat Boss inside and drew the curtains.

The show was over, at least for me. I was not sure what happened behind the curtains but I was sure Fat Boss was enjoying his foot massage.

I returned back to my Maths assignment and thought hard. After a minute, I burst into laughter again. The scene of the Fat Boss disrobing in front of everybody was just too much. I wondered what the other customers thought. I would be mortified if I did that in public.

Twenty minutes later, a short, sharp scream erupted from Wonder Feet.

I was not perturbed. Having grown up in The Emporium, I was used to drama and episodes. I continued with my work but I saw some of Han’s customers shuffling their stools now. A few paramedics in their classic blue uniform were now running over from the lifts to Wonder Feet. This was certainly not common so I rushed over to find out what happened.

To my shock, a small crowd had gathered in front of the shop. In the centre, the paramedics were performing chest presses on a victim. That familiar white shirt and the big paunch, who was it...?

It was then, that I realised that Fat Boss had exited Wonder Feet but had fainted along the corridor. The paramedics’ CPR presses seemed to work as Fat Boss seemed to cough momentarily. His lungs spluttered

and his eyebrows flitted. Colour returned to his cheeks and he was temporarily revived, but for how long? The paramedics then struggled to load him onto a stretcher, as his enormous frame barely fit onto the poor device, before bringing him to The Emporium lifts.

By this time, the police had also arrived and appeared to have handcuffed the Chinese masseur. It was later known that she was a popular foot masseur known as "Little Chilli" to most tenants and proprietors in The Emporium. Her nickname was a result of the bright red, latex dresses that she wore underneath her massage uniform, coupled with the red lipstick and red fingernails. Whatever she did in Wonder Feet now left very little to the imagination.

There were now pockets of gossip erupting over this scene of an unconscious fat man and a handcuffed lady in red. The police shouted over the loud-hailer for the crowd to clear out, as they restored order and questioned a few other people at the side. Some of them, probably reporters, were armed with hand-held tape recorders.

"Hi boy, did you see anything just now? I am a reporter from ..." I turned round to see a bespectacled woman in a white shirt talking to me. I quickly declined and ran back to the salon, struggling to digest what I just saw. Some other customers, hungry for a moment of stardom started speaking to the reports but really offered no information of value. Yet, that was what people tuning in to the evening news wanted to see - reporters on-site narrating something while their own thoughts transpired. It didn't matter what these eye-witnesses saw nor what they said - it only mattered how controversial, salacious and scandalous the story was. These kinds of stories always made excellent fodder for the overactive imagination.

The next day, we read in the papers that a man had passed away after visiting a foot reflexologist in our area. I knew it was Fat Boss, but no further details were embellished.

Rumours spread fast in The Emporium, and we soon came to find out that the Chinese masseur had pumped Fat Boss with a shot of contraband Viagra. It was also believed that Fat Boss had taken it before without any problems previously but this time, he looked pale after taking it yesterday. He then succumbed to a fatal heart attack on the way to the

hospital.

Han's business license was suspended shortly after and he was also arrested. His landlord was called in for questioning over suspected illicit activities. He closed down a week later and the once endlessly long rows of stools were now gone. I no longer had any Chinese medicinal smells on my schoolbag anymore.

While Han had drunk coffee and slurped alcohol downstairs, his business had been overrun by illegal workers eager to make a quick buck.

If you even dared to look away for a moment, The Emporium would swallow you up.

Unsuspectingly,

Unknowingly,

Until you were swallowed whole.

9

THE KINDERGARTEN

“RRRRRRRRRRRIIIIIINNNNNNNNNGGGGGGGG”

The faint till of the school alarm could be heard. It was only a day before the church camp tomorrow. I was excited.

The 1st storey of the emporium had a mega unit that was occupied by a church. Though smaller in size compared to other churches in Singapore, it was still a sight to behold. It had a long-term lease for 8 units in The Emporium, and hacked down the walls to create a mega-space for its premises. It was the first of its kind in Singapore, where a religious venue was situated right in a commercial shopping mall. Singapore was already a multi-religion, multi-cultural state since its independence and tenants in The Emporium welcomed the church. The church-goers would serve as additional business for them, which only made them happier to have a neighbour which did not compete with them in any trade.

The church was founded by a group of good Christians who had lived nearby the Emporium. It served the burgeoning demand for gospel reading and worshipping in the vicinity. It also offered a kindergarten service, helmed by its principal Rebecca Pang, or Miss Pang.

Miss Pang was a rich single woman at 63 years old. Her father had been a businessman dealing with commodities import and export. Her English was perfect, a testament to her strict convent education. She was always dressed in floral-print dresses, with generous laces at its hem.

The conception of a kindergarten was greatly supported by the church at the time. As the education scene in Singapore was still developing, most parents had the option of not sending their children to any nursery schools until they reached 7 years old, whereby they had to attend state-mandated primary school. A church kindergarten would provide a strong education in English language. This was a draw for many Chinese parents as only about 5%-10% of the population spoke good English – the rest was a large hodgepodge of Mandarin and various dialects.

The church decided on the name “Sunrise Kindergarten”. Miss Pang wanted her children to always be guided by the bright rays of the sun towards a path of righteousness, and to always rise up from any challenges they faced. The logo of the school was a cute cartoonish sun painted with bright yellow and orange colours.

Helen had quickly seized the chance to sign me up, when the church kindergarten first opened. It was like a godsend to Helen. Firstly, she could work peacefully at the salon. Helen always recounted to me about how I screamed and cried whenever I saw strangers at the salon. This infuriated June and she wanted Helen to send me to a childcare if possible. It was affecting business and June would have none of it.

Before primary school/Grade 2, the education system in Singapore was informally sorted into 4 levels – Pre-Nursery, Nursery, K1 and K2. Pre-nursery was for children 3 years-old, and often for the parents who were *kiasu*.

The word *kiasu* came from a Mandarin dialect-translation, meaning “scared lose”. It was a mindset and culture of a generation of Chinese in Singapore, who treated everything in life as a competition – a chance to outrank and outsmart others. In raising a child, many Chinese parents also adopted the same philosophy. They wanted their children to start early and to have every possible advantage money could buy in life. Such a concept has also been popularised by recent works such as the controversial ‘Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother’.

For Helen, it was a mixture of *kiasu* parenting and practical circumstances. She had been saving a sum of money for my education and so, was more than happy to send me to the kindergarten just downstairs from the salon. At the time we registered, Miss Pang was still working with the church to coordinate everything, such as licenses, syllabus, teacher-hiring, food-preparation for the children, furnishings. It was a lot of work, but they expected to see results.

When Helen first registered seven years ago, Miss Pang greeted us.

“So, Helen, how old is your son?”

“My son is three years old next year. Is there a problem?”

“Helen, our school is sponsored by our church. Over here, our children will learn the ways of Christ. What religion are you? Are you okay with our arrangement?”

Aunt Helen quickly replied that she was a free-thinker and she was okay with me learning the ways of the Christ. Helen was considered open-minded for most parents at that time but to be honest, I knew that Helen did not care whether I became a Christian or not. She was more interested in solving a practical problem - that a kindergarten in The Emporium would let her work without distractions at June’s, give me a decent head-start and give her less of a headache at the salon. Whether I wanted to believe in Jesus Christ or not was for me to decide in the future.

Kindergarten was a very fun time. In the past, there was no stipulated syllabus for children in Singapore. Many kindergartens adopted their own teaching styles. There was also no streamlined training or qualification requirement for teachers. If Miss Pang deemed them fit, they were fit. If Miss Pang deemed them not fit, they would go. In a way, whatever the children learnt was at the sole discretion of Miss Pang and the teachers. However, they also had to answer to the parents at the end of the day. Miss Pang asked for volunteers from the church and many answered the call. In the end, a team of 5 would help out in the kindergarten operations.

The school fees at Sunrise were in a comfortable range, not too cheap and not too expensive. It was set at a market rate with a discount. The structure of the program was such that the church would top up any remaining amounts from its fund. In its first years, many fixed inevitable overheads were expensed and Sunrise could not make enough money solely from the school fees alone. Hence, many church members stepped forward to fund the program. One such person was Mr Stanley, who sold bibles and gospel recordings and directed a part of the revenue towards funding the kindergarten. Had it not been for kind people like him who relieved the financial stress of the kindergarten, Sunrise would not be able to fully focus on its teaching duties, and many of us at Sunrise would not have received such a stellar education.

I was now ten years old, and had graduated from the kindergarten for 4 years. Miss Pang had called me back to join in the church camp, which

promised to be a day of wild fun. And since it was only downstairs, there was no reason not to go. The camp was subsidised by the church and entirely free. All the more I was set to go.

“Ah Bee, enjoy yourself tomorrow ah. Say hello to all your teachers for me!” Helen grinned with a twinkle in her eyes. It would be a good break for her, as the church kept me busy.

“I will, Mom.” I smiled back, fanatically looking forward to the next day.

That night, I couldn’t sleep. I had packed my bag with everything I needed. *Hacks* sweets, snack bars, and home-made muffins. I loved Helen’s muffins. I would bring them to share around with my other friends. Although I wasn’t a Christian, I loved going to Sunrise’s events. They were my alma mater and Helen always taught me to contribute back to institutions that have helped me before.

Morning soon came and Helen and I commuted to the Emporium via public transport. The first thing I did was to rush into the main hall in Sunrise. I saw cups of mung bean seeds planted on damp cotton wool at the window sill. White labels of childrens’ names were plastered carefully on the sides, indicating who had grown them. It belonged to the current kindergarten kids of Sunrise.

Some were showing signs of sprouting. Looking into the plastic cup, and seeing the small shoots coming from the beans was totally nostalgic. I recall how I first planted my own seeds back in kindergarten. Life was a miracle. To see shoots and roots and finally fruits coming out from a tiny seed – it was like looking into a kaleidoscope with its infinite possibilities.

“The beans are growing every day, Bee. They will grow to be a tall and strong plant one day, just like how you will grow to become a strong, smart man one day.”

Teacher Stella’s bright voice came from behind me. I looked at her and smiled. Teacher Stella had been my favourite teacher in kindergarten. She genuinely loved children and had a passion for teaching like no other. It was her kindness that had also influenced me to always be compassionate and forgiving to the people around me. I didn’t need God or

Buddha or anybody to teach me good values. Having good people all around created a conducive environment for love to blossom.

The activities soon started. A total of fifteen children had signed up for the church camp. My eyes fluttered around. I didn't manage to catch any familiar faces. Just when I was about to give up and start making friends, I caught sight of two of my classmates – Samuel and Megan! They were chatting together. I quickly rushed over to join this.

“Oh, hi Bee! It's been so long! Which school are you at now?” Megan asked me excitedly.

Megan had been one of my favourite ex-classmates. Her hair was cut in a perfect geometric concave bob to neck length. When she walked, her side fringes would sway up and down, swiping along her symmetrical face. She had big brown eyes, which seemed to gaze right into your soul.

Samuel was my other ex-classmate. He was a reserved boy and had black hair was cut in a classic side-swept fringe, revealing an extremely boyish look. I didn't get along too well with him because we both had a crush.

On Megan.

In our previous kindergarten class, the number of boys had outweighed the number of girls by 4 to 1. There were other more attractive girls than Megan but she often scored full marks in class. Her wit and humour shone though and had attracted me. Somehow, Samuel and I came to know about each other's liking for Megan and so, we became love rivals.

“Hey Bee, how are you doing? How's your AUNT doing?”

Samuel smirked; his handsome eyes now ever more alluring. Since graduating from kindergarten, he had grown much more in bulk. Many of my peers often bullied me, knowing that I was adopted by Helen. In The Emporium, it was difficult to keep secrets. One way or another, people always tended to find out what happened. After I went to primary school, I never revealed the fact that I was adopted to anyone. Nobody had to know.

“Helen is doing fine, Samuel. I am also top of my class.”

I boasted to Samuel with blunt sarcasm. I had been proud of my grades and had topped the cohort every year. It was the only one thing I was good at, other than observing people at the salon.

All this time, Megan was all smiles, looking genuinely happy to see her ex-classmates reunited. She had not known that Samuel and I both carried torches for her back in kindergarten.

The first activity for the day was a puppet show put up by Teacher Stella and her team.

She had brought out 5 friends from her crocheted bag. Using a mixture of gloves, handicraft fabric, threads and craft eyes, Teacher Stella had created a range of characters, ingeniously made from scrap materials. Their expressions were weird and made us burst out in laughter. It was story time and together with another helper, Teacher Stella donned the puppets on each of her two hands. A mini-stage had been created out of ice-cream sticks, glue and brown twine string, painted with different water-colours. Both Teacher Stella and her helper sat beside the stage, and started to narrate a story. Our eyes were fixed on the play and the characters, as Teacher Stella told an adapted story of Hansel and Gretel and their interactions with the evil witch.

I giggled alongside with Megan, who was also engrossed in the show. The deadly glint in Samuel’s eyes were subtle. I ignored them. I hadn’t come to pick a fight with him. The shades had been pulled in the room, and there were only two spotlights trained on the stage. It was extremely quaint as the fifteen of us lay on the concrete floor, belly-down, elbows on the floor and palms on our chin. It was like a movie, except even better, as the puppets seemed to come alive under the skilful hands of Teacher Stella.

The story of Hansel and Gretel was now reaching its climax. The witch had already fattened the children and was preparing to cook Hansel. Gretel, who was held in Teacher Stella’s hand was thinking furiously of how to outfox the evil witch. Everybody held their breath in bated anticipation as Teacher Stella slowed down her pace of the story, in preparation for the crescendo of events. Together with the other church



helper, their coordinated movement of the puppets and the undulating tonal expressions only made the story ever more captivating.

Samuel suddenly had the urge to use the toilet. He got up and started to tip-toe across the many bodies that were lying on the floor. Teacher Stella stopped the play momentarily and signalled for another teacher nearby to help guide Samuel to the washroom.

Samuel threaded carefully, careful not to step on anybody's legs or stomach. The room was dark and the visibility was low. Teacher Stella resumed the story-telling and once again, we became quiet and focused on the play. As Samuel reached me, I stayed still but out of the blue, an intense pressure came upon my legs. I twitched and the next moment, there was a heavy thud on the ground. A blood-curdling scream ensued and the class turned back to look.

Samuel had landed face-first on the concrete ground. The teacher at the side rushed forward to bring Samuel to his knees. A gaping wound had formed on the spot above his eyebrow, and blood was gushing down his entire face. The teacher quickly signalled Teacher Stella, who by now had abandoned the puppets and ran towards the first-aid box. The teachers quickly lay Samuel on the ground and gravity slowed down the bleeding. Wads of white cotton gauze were now pressed on Samuel's eyebrows and eyes to staunch the bleeding.

By then, Samuel had been crying hysterically in pain. The whole group had huddled around the scene, too scared to talk. The sight of the large volume of blood was nerve-wracking for most of us, which was wiped away by the teachers and soaked into a small pile of tissues and cotton gauze. What was once the quiet that rivetted us to the stage had now become a silence perforated by uneasiness and unease.

I was enveloped in fear. I had not caused Samuel to fall but he still did trip on my legs. In some ways, I felt certain responsibility. As Samuel's bleeding stopped, he started to return to his sense.

"It was Bee, he moved his leg and I tripped. It was Bee."

The darn Samuel must have been using the chance to get back at me. As much as I was concerned about his condition, I was also transfixed with trepidation. What would happen if he accused me and his parents

found out? Would Helen have to pay damages for his hospital fees or be responsible for anything else? We were barely making ends meet. Teacher Stella started to inform another helper to call his parents and to round up the rest of the students. She seemed to pay no heed to what Samuel was saying, which was in between sharp throes of pain and accusatory screams.

Megan looked at me accusingly and I tried to look insouciant. Yet, deep down, my heart was throbbing with fear. I wanted Helen to come down and pick me up immediately. I wanted to go back to the beauty bed and lie down in the salon, safe from the reaches of Samuel and everything else. I wanted to curl into a ball and go to sleep, drifting off into a fantasy land, where Megan and I were admiring the marvel of the growing mung beans. I wanted out desperately.

Shortly afterwards, Samuel's parents came rushing to Sunrise. His father was practically an older version of him, while his mom had the typical housewife demeanour. Samuel's father looked livid and grilled Teacher Stella on what had happened in class while his mother rushed to comfort Samuel. Samuel's crying had already stopped but on seeing his parents' presence, he started to wail uncontrollably again. I saw Teacher Stella explaining to him what had happened but the exact words were inaudible. Samuel constantly pointed his pudgy fingers towards me, and his father glared at me menacingly. I felt like was I was about to die in a few moments.

Some of the children had gone to the office to phone their parents to pick them up. When these parents arrived, on seeing Samuel's condition, they too swarmed Teacher Stella and some of them even went to question Miss Pang, the principal. I had also phoned for Helen to come to pick me up, and a mix of disappointment and anger and fear swirled around in me like a swamp of dirty, sewer water. How I wished I could dig a hole and hide in it. Where was Helen when you needed her? She was just upstairs on the 3rd storey, couldn't she come down? I could go back myself but due to the incident, I was only allowed to be fetched by a guardian.

Samuel's father had decided to bring him to the hospital at this stage. He grumbled and seethed at the teachers, and told Samuel's mother to get him to the car.

“Darn useless people...” His hissing was muffled but his face did nothing to hide his fury. Though Samuel’s bleeding had somewhat subsided, the deep cut was still not closed and probably required stitches.

By then, the fear in me had turned into redirected reprisal towards Helen. Of all the days to be late, this was the one day where it mattered the most. And she was not here...

I screamed at Helen when we reached the salon.

“Where did you go when I needed you? I didn’t know what Samuel’s father wanted to do to me... Where were you?” I had already hit tipping point and couldn’t control my emotions anymore. Helen tried to put her arms around to comfort me but I launched a swift and hard kick at her. The kick hit her stomach and she stepped back.

This move seemed to take her aback. I knew that she must have been busy with customers, and thus, was late in coming to fetch me. Yet, I could only feel the powerful fear that gripped me during the morning incident. The disappointment of not having Helen there to protect me from the evil Samuel and his parents, I felt such betrayal from her, even though deep down, I knew that it was not right.

That night, as we headed home from the salon, I saw Helen applying a steroidal cream to her hands. The peeling on her hands had become more severe and I saw tears escape her eyes as she grimaced slowly. I knew that she must have been doing a very tedious perming job. The ammonia in the perm lotion was a powerful irritant. Even though it is common practice to wear gloves these days, back in the days, the industry standard in Singapore was to use one’s bare hands. Customers did not like to see stylists use surgical gloves, and these also represented increased business costs to June, who was a miserly boss.

Even though I knew Helen was working hard to earn money for the mortgage, I had vented my frustrations on her. I felt a tinge of melancholy pierce my heart but I went to bed. As much as I regretted my actions, I also didn’t have the courage to tell her that I was sorry.

Everybody had their own difficulties.

I had mine.

94 As Coarse As Emporium

Helen had hers.

And The Emporium too, had her own problems.

10

THE FOUR-FACED BUDDHA TEMPLE

If you look closely at Buddha's hair, you would notice that his hairstylist was an expert at perming. Some say that the hair curls were snails that covered his head to prevent heatstroke from meditating in the open spaces. Some say that the curly hairdo was natural. I can only say that the salon that Buddha went to had not taken any apprentices.

The Emporium was a private building established in 1980. It was built by a large Chinese family, who were devout believers of Feng Shui and Buddhism.

When I was ten years old, business had been bad for The Emporium as a mall. The level of footfall was at an unprecedented low. Many attributed it to the quickly burgeoning growth of other modern malls. The Emporium's management committee, however, pursued a more mythological and superstitious line of reasoning. They consulted a Thai amulet shop master situated on the 2nd storey, who keenly advised them on buying a full gold, Four-Faced Buddha to worship in the building. The Buddha would look out in all directions of the building, protect the building's health and usher in new customers. The only problem left was to determine a suitable, auspicious spot to erect the Buddha.

After much astrological calculations and directional analyses, the Four-Faced Buddha was to be erected on the 3rd storey, just beside a big sauna. This was previously a beer-garden but they had gone defunct. It was an area that was about 1,500 square feet, with a roof that was directly exposed. It provided the perfect space for a makeshift temple as the joss stick smell would dissipate into the open roof, separated from the air-conditioned building.

In the weeks before the Four-Faced Buddha was ushered into the building, a giant crane was parked right outside The Emporium. Due to the enormous size of the stone altar, the only way to transport it into the building was via opening a large hole in the exposed roof, and using a crane to saddle the altar into the spot. The stone altar weighed





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THE EMPORIUM

1.5 tonnes and was a complete slab of marble developed in the Phran Kratai District of Thailand. Bringing it to the intended place required precision and planning, a job that was left to the external contractors procured by the Thai Master.

On the day of the unveiling, many tenants and proprietors gathered for the big event. The Thai master performed an elaborate ceremony to consecrate or “开光” the statue. It is believed in Buddhism that statue of deities are initially empty shells when constructed. A ceremony and mantra must be chanted to summon the essence of the Four-Faced Buddha into it. This ritual can only be conducted by highly-trained monks or masters. Only then will the statue will be fully consecrated and the worshippers, blessed.

Whether by sheer divinity or coincidence, business started to resume to its peak in The Emporium shortly after the Four-Faced Buddha was erected. One could say that many mall-goers also took the chance to pray for wealth and prosperity at the altar, which contributed to the increased footfall. Whatever the case was, many of the tenants in The Emporium attributed it to the blessings from the Buddha and this only served to increase the number of people heading to the temple to worship, hoping that their own wishes and prayers could be answered.

As a child, I enjoyed going to the temple to play. Yes, play, not pray. Helen and June were religious Taoists and prayed to various deities. I didn't really have any staunch beliefs but I enjoyed lighting up the joss sticks and seeing the puffs of smoke unfurl from the embers of the tip of the stick. They produced a woody, earthy smell which had a calming effect on me. Looking at the serenity on the Buddha's four faces, I too, for those few moments, felt a piece of the paradise that the eyes of Buddha was staring into.

In Taoist and Buddhist tradition, other than the burning of the joss sticks, there was another type of offering where incense cones were burnt in a copper or brass offering bowl. These cones were made of mostly sandalwood and released an aromatic smoke over a period of time. Red and yellow candles and prayer oil were also used in these prayers. Since ancient times, fire had been a medium to bring humans closer to God in different religions. Different objects burnt at different speeds, and also produced different smells and energies.

I often enjoyed pouring a smudge of prayer oil onto the incense cones, and then using a candle to light up the cones. Due to the splashed oil on the cones, they would catch fire in a sizzling display. At that time, the only entertainment available to children were either physical games such as basketball or catching or the arcade. Phones were not widely used yet and World of Warcraft was only in its infancy. It was boring at the salon everyday so I enjoyed setting fire to the incense cones and exploring different materials that displayed different pyrotechnic sensations.

Once the initial fanfare of the Four-Faced Buddha died down, only a few other regular devout people visited the altar other than me. One of them was Belinda.

Belinda was a rotund woman, with shoulder length locks combed into a side-parting. She spoke English in a very calming and coaxing manner. I first met her on one of the days when I was playing in the temple with another friend.

“Hello, how are you? Such a sweet child,” Belinda greeted me with her usual big smile and started to unpack her offerings for the Four-Faced Buddha.

Helen had drilled into me proper manners so I replied and asked her about her day as well. Subsequently, we became acquainted and got closer.

One time, I remember going about my favourite routine of burning various things in the offering bowls. Belinda then brought out a packet of *Hacks* Orange sweets and offered it to me.

“Children should have some sweets” she smiled.

“Thank you, auntie”. I replied, remembering my manners.

I loved the *Hacks* sweets. As a child, I normally frequented the arcade and also enjoyed binging on sweets. I regarded myself as connoisseur in my youth, having tasted almost every kind of sweet the Singapore market had to offer. My favourites were the *Hacks* sweets, which were hard candy, and *Fruit Plus*, which were soft candy. *Hacks* made for good suckling, as the smooth honey liquid oozed out from the oval-shaped confectionery in the mouth over time.

From then on, Belinda and I became great friends. Whenever I visited the temple in the afternoon, she would be there in her daily prayer session. She told me that she was a Christian but had converted to being a Taoist after she dreamt of *Guanyin* (Goddess of Mercy) one day. *Guanyin* had given her some advice, which she applied at work and she had found some success. From then on, she decided to go to temples to pray.

Even at a young age, I realised that the amount of offering that Belinda gave was not the normal amount for other worshippers. I reckoned that she must either have committed a lot of sins and wanted Buddha to forgive her, or that she was knee-deep in wishes and had the mentality of “no risk no reward”. However, I could never really confirm this.

Shortly after I became familiar with Belinda, I noticed another devout temple-goer - Old Chicken. Her moniker was given by Helen. Old Chicken ran a massage parlour on the 2nd storey of The Emporium. In Mandarin, chicken is a euphemism for a social escort. And she was in her 50s. Most masseurs and escorts retired naturally when their age caught up, but not Old Chicken. She had progressed into a madam pimp but still serviced customers herself.

At first sight, one would not think much of Old Chicken. She had no eyebrows, and always drew two thin lines with her green pencil. Her hair was self-dyed, evident from the uneven colours of red and brown. Her skin was dry and she put on minimal makeup. She often wore a yellow top and short denim jeans.

As I started observing Old Chicken more, I noticed that whenever she left the temple, there was always a bag of fruits and flowers in her hands. In Buddhism, devotees often made offerings to the deities, in the form of paper offerings, or food and flowers. They often left these on the altars as a form of worship to appease the deities. They did not take such things back home. It became obvious that Old Chicken was stealing from the deities.

One time, I managed to catch her in the act. Another devotee had just given an offering of ten sweet nectarine oranges. After the person left, Old Chicken came and promptly swooped in on the oranges, covertly slipping the offerings into her bag.

It was plain to me that Belinda had also noticed it but we chose to keep quiet. Many people suspected that Old Chicken had the backing of street thugs to be able to operate a massage parlour that provided other illegal services. It was not wise to confront her over the swiping of offerings. Besides, the offerings were given by other devotees. It was certainly not our place to ask her why she was taking the offerings of others, unless she took ours.

Once a year, the Four-Faced Buddha's birthday was celebrated based on the lunar calendar. Many of the tenants had come together to make a grand offering to the Buddha. As one of the prominent devotees and also a proprietor in The Emporium, Belinda was invited to procure a lucky 4D number from the Buddha. 4D was the Singapore gambling system where a punter would bet on a 4-digit number. The process of procurement of numbers from the deities involved writing 0 to 9 on nine different pieces of paper, rolled up and then placed in a bowl. The devotee would then pray to the Buddha and shake the bowl. Whatever number tumbled out were then read out and a 4-digit number would be "consecrated" by the Buddha.

"Belinda, ask Buddha nicely for the number! I am betting a lot on this! *Huat ah!*"

One of The Emporium's junior security guards at that time—Henry, shouted from the back. "*Huat*" was an expression used in Singapore, which meant prosperity. I looked at the whole scene from the side and smiled. Since it was the Buddha's birthday today, I imagined that many other places worshipping the Four-Faced Buddha would also be holding similar ceremonies. How many "lucky numbers" was the Buddha giving out? Would all of them be prize-winning numbers? Were they all the same or different? Did Buddha have time to listen to everybody's requests? The questions ran through my mind, purely from a scientific perspective. However, everybody's anticipation and trained eyes on Belinda were palpable. They really believed that Buddha was in the statue.

As Belinda shook the bowl, the numbers fell out one by one, with replacement.

"8"

102 As Coarse As Emporium

“0”

“1”

As Belinda prepared to shake the bowl for the last number, the crowd started to move a little. Everybody was jostling for a place, eager to be the first to see the last digit. With a firm shake of the bowl, a single, red piece of rolled-up paper dropped to the ground without any sound. Belinda leaned forward; her kneecaps still firmly planted on the ground.

“The last number is … 5!”

Loud babbling started to erupt throughout the crowd. Everybody now knew the number, but how much to bet would be up to them. I wondered why they didn’t ask Buddha this.

That day, many people spent several thousands betting on the lucky number – 8015. However, in that week, the number did not appear in the prize-winning list. As four more weeks went by, the number soon became an afterthought.

Yet, by a sheer miracle, while I was in the salon late one night, Henry, the security guard in The Emporium, rushed over to the salon.

“Helen! Helen! Did you buy the Buddha’s number? 8 0 1 5! It opened tonight! Second prize!”

As Henry went from shop to shop, bringing the good news, Helen began frantically rifling through her lottery tickets, checking if she had at least scribbled the number somewhere for tonight’s draw! The Four-Faced Buddha has answered The Emporium’s prayers and blessed the number!

The next day, I visited the temple as usual but this time, there was an elaborate offering of rose garland necklaces, food and drinks for the Four-Faced Buddha. Belinda and her newly-employed helper were busy unpacking yet even more food.

“Hi Bee, this is for you! Don’t mention it.”

Belinda handed me a big packet of *Werther’s Original*. It was one of the most expensive cream candies in the market, made from toffee and

milk, with an inner soft filling of liquid caramel. I could not wait to taste it. I thanked her and started to beam. There was no speculation needed, Belinda had probably continued to believe in the Buddha and betted big on the number. And she had made a killing yesterday night.

Old Chicken was also in the temple but this time, she could not control herself anymore. The bountiful offering that had flowed in this morning was to her, a field full of strawberries. And she was the only picker in the field.

Under plain sight of me and Belinda's helper, she swiped something. Of all the things she had to steal, she had taken from the counter a packet of roast duck rice Belinda had bought as an offering. Belinda saw it too and this time, did not hold back.

"Hey you, put the packet of rice back. I bought it for the Buddha, not for you. Please put it back."

Old Chicken pretended to be deaf and made a hasty run for the exit.

Belinda shouted again and lunged forward to pull her shoulders. For somebody her size, she could still be surprisingly swift when she needed to. Old Chicken started struggling but Belinda's grip was vice-like. Old Chicken started screaming in Mandarin that she wanted to call her lawyers and call the police for Belinda's manhandling. This seemed to agitate Belinda further. With no hesitation, Belinda gave a short, sharp slap to Old Chicken. The hand connected with her lightly-powdered cheeks, and a small dust of powder dispersed into the air upon impact. I imagined the acute pain that Old Chicken must have felt.

Old Chicken seemed taken aback for a second but as soon as the pain registered, she quickly came to her senses and in a fit of rage, gave Belinda a big push. Belinda fell back.

"TTTHHHHHHHHUUUUUUUDDDDDDDDDDDD"

She hit her head on a protruding arm of the Four-Faced Buddha. The Buddha's eight arms held eight different objects. Fortunately, Belinda's head hit the arm holding a book, which was not sharp. Things could have escalated quickly if she had hit the spear or the vase, which had pointed edges. She winced in pain while her helper rushed over to pre-

104 As Coarse As Emporium

vent her from stumbling into the ground.

Realising that something was amiss, Old Chicken quickly fled the temple. Belinda was not bleeding but she seemed to hold her head in pain. I asked her if she was okay. Belinda said she was fine and that it was a minor bump. Her maid was checking if there was any blood. In her haste, Old Chicken had dropped the packet of rice and the remnants of chilli sauce, steamed rice and roast duck were strewn all over the floor, in front of the Four-Faced Buddha. I imagined Buddha must have been fuming mad from the altercation, as the oil stains from the roast duck drenched the entire altar area.

Belinda's helper and I swept up the remains and cleared as much as we could. Belinda now sat down at a plastic chair nearby, still facing the Buddha, but she seemed to be in a daze.

"Pssstttttt, did your madam win a lot yesterday?" I signalled to Belinda's helper.

"Huh, what do you mean, sir?" The helper was clueless.

"The lottery yesterday. Did she bet on the number by the Buddha?"

"Ohhhh! Yes, madam did. I think she won a lot, that's why we bought so many offerings today."

I was right. Oh well, Old Chicken may have stolen her roast duck rice, but Belinda was the real winner. I looked at Belinda. She seemed to have recovered, but something looked a little different. I wondered whether it was her eyes, or her demeanour but it was probably my imagination.

Shortly after this incident, I heard rumours that Belinda started to gamble even more compulsively. Whenever she had placed huge bets, she would buy large amounts of expensive offerings for the Buddha, but Buddha did not heed her requests.

After a few months, she had lost all her winnings to her gambling addictions. She had also become senile very quickly. What was once both of us smiling happily at each other in the temple, became a scene where she had a very suspicious pair of eyes trained on me when she did her prayers. Her helper gave me a sympathising look whenever we met in

the temple. She would start to shout strange things that sounded like Thai towards the Buddha. I knew that Belinda did not speak Thai, only English and Mandarin like normal Chinese Singaporeans so something was amiss. I became quite scared of her and left whenever she was there.

One day, Belinda stopped coming to the temple. She used to run a real estate consultancy service, which was a family business with her brothers. Upon further inquiry, her brothers revealed that Belinda had started to mutter strange words every day and stayed up the whole night. Her helper resigned and they sent her to a nearby nursing home.

Belinda became senile quickly.

She died a year later, at age 49.

11

THE BARBER

Any business-owner would know that owners of the same kind of business usually had an unspoken, deep-seated aversion towards each other. In The Emporium, there were ten salons and barbers with the same kinds of services. This represented fierce competition for the limited pool of customers who visited the building.

Our salon was a unisex salon. June herself had trained with a Japanese teacher, learning to cut women hair primarily but diversified towards men's hair later in her career. June had also sent Helen overseas to England to apprentice under the Vidal Sassoon Salon, created by the late Vidal Sassoon who was one of UK's most celebrated hair stylists. Helen was trained in women and men cuts, with a specialty in bun-combing.

A few units away from our salon, on the 3rd storey, towards the direction of the sauna, was Tong Lee Chai Barber. It was currently helmed by the second-generation son, taken over from his father. Nobody really knew the name of the barber but he had wispy and sparse white hair coming from his scalp and white eyebrows. He wore the same cheap clothes every day, a chequered white short-sleeved shirt over black pants, with his signature golden squarish spectacles. I referred to him as the Old Man.

Old Man's barber was unlike our salon. June was a businesswoman and understood the clientele's demands. Our salon underwent a major renovation once every three years, including a new coat of paint, changing of dimming lights, and replacing of old furniture. As a salon, we had 4 salon chairs and a salon wash basin made of ceramic and painted black. We also had large rectangular pieces of mirror to each chair, for the customer to examine and preen their looks.

In a salon, there is a constant flux of hair, hair spray and other chemicals such as perm lotion and shampoo. Every day, a lot of bacteria and chemicals collect everywhere in the salon. The hairspray, invisible to the air, often sticks to the flooring and will accumulate bacteria and become dark, irremovable stains over time. If you observe your salon closely,

you will start to notice these dark spots on the floor.

As such, Helen and I meticulously upkept the sanitation of the place. Once every two weeks, armed with pink rubber gloves and a bucket of water and some *Cif* (a stain remover brand), we would scrub the floors and furniture clean. It was a good bonding time for her and me.

Unlike us, the old man was a lone ranger at his shop. Nobody knew his real age but we estimated he was probably in his 70s. His shop was old-school, and also functioned as a semi-storeroom. He had three chairs, but two were in disuse and stacked high with wasted and used carton boxes. In a corner, he had a mountain of literally rubbish – unwanted and discarded items that he had salvaged. A black cashbox was placed prominently in a select spot, and had been the target of a robbery a month ago. Rough Face, a tattoo parlour boss, had saved the Old Man from the predicament.

Old Man was a self-professed, self-trained engineer and he fixed all his tools, including his electric clippers and scissors himself. He also fixed watches, clocks and other electronic devices. The mountain of rubbish probably contained many spare parts that he had rescued from the dumps. This was not uncommon, as many elderly Singaporeans had lived in very poor conditions in the past and had a very frugal lifestyle. *One man's trash is another man's treasure* and that motto seemed to be Old Man's byword.

Even more unsanitary were his equipment. In salons, customers usually sit on a chair and there will be a mirror and a station for customers to put their belongings. In his shop, the station was filled to the brim with his tools, probably left over from his father's time. There were used ear tweezers, rusty razor blades, countless pairs of hair-cutting scissors and God-knows-what hidden among them. A disgusting powdery and iron smell enveloped the entire shop.

Despite this, customers streamed into his shop every day. Most of them were elderly Singaporean men, but they also brought their sons. Some of these sons had married and also brought their sons over. Nobody seemed to care about the sordid squalor in the place. When our salon was quiet, I could see streaks of inconvertible jealousy flashing across June's face. The long queues of old men outside his shop, waiting for

TONG LÈE CHAI





their turns and talking noisily seemed to stoke the fire. June often blasted her radio and took a nap, hoping for oblivion from the Old Man's customers.

The crowds at Old Man were perhaps not surprising if one poked a bit more. In Singapore, a good haircut took around 20 minutes, with proper trimming and a keen eye to detail. The entire building, with its ten salons and barbers in total, often charged the vicinity of \$8 to \$10 to its customers. Old Man charged only \$5, sometimes even less for easier customers such as those who wanted to shave bald. In a building like this, this was a vicious circle.

There is a reason why some industries decline over time. It is because of people like the Old Man. I learnt in school that price wars caused more damage in the long run for everybody. This was a real-life example. Customers begin to expect good service for lower prices. In turn, the lower prices translate to lower income, and more and more talented people start to leave the industry, in search of better prospects. In time to come, the entire market is saturated only with people who want to undercut each other and perfect their marketing and pricing strategies. Nobody is interested in improving their techniques anymore, and the whole industry starts to plunge. If one is a hairdresser, one will know this. Many salons in Singapore currently offer rock-bottom prices but once the customer steps in, they will try all means to persuade them to buy shampoos or sign packages for some kind of hair treatment. Whatever the original art of haircutting was, now becomes a languishing cesspool of marketing.

Some of our customers started lapping for the savings and went over to the Old Man. I have seen Old Man working from 9am to 5pm non-stop, without toilet breaks and just servicing customers one after another without a break. While every other salon had no customers, there were large crowds of people waiting outside his place. It is amazing that at his age, he could stand all day and still manage to deliver somewhat satisfactory cuts.

Helen had taught me some basic hairdressing, including barbering and shampooing. Due to my studying commitments, I never had the time to master the art. Whenever Helen trained me to cut the mannequin's head, just standing straight and focusing on cutting precise lengths of

the bob was exhausting, even for thirty minutes. Let alone the old man cutting hair for 8 hours straight without breaks. Although his tactics were dirty, his skills were admirable.

One of the unspoken rules in haircutting was the customer's skin condition. If you looked closely, some customers had very bad eczema or red peeling around their neck and scalp areas.

In 1987, the late Diana, Princess of Wales had made monumental headlines when she opened UK's first HIV unit. From then on till her death in 1997, Diana shed a lot of light on HIV and how it was transmitted. Unfortunately, in Singapore at this time, there was still a lot of confusion and misinformation. Sexually transmitted diseases accounted for a large proportion of skin problems. Most of these were not easily transmissible but some looked very frightening.

Old Man had many customers and when you had this kind of volume, it was unavoidable to have customers with skin conditions. Once, I passed by his salon, I was aghast with horror. Old Man was on his electric shaver and the customer was a very tanned and plump Chinese man with many paint stains on his loose-fitting work garb. His neck was severely inflamed with all kinds of warts and lesions. The warts looked so ripe that the slightest prod would cause them to explode, with the viscous liquid drenching everything and anything nearby.

Despite this, Old Man seemed to pay no heed to this and trimmed the back of the man's head as he usually did. It was horrifying indeed. His hands handled the warts as if it were normal skin. His finger nails brushed against the lesions, which were peeling and bleeding in some areas.

The shaver continued to work its way up the man's neck, its sound ringing throughout the shop. I noticed a tiny wart popping open, and its creamy-white pus shooting outwards, smudging Old Man's right shirt pocket. However, both of them seemed oblivious to this. The customer was almost dozing off, while Old Man continued on his routine.

Perhaps he was too engrossed in his work. That was the only reason I could think of.

I knew that Old Man's shop did not have any basin for him to wash his hands. He also did not have any wet wipes nor sanitary equipment. The whole shop looked like a relic from the past. Even the lights were still old, yellowed fluorescent tubes that had not been replaced in eons. I could not imagine all of the microscopic subcutaneous substances that landed on his tools and his bare hands. I also knew that he did not sanitise his equipment after each use. He continued serving his customers one after another, like a broken-down factory churning out rusty canned-food. Old Man was skilled at cutting the very classic man's cut, with a short fade on the back and sides, and a thinning of the top crop of hair on the crown. He had probably reasoned with himself that his low pricing did not warrant any other duties of care towards his customers.

While I walked to the toilet, I felt a tumultuous churning in my stomach. I could not imagine myself touching those warts, let alone cutting the hair near the warts. You see, when the blade of the clippers goes onto hair, the constant rotating movement of the two blades criss-cross each other. This creates a very quick scissoring motion.

Imagine holding a scissors and cutting paper.

Now imagine your hands moving very fast and increasing the speed of the scissors.

Next imagine fifty of these scissors side by side moving in one direction.

That was how the clippers worked.

For men's hair, the constant cutting over a life-time creates hair that is harder and coarser than women's hair. When hair gets very hard, sometimes, the blades of the clipper will not cut them, but simply suck in the entire hair strand and uproot it from its follicle. On a microscopic level, much of the skin cells and whatever is on them will be in contact with your hands and clippers. Whether the warts were transmissible or not wasn't the issue anymore, the plain sight of them made my mind go dizzy with disgust.

As I came back from the toilet, the customer was already getting up and retrieving a \$5 note from his back pocket. His hands were also full

of tiny warts, similar to the one on his neck. The barber did not seem bothered by any of this, with only his eyes lighting up at the money and his mouth breaking into a smile. He signalled for the next customer waiting outside.

A father had brought his two-year-old son in and talked to the Old Man with the familiarity of long-lost friends. His child needed a haircut. I slowed down my gait and pretended to have left something in the toilet, and as I passed by the shop once more, I saw the Old Man use the same clippers, the same hands, and quickly got to work on the child.

Old Man had off-days on Friday. Many services in the building took their off-days on Mondays and Tuesdays. This was because Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays were peak periods in The Emporium. Most Singaporeans had a five-day work week and during the weekends, they would patronise the malls for retail therapy. Helen and I always wondered why he had chosen Friday as his rest day.

Old Man had this strange bracelet that he used to hang at a very conspicuous spot, on top of his mountain of salvaged items. It consisted of twelve beads with strange patterns on them. The beads were wooden brown in colour. It was only after several years later that I knew they were called *Rudraksha* beads, seeds of the *Elaeocarpus* tree. It was a revered tree in Hindu culture, associated with the Hindu deity Shiva and with mantras such as *Om Namah Shivayah*.

In periods of lull, Old Man would start to sit down on a wooden chair, and hold the beads in his hands. With his eyes closed and shoulders relaxed, he would start to mouth some words into the distance. Almost afterwards, his customers would start streaming into the shop, and his business would quickly resume.

“Bee, you’ve noticed the bracelet that the Old Man always holds right?” Helen once asked me when she was accompanying me to the Four-Faced Buddha Temple. I nodded my head.

“That Old Man must be practising some kind of black magic. Everybody’s business is so bad but only his is thriving.” Helen sighed. Business had been bad for two consecutive weeks. If this kept up, we would not be able to pay our mortgage for our house.

A fateful Thursday, by some strange coincidence, there were three separate families with three children waiting for their turn at the Old Man's. The children were probably in the age of one years old to three years old. All three were rowdy and wailing incessantly. The poor mothers were busy feeding them with suckling bottles, but the scene shifted between pacified looks to sudden wailing, and then back to sudden peace. It was disorientating.

One of the children was a fat boy with a bib tied to his neck. The pudgy arms of the baby were flailing about and the mom, an equally obese lady was furiously rocking him in her arms. The Old Man's shop was not a very big space, about 180 square feet at the most. The fat baby and his mom stood near the Old Man's pile of rubbish.

Without warning, the fat baby had suddenly grabbed hold of the *Rudraksha* beads from the top of the rubbish pile. The Old Man was busy pacifying one of the other babies whose hair he was cutting, and did not notice this.

“Orh, orh, don’t cry, don’t cry.” Old Man tried his best to placate the baby in his smattering of broken English.

The baby on the salon chair was crying and screaming, probably due to the fear of the mechanical sound of the clippers. Most children were, as they were not familiar with it and often associated pain and fear with them.

The fat baby’s mom saw the bracelet and reached out to wrestle the bracelet away from the baby.

“Bad baby! This is Uncle’s. Don’t touch other people’s stuff.” The mom commanded the baby, as if he could understand any word she said.

The baby resisted and out of the blue, his arms moved rapidly and flung the bracelet out of the Old Man’s shop.

Whether by divine will or coincidence, Iris’s doors swung open. The Facial Place was located directly next to Old Man’s shop. She happened to step out at that moment and in her usual three-inch high heels, she was rushing off to buy food. In her haste, she did not notice the *Rudraksha* bracelet on the floor.

“PPPPPPPZDKKZKDDKZKDZKKZKDKDKDZKZ”

With the full force of the thick area of her heels, she stepped on the bracelet. Almost instantaneously, the bracelet disintegrated and the beads flew out in all directions. Some of them crushed under the weight of her shoe, while others rolled outwards.

“HHHHHHHHHHHUUUUUHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH”

Old Man momentarily grasped his left side of his chest, the area where his heart was. The Emporium was airconditioned at a comfortable 23 degrees Celsius but tiny beads of sweat started to break out on Old Man’s forehead. He lost his balance for the slightest moment and his customers went forward to support him. It was as if all the colour had drained out from his face, straight into hell.

The next day, Old Man did not come to work. He did not put up any notice nor inform anybody about his whereabouts. From the outside, the transparent glass walls showed the pile of rubbish and his work station, which had been untouched for days. His customers kept dropping by to ask June where he was. At one point, June was so irritated that she snapped off at one of his customers.

“If you want to find him, you should knock on his glass walls. If you knock hard enough, he will appear.”

June said it with derisory scorn and great sarcasm. The man got the message and went off, cursing June under his breath. Even I was getting irritated, as his customers kept asking about him.

About two weeks later, the Old Man’s son came by to paste a notice and said that operations were suspended indefinitely. Old Man normally kept to himself and was highly secretive. Many people suspected he was dead, but nobody dared to say a thing.

Old Man returned only six months later. He kept quiet about what happened and maintained his usual silence and nonchalance. A new set of *Rudraksha* beads had also appeared once again. The colours were a bit warmer and darker than the previous bracelet, but the furls of the beads seemed even more intricate and complex.

If you looked closely, you could perhaps see the universe in the strange

116 As Coarse As Emporium

and intricate patterns.

And maybe, just maybe, you could see all of The Emporium at once in the cosmos of the *Rudraksha*.

12

THE RECRUITMENT AGENCY

In the Emporium, only a few people spoke Cantonese fluently. Being able to speak the same dialect instantly connected people. June and Helen had gotten along well with Big Backside because the three of them spoke Cantonese among themselves. And then, there was Loh.

Loh was of Hakka descent. His hair was long at the sides and combed backwards all around, resembling a lion's mane from the front view. He had a prominent black mole on the right side of his face. Whenever he spoke, the mole twitched in all directions, which had a bewitching effect on me.

Loh's unit was appropriately named "Loh's Services". It was located at the very end of a cul-de-sac corridor on the 3rd storey, near our salon. It was extremely nondescript without any signs of life. Not many patrons would bother walking to the end because the lights were kept dim there. If you didn't pay close attention, you would not know that there was even a business there.

Whatever Loh did in his unit, nobody knew very well. Whenever I came with Helen to the salon at 8am, Loh would arrive shortly at 8.15am, staying in his unit all day till late into the evening. All sorts of customers would visit him. Some of them were decked out in branded clothes from top to toe, in classic Louis Vuitton or Prada apparel and bags. Some of them looked furtive enough, with beady eyes and crooked noses. One thing was clear, everything was shady about the place.

Loh maintained cordial relations with most of the neighbours on the 3rd storey. Whenever somebody asked him what his business was about, he would reply with his cheery and upbeat voice - "Oh, I run a recruitment agency. We refer our clients to all kinds of jobs suitable for them. No job is inaccessible to me."

His cheek mole twitched furiously while he spoke in perfect Cantonese. A strange smile would form on his face but having grown up in a salon and observing peoples' expression all the time, I knew that he was lying.

To prove my point, one of our neighbours, who also ran a manpower agency, told Helen that he never found Loh's name in the registry of approved recruitment agencies. Even though we were not apprised of Loh's activities, we were certainly apprised of his wealth. Loh drove a big, black S-class Mercedes, a perennial favourite in Singapore. It was the biggest car in the parking lot, and he made it a point to park at prominent spots with maximum visibility. It drew envy from many of the tenants in The Emporium, and only served to draw more suspicion about the exact nature of his business.

One of our customers, Yuki was a middle-aged woman who kept a short-bob. She had been our customer for a very long time but recently, Helen had seen her going in and out of Loh's.

“Eh Yuki, the usual?”

“Yea Helen.”

As soon as Yuki sat down in the salon chair, Helen proceeded to deftly clip two towels to her back. Yuki always came for a hair-wash right after her work at 5.30pm. The towels served as a barrier between the overflowing shampoo and her expensive dress. With two presses of the shampoo dispenser, rich orange liquid *Zoa* shampoo flowed onto Helen's hands. She quickly smeared it on Yuki's soft auburn hair and squirted water onto it with a water bottle in her other hand. The shampoo started to lather within seconds, forming thick, luxurious soap bubbles which looked like pockets of snow on Yuki's head.

Yuki was a high-ranking manager in one of the local banks, working as a relationship manager and taking care of high net-worth clients. Yuki didn't come from a rich background but they said that in life, you faked it till you made it. She was always clad in an expensive designer-tops and the air of Chanel No. 5 permeated the space around her.

Yuki seemed more dead beat than usual, with heavy eye bags obscuring her beautiful brown eyes. Being a relationship manager was no mean feat. You met all sorts of wealthy people who had truck-loads of money and the job was to get them to invest in a multitude of projects that the bank wanted to offer. It was simply a sales job with good commission. The only problem was that rich people had weird quirks all the

time. And Yuki had to be in their good books to get them to buy the bank's investment products.

"Why are you so tired lately? Difficult customer? Haha." Helen inquired.

"Oh, it's nothing lah. A lot has been happening, haha. I didn't catch enough sleep these few days."

The shampoo lathered more and more and Helen started to massage her scalp. In seated shampooing, one of the key aspects was the regular movement of the hands. The customer expected to be pampered, Helen expertly moved her hands in a clockwise manner, from the top to the side and back from the top to the other side. The fingers curled into a claw-like manner to thoroughly scrub the scalp, while also scrunching up into supple motions to massage the acupressure points on the head. A good head massage would relieve the tensed up feeling in the brain after a long day of hard work, improving blood circulation to the scalp and also stimulating new hair growth. Or at least, that's what we touted.

"Oh? You've been talking to Loh recently, right? I saw you at his unit the other day"

"Which Loh?" Yuki seemed puzzled.

"Norhhh, the one at the corner lah. That was you right? I can recognise your beautiful legs from anywhere"

Helen made sure to sneak in compliments while engaging Yuki in the conversation. Honestly, Helen didn't really care much about whether Yuki went to Loh's or not. Her job was to make sure the customer was happy.

In a salon, there were two types of customers. Some people fall asleep the moment they sit down. For them, it was a secluded moment of paradise as they had their hair cut and could also fully relax in the salon chair. For others, they enjoyed the conversation with the hair stylist. The salon was the ultimate safe place for most women to pour their hearts out. In here, they could confide in their stylists, who was separated from their usual web of life. Whatever they said stayed here in the salon, or so they thought.

“Oh, that Loh, yes, one of my clients needed his help lah. Loh’s services are the best.”

“How did he help your client?” Helen quizzed in an unconcerned manner, careful to suppress her growing curiosity about Loh.

“Oh, the client had some visa problems and wanted some help for his son to come over here. He ...” Yuki was talking jubilantly but somehow became tongue-tied.

“... he wanted Loh to help with some referral of contact for his son to get a job here.” It was immediately obvious that Yuki felt uncomfortable and was lying about what Loh did.

Helen did not probe further, nor was she interested in what Loh did. Having been in The Emporium for over fifteen years by then, nothing really fazed Helen by then. Many businesses had come and go, and one day, the salon’s heyday would also be over. Whatever Loh did wouldn’t be the first nor the last.

Yuki happily enjoyed the rest of her shampooing and headed home. However, my interest had been piqued in that short conversation. The fact that Yuki felt the need to cover up for whatever service Loh rendered, confirmed my suspicion that something fishy was going on.

I was perhaps also drawn to Loh’s activities because I had always found Loh to be an extremely intelligent guy. He spoke several different Mandarin dialects expertly, along with good English and impeccable Thai. Whenever he spoke to our neighbours along the common corridor, he could effortlessly swap among the Teochew, Cantonese, Hokkien, Hakka, Hainan dialects. In Singapore at that time, there were still different dialect enclaves and people regarded you as one of their own if you spoke in their tongue. Helen spoke the Cantonese dialect but out of business necessity, she had learnt Hokkien and Teochew over the long span of her hair styling career. And even then, she spoke only the rudimentary. Loh could speak fluently and quickly, and with the correct intonations which made him sound native in everything he spoke.

Running a business was not easy, a profitable one was even harder and to be a polyglot on top of that. The chance to find out what was behind all this was not far away.

Loh often brought his two sons over to The Emporium. They kept to themselves under the watchful eye of their father. Once, when I was playing along the corridor, I saw his elder son, Mario, walk out to the toilet.

“Hi, do you want to play?” I had always been a spontaneous kid after Tina, Zoe’s daughter left The Emporium. At that time, I seriously regretted not having spoken to her earlier, else, we could have played much more. From then on, I had resolved to abandon all fears and to proactively seek out playmates.

Mario was about my age, and often sported a kid’s polo tee. Even for a child, he dressed quite formally, like his father did. He had handsome eyes and a very boyish look, but was overall very shy and introverted. Mario seemed surprised at my request.

“Erm...” He turned back for a while, probably shocked at my approach but then quickly decided to say yes. I brought him over to an area on the corridor near the salon and we played Snakes and Ladders. Mario didn’t know the rules – typical brought-up-at-home children, but once he started to get the hang of it, he was very excited by the stochastic nature of the game.

Slowly but surely, Mario introduced his brother to me and we played our favourite game of catching in The Emporium. Loh did not disapprove of this. Most parents in The Emporium let their kids play together. It was a win-win situation because they could focus on their work, and their kids could also learn social skills.

One day, Mario was playing Monopoly with us when he said he wanted to sip some water. I was curious about Loh’s office, so I asked Mario if I could follow him in.

“Why not, Bee? Haha, you’ve never been in the office, right? Sure, step in for a while.”

With that, Mario brought me in to Loh’s office that day. Loh was busy with a client and smiled at me. Perhaps it was because I was only ten at that time, most people did not think much of me. I had also always been a very well-behaved boy. People often praised me for being able to just sit on a chair outside the salon and watch the customers go in and

out. Other children would have wanted to run around or kick a football but I was contented just sitting there and watching people.

It was fun to examine the tiniest expressions on a customer's face, that slight crease of the eyebrow, or the subtle edge in their voices when they were excited. I imagined myself as a future Sherlock Holmes, able to decipher the true intent of people's brain from just simply observing their demeanours.

It was mind-blowing to see Loh's office for that first and last time.

Loh's office was completely opaque from the outside. The white frost-ed glass gave the exterior a stark look but the interior was a different story. When the door swung open, a beautiful white marble counter top greeted me, complete with two ceramic Chinese antique vases at each end. The blue dragon motifs were spread out on the white surface, the plain colours accentuating the majesty of the mythical beasts.

The floor was tiled with white marble as well. An orange replica carpet with the words HERMES was lay out on the floor as a welcome sign. A black silk curtain was pulled behind the counter. Mario led me in and there was an automated water dispenser with a black carbon filter inside. The back of the shop was partitioned into two corners.

In one corner, there was a long, solid wood table with a pile of red small books, the size of the notepads I used in school. I read the words – “R E P U B L I C O F S I N G A P O R E”. There was a symbol of a lion and a tiger and another word at the bottom – “P A S S P O R T”.

I didn't know what “republic” nor “passport” meant but I certainly knew what Singapore meant. There were two state-of-the-art sewing stations next to the pile, and an industrial-grade A3 printer. A work-bench filled with all sorts of vice grips, screw-drivers, paper filers, etc was also lit by a small warm downlight. The place smelled faintly of ozone, a common smell in photocopier rooms.

On the workbench, I also saw a few other copies of the red small books. Some of them were flipped to the first page, with gaping holes in them. I could not see clearly but there were a few other similar sized books, with different colours strewn around. It looked like a rainbow myriad of patches on the table.



Loh now bade the customer goodbye and went to his workbench. He quickly strapped a black jeweller magnifying glass to his left eye and took out several of the small red books. With a steel scissors in hand, he carefully sliced in the middle of the cover page of one book. The cover page separated into two sheets of paper with bits of pulp falling onto the workbench. Loh was entirely riveted in this process. The precision that he had at the table was unnerving, as if he were a master watch smith carefully taking a *Rolex* watch and piecing it back together.

The other corner of the shop was an office table. That was where he had just met the client.

“Okay, let’s go, I’ve got my water. Let’s leave quietly.” Mario whispered.

It was the last time I ever got to see the inside. It was not until I was much older that I realised what Loh was doing in his office. The passports, the tools and the precision – I had expected something shady but I didn’t know that it was this bad. Whatever the case was, I was grateful that nothing untoward had happened that day. Who knew what connections Loh had? It was easy to silence anybody if you had that kind of influence and connection. Singapore was still not the safe haven it is today, and anything was possible.

Around this time, The Emporium’s customer footfall was declining slowly, but still considerable. The entire 3rd storey, where our salon was situated on, had a 95% occupancy rate, meaning that there was a wide range of live businesses operating. While I was flustered thinking about what Loh was doing, another incident quickly took my mind off it.

The next day, when Helen and I reached the salon, we saw a huge gaping hole in the glass wall of one of the offices along the corridor. The entire glass panel had been removed and placed carefully at the side, resting against a common wall. The office belonged to a gospel recording service. The boss was Pastor Lee, a nice middle-aged man with rectangular spectacles. He was one of the better neighbours because he worked quietly in his premises with his wife Betty. Together, they were recording the bible in different languages and exporting them to different countries around the world to spread the word of Christ.

At first, Helen and I just walked past the glass as if everything was nor-

mal. But when we saw the insides of the unit in a disarray, it dawned on us that something dreadful had happened.

Somebody had broken into the shop!

Helen and I called out some of the other neighbours and we quickly called Pastor Lee and the building manager, Patrick

“Oh my! What happened here?” Pastor Lee rushed to the scene with Betty behind.

They quickly went inside to find out what had been stolen. Shortly after, the police arrived on the scene and blue-white police tape was soon sprawled all over the crime scene. In all, it was determined that five hundred dollars had been taken from a small, red wallet in the shop, as well as some gold crosses that Pastor Lee hung.

The incident quickly made the tabloid that night. Many mall-goers at The Emporium came up to the 3rd storey to gossip and look at the scene. By then, the glass had been cleared and Pastor Lee had reorganised much of his shop.

“Pastor Lee, are you okay?”

“Helen, thank you for your concern. We are doing okay. It will cost us some money to replace the glass walls but fortunately, the insurance will pay out. Our church members have also volunteered to help us with some of the repairs of the office equipment. We are thankful to Christ for helping us escape this difficult time unscathed.” Pastor Lee normally preached a bit more about the church and Jesus but today, it seemed even the incident left a mark on his usual cheery self.

The theft became the talk of the entire Emporium. The building had a 24-hours security team patrolling the place at all times, together with an electrician and admin staff. It was open from 7am to 10pm daily. There was no CCTV at that time but it would not be possible for an amateur to commit the crime without alarming anybody. Many people suspected that it was an insider job, and also an expert job.

As if on cue, the next week, another office was broken into. This time, the robbers made off with an amount of \$2,000 and some other valuables.

126 As Coarse As Emporium

The whole building became abuzz with this sudden development. The police had been in talks with the management but there were no substantial leads on the first incident. And now, a second unit had been targeted.

The security team was called in for interrogation but they maintained that they did not hear anything in the night. This was not surprising. The security at The Emporium was split into the Morning Team and the Night Team. The Morning Team operated from 8am to 8pm. They were mostly in charge of directing patrons and attending to general complaints. The Night Team mostly dealt with an empty building and were in charge of locking up all points of access to the mall. They also had to patrol the entire building, clocking designated points to fulfil their duty. At that time, the security guards only had to clock a total of twice per night, meaning that they only patrolled the entire building two rounds every 12 hours. A full walk of the building was over in 15 minutes. If the robber timed his movement correctly and precisely, committing the crime was a walk in the park.

However, several important questions remained.

Firstly, the glass was removed and the security guards had reported that they did not hear a thing. Was there a way that the glass was cut open without sound? At a time when the Internet and Wikipedia were still not so developed, there was no easy answer to this.

Secondly, the break-ins occurred only on the 3rd storey exclusively. The other floors were not targeted. Why?

Thirdly, could it be an insider job? Were the security guards reliable?

Throughout these two episodes, June was similarly concerned but not worried. The two offices targeted had exterior glass walls. Our salon was protected by a metal roller shutter that was pulled down every night. There was no way that the thief could cut through the quarter-inch thick steel. Cutting glass was different. It only required a sharp cutter and a forceful push before the entire panel gave way. Some offices had saved money and their walls consisted of several smaller glass panels glued together with silicone. It was infinitely easier to break into these by slicing at the weak silicone joints, and then dislodging the glass

panels.

For some strange reason, this incident also seemed to bring the whole building together. Loh, Rough Face from the tattoo parlour, Iris from the Facial Place, the Old Man barber and June had put aside their temporary differences and discussed their courses of action. An emergency, extraordinary meeting was held to explore the options that The Emporium had. The room was overflowing with consternation but with firm resolve to stop the thief in his tracks.

After an intense three-hour discussion, two ideas were put forth. One was to install CCTV and lay cabling throughout the ceilings down to the management room. Wi-fi technology was still not prevalent at that time. This entire process would take weeks to complete as The Emporium would have call for an open tender, approve contractors and then start work. There was no way this would be done in time.

The other plan was proposed by Rough Face, which was to procure a large fierce German Shepherd. The dog was to be tied to a leash in the direct centre of the 3rd storey.

The idea seemed simple but cost-effective. The dog would be leashed in the evening after 10pm by the contractor. It was trained to start barking ferociously upon sensing any human presence. The loud barking would then alert the guards who had their command post at the 1st storey. The guards would then be able to rush up to apprehend the thief. This idea seemed to make enough sense back then and was passed with an 80% majority vote.

On the night the dog arrived, most of the 3rd storey tenants huddled together to watch the dubious scene. The German Shepherd easily weighed 70 kilogrammes, and had a permanently menacing look. It salivated constantly with its panting tongue. The saliva collected in a pool at its legs, where it was leashed to the glass balustrade at the corridor. The trainer informed the management that the dog was named Billy and also a retired police force top canine.

As soon as the trainer left it, Billy barked incessantly at any movement. The sound seemed to reverberate in the entire building, travelling far and wide. Even the glass walls started to shake a bit, and this time, the

128 As Coarse As Emporium

guard could not deny that they could not hear anything. You had to be deaf not to hear Billy.

“Helen, I am so scared of the dog at night! It is affecting my business.”

Iris used to squeal to Helen in the morning. She had customers who booked facial appointments after their work, and often late after 10pm. Billy’s barking often jolted them from the peaceful sessions, and she was receiving complaints.

Most of the businesses decided to close before the dog came at 10pm. Nobody wanted to be near the large, fierce Billy. Everybody was sure that the 3rd storey would be safe from the thief, at least for the time.

A week passed, two weeks and then a month. Still, nothing happened. The previous pall of fear that engulfed the building was now gone, reassured by reddish-black Billy that guarded the 3rd storey.

After two months, the building came together to discuss the results. In those two months, The Emporium had remained safe from the clutches of the glass robber but Billy also brought with it certain inconveniences. In particular, the barking from him was so loud that some of the late mall-goers at the lower levels were taken aback. There was a concern about who would be liable if somebody got a heart-attack from being scared by Billy. The Emporium voted to remove him but to continue to stay on alert.

About a week after Billy was relieved of his duty, it seemed like all was peaceful again. Mall patrons started returning and businesses started to operate till late again.

One morning, Henry, the junior security officer in The Emporium was doing his rounds at about 5am. As he reached the 3rd storey, he started to see a suspicious figure in front of Loh’s unit. The lights in The Emporium are switched off in the night, leaving only the green EXIT signs lit. Henry brandished his torch light and pointed it at Loh’s shop’s direction.

The thief was at it again!

“TTTTTTTHHHHHHHHHUUUUUUUUMMMMMPPPPP”

The thief shoved into Henry, who was blocking the cul-de-sac. At 50 years old, Henry was considered senior in age for the profession but The Emporium had saved on money and bid very cheaply for external security services. Due to the low fees that The Emporium forked out, we could only procure security guards that were older and frail. When you paid peanuts, you received monkeys.

Henry stumbled backwards and was powerless to do anything. He knew that he could not give chase at his old age. He used his phone to quickly dial the police.

“Hello, I am calling from The Emporium, located along XXXXXXXXXXXX. There’s been a break-in, please send help!”

Henry’s voice was frantic.

Shortly after, the police came. At about 8am, most of the tenants and proprietors started to come in to set up their businesses for the day. On seeing the commotion outside Loh’s unit, many came forward to join in.

The police were questioning who owned the unit and to come forward.

“Bee, whose unit was broken into? The darn thief!” Helen said to me, while getting the salon ready to avoid a scolding from June.

“Mom, it’s Loh’s” I said to her, shuffling back between Loh’s unit and the salon, and delivering news to Helen.

Footsteps now approached Loh’s unit from the long corridor outside the salon. Loh himself had parked his Mercedes and was now walking in.

I was relieved, the police could now inform him about what had happened through the night. However, something wasn’t right.

Two policemen started to surround Loh and brought him to verify certain things at his unit. A forensic specialist now began to place the small red books that I saw previously into clean, clear Ziploc bags, as if removing crucial evidence from a crime scene.

“CCCCCCCCCCCLLLLLLIIIIICCCCCCKKK”

130 As Coarse As Emporium

The unmistakable sound of handcuffs was now heard. Loh was taken away for suspected tampering of passports and abetting of illicit activities.

A few days later, Helen and I came in through The Emporium's car park to access the lifts. There it was, the sheen of Loh's black Mercedes shone right into my eyes. It had been polished to a sparkling shine, and was parked prominently in the carpark.

As we went to the salon, we saw Loh talking to several other tenants.

"Loh, good morning! How are you?" Helen greeted, with no mention to the incident a few days ago.

"Hello Helen, I'm good as always. Haha. Still breathing and alive, so it's a good sign."

Helen did not prod further. She knew not to pour salt on open wounds. If Loh did not want to talk about what happened, then there was no point grilling him. It would only make the situation awkward.

Loh seemed to telepathically sense Helen's unease.

"Aiya, few days ago, there was a mistake. The police found the passports of some of my staff. Some of them had expired and were in my office. It was a giant mistake." Loh laughed out loud to everybody nearby.

On hearing this, everybody burst out laughing, but an uneasiness filled the air. The story was incredible, but it was Loh's account and that was that. There was no reason for anybody to pursue anything. Even the police had let him walk free.

A few days, a body was discovered in a river nearby. From the description given by the police, it matched the description that Henry had shared about the mysterious glass thief who was never apprehended.

Perhaps the body was really him.

Perhaps he had crossed somebody he shouldn't.

And perhaps the long arms of The Emporium had now caught up to him.

13

THE TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE HEALER

“Helen, help me a bit.”

June was struggling to walk back to the salon. Helen went forward and with her arms underneath June’s shoulders, she helped June back to a roller chair in front of the salon.

“Wahhh! The session by Ivan is really good. Painful but I felt all my stress points being relieved.”

As June relaxed onto the seat and her eyes were half-dazed, I could see Helen scowling. Helen and I had been late to the salon that morning. One of Helen’s regulars had come early and June had “snatched” the customer. This particular regular always left a huge tip. Even at ten years old, I knew what money was. Money was this lucky thing that I could use at the arcade, or at the snacks shop to get sweets. I knew that whenever I needed a coin or two, I could ask Helen, and she would give it to me. Money was also this evil thing that made Helen continue to be at the mercy of June. Even when June’s tyrannical behaviours were getting outrageous, Helen bit her nails and kept quiet. Because of money.

The large morning tip was probably why June had decided to go get a massage at Ivan’s. Helen was late on a mortgage payment and every bit of money mattered. To see June enjoying herself at the expense of us, made me hot under the collar. However, we would always manage to get by, just as Helen had done so, after moving out with me for the past ten years.

From the salon, when one turned right, at the very end of the Emporium was a big sauna. Before one reached De Sauna, there was a long corridor with shops operating. There was also a small cul-de-sac with some shops in it. Loh’s shop was at the end of the cul-de-sac, safely ensconced in a corner.

“Ivan TCM” was a shop two units to the left of Loh. It was run by its sole owner – Ivan.

中医大

IVAN'S TCM



Ivan often caked his face with thick, white beauty powder. His face was unusually white, while his neck was reddish pink. The two different tones of colour did not bother him. He became known as White Face.

White Face had moved into The Emporium at the time when I was adopted by Helen. At that time, June had already been running the salon business at two previous locations and had moved into The Emporium for almost five years before White Face came along.

White Face was a short man at about 165 cm. He always wore a short-sleeved sky blue shirt, ironed to straightness and black pants. He could have been mistaken for a corporate, white-collar worker but White Face was in fact a TCM (Traditional Chinese Medicine) practitioner.

During this time, western medicine had already been introduced to Singapore and it was flourishing. TCM had been brought over to Singapore by the early Chinese immigrants, with their acupuncture, moxibustion, and meridian massaging techniques. With the rise of western medicine, TCM had been relegated to becoming a more economic manner of addressing geriatric ailments. Most of the customers were the elderly Chinese, who had been relying on Chinese remedies for all kinds of maladies their whole lives.

White Face had a wife, who was one of the kindest souls in The Emporium. She was the same height as White Face, and wore round spectacles with hair tied up in a ponytail. At 9am sharp, White Face would come to the building with his wife, and she would start to do the chores such as cleaning the shop, refilling the water supplies and getting the TCM paraphernalia ready for Ivan to service his clients. I had not once seen her have any free time to her own, and though she worked hard, she never failed to smile and greet me every time I passed by their unit. She would also offer me sweets and chocolate on many occasions.

In every strata-titled building in Singapore, a committee known as the MCST (Managing Committee Strata Title) is formed to oversee the matters of the building. Security services, cleaning services, aircon and maintenance services are scrutinised and awarded by the MCST. The MCST was a committee of seven people elected from all of the owners of the units in The Emporium. White Face was one of them.

134 As Coarse As Emporium

As a committee member, White Face had much more say than most of the other unit-owners like June. White Face's business was thriving at that time and he was also a newly elected committee member after moving into the building for a year. This soon went to his head.

Over time, White Face's demeanour began to change. They say that absolute power corrupts absolutely. For White Face, he began to talk in a haughty and standoffish manner.

"June, you are not allowed to put your broom and dustpan along the common corridor. The common corridor belongs to the strata title. If you want to put anything, you have to seek permission and pay a fee." – Ivan would often take a swipe at us.

Grumbling, June had no choice but to abide as she did not want to pay extra. Business was not going well and we wanted to avoid trouble as much as possible.

White Face would then start chuckling to himself, often reminding me of a kid who had gotten his way.

Even his industrious wife was not spared, as I often heard bickering from their unit from the salon. When I peeked over, his wife would come out, head down and dejected, and a clear sign of who had won the fight.

Over time, his wife began to confide more and more in Helen when they bumped into each other at the common pantry area.

"Eh, Helen, how's business?"

"Not bad, how about you? Eh, what's that red mark on your hand?"

"Oh, we are doing okay too. I am so busy every day, cleaning and working. Yesterday I fell down and hurt my hand."

Helen had seen many of her customers who were the subjects of domestic abuse. White Face's wife had all the tell-tale signs. However, Helen also knew that pursuing further at this point would definitely elicit backlash and resistance. When women were abused, they would often tolerate and endure for all kinds of reasons, such as reassuring themselves that their husbands only did this one-off, or that they had

not performed up to expectations and with improvement, they would avoid such a fate. If the abuse happened and they still wanted to cover it up, no amount of coaxing from Helen would get White Face's wife to open up. Helen decided to play along and not inquire. It was premature. When White Face's wife could not take it anymore, she would fight back. Now was not the time.

In the month that White Face was elected the committee member, most tenants and proprietors did not really know nor bother. Committee members could decide on certain matters for The Emporium, but big-ticket changes still had to be referred to the annual general meetings, where the whole building came together. Yet, White Face did not think otherwise.

Once, when Helen and I went to the 2nd storey food stall, we glimpsed White Face at the front. He was queuing up and it was soon his turn. The food stall served economical rice, which was a staple type of food in Singapore. Different dishes would be pre-cooked and placed in large serving trays. Customers would order a plate of steamed white rice and select a few dishes. It usually consisted of a meat dish and a vegetables side.

Today, White Face seemed extra ravenous and was commanding the stall staff to pile his plate high with different dishes.

“I want this, extra gravy.”

“That one too, give me a bit more.”

I wondered how much the bill came to be. As White Face took out his wallet, he started to command in an authoritative manner.

“Lady Boss, I am the newly elected committee member of this building. I want this plate to be \$2. If it's anymore, it will not be good for you and me.” With that, he resumed his big smile and placed a piece of stale, old \$2 bills on the counter.

The lady boss seemed to stutter for a while. For the plate that White Face ordered, with a mixture of steam dory, curry chicken, stir-fried pork and at least two other vegetables, it would normally run into \$5 onwards. It was daylight robbery. The lady boss did not want trouble so

136 As Coarse As Emporium

she made a grimace and accepted the money.

White Face then sat down and tucked into his meal.

When Helen and I reached the counter, Helen whispered softly.

“Lady Boss, what happened? Why did you charge him so cheaply?”
Helen made sure that she was out of earshot of Ivan.

“Aiyo, don’t you know? He is the committee member here. Just the other day, he threatened me to charge him cheaply too or he would request the building committee to increase my operating costs!” the food stall lady boss complained.

She was referring to the tables that she had set around the stall. The food stall rented a unit, which had space for her kitchen and food, but there was inadequate space for customers to sit down. She had to rent common corridor space outside her shop from The Emporium’s committee to set tables for customers to chow down. If White Face said a word, he could influence the pricing of the rented space. It was wise not to offend him.

Soon, many other stories began to make their way into circulation within the Emporium. It was well-known by now that White Face was not only a ruthless bully but also a cheapskate. Everything that he could squeeze out of his committee member standing, he did so. And without remorse nor compunctions.

The Emporium hired 6 cleaners for two shifts. Much like the security guards, the morning shift worked in the, well, morning. While the night shift cleaners did the evening rounds. As a shopping mall, there were many toilets to clean, and much to do, such as cleaning the corridor glass balustrades, the floor, the escalator handles, etc.

One of the cleaners was Siti. Siti was a Malay lady from Johor, Malaysia. She was married with two children, who stayed in Johor. She had come to Singapore in search of a better living. The currency exchange from SGD to MYR was 3 to 1. It was certainly lucrative to work here and send money back to her home in Malaysia.

Siti wore a blue headscarf and a blue uniform. Without fail, when Helen and I entered The Emporium every morning, she could be seen

mopping the floors. The smell of antiseptic solution stung my nose each time we passed by her. It was unpleasant, but also reassuring.

“Hey Helen! Good morning, Bee!” Siti greeted us every day. It was like a friendly reunion of neighbours.

“Good morning Siti!” Helen responded.

“Where are your manners, Bee?” Helen would then remind me.

“Hello Auntie Siti.” I would call out.

We both knew that Siti worked very hard in The Emporium. Unlike some of the past contracted cleaners, who were extremely slack, Siti was devoted to her job. The previous year, another company had been awarded the contract to clean The Emporium. Their staff comprised men that looked like ex-convicts. They were often seen smoking behind the building, congregating and chattering non-stop. When it was toilet-cleaning time, they would push the cleaning carts to the toilet, and be done in 5 minutes. The 5 minutes was simply connecting the hose to the water point, and spraying down the entire toilet with water. People like this, who had no sense of duty to their jobs, were abhorrent.

Cleaning a public place such as The Emporium was a highly visible job. If the cleaning was not done properly, the toilets would stink and smell almost immediately. If you didn’t clean for two days straight, the smell could be fatal.

When Siti came in, the toilets started to smell pleasant once more. It was a godsend. I could go to the toilets and breathe easily once again.

One morning, I saw Siti stepping inside White Face’s unit. I became puzzled and went to take a look. Like many other units, White Face’s walls were transparent glass panels and one could see clearly inside. Siti was cleaning the insides of Ivan’s unit!

At ten years old, I knew it was certainly not right. Siti was employed by The Emporium. She was definitely not allowed to clean private property. Ivan must have coerced her into it.

I reported this to Helen and June, but the both of them shrugged it off. June was simply one of the small-time owners in the building. Even she

138 As Coarse As Emporium

had no power over what White Face wanted to do.

It began to get worse. I started to see other cleaners being summoned to White Face's place to clean his premises, and wipe everything spick and span. Whenever he needed any services, he would remind the business owner of his position in The Emporium and cajole them to charge a lower price.

At that time, Han's Wonder Feet was still operating. White Face would often saunter by the shop.

"Hello, is your manager here?"

The Chinese lady who had been employed by Han as the manager would step out.

"Oh, Boss Ivan! Please come in." In a subservient tone, the manager ushered him in.

Whatever they did inside, I did not know. Helen told me that White Face had threatened to report the illicit activities that happened inside the shop. In return, the women there were to "service" him as lip service. White Face often chose select times when his wife was not in, and rushed over for the massage service.

"Bee, when you grow up, you cannot become this kind of man. It's the lowest form of scum." Helen nagged at me.

Yet, as time went on, the fights between the White Face and his wife grew ever more vigorous and once, I was napping on the beauty bed when a terribly, deathly sign emanated from them.

"PPPPPPPPPIIIIIIIIAAAAAANNNNNNNNNGGGGGGG-GGGG"

"AAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH-HHHH"

A porcelain vase had been thrown out of White Face's unit and it landed with such a ferocious force against the ceramic tiled flooring. White Face's wife shouted and cried with such an anguish that chills ran down my spine for a few days. It was the culmination of so many years of

hard work for a man she loved, but now, that love had turned to betrayal and disbelief, and soon towards deep-seated regret. Whether it would become courage for her to ask for a divorce or increased tolerance for more atrocities was still not clear at this point.

Many of the neighbours had come out to look at the commotion at this point. The wife was now sobbing in a corner, head bent down and hair dishevelled. The porcelain vase pieces were strewn all over her shoes. There was a short cut at her legs, with a rivulet of blood draining downwards.

A neighbour handed her a tissue to stop the crying and also staunched the blood on her leg. White Face's wife's weeping became even more uncontrollable. A helpful guy nearby proceeded to escort her to his shop to have a drink and seat.

On seeing this, White Face lunged forward and grabbed his wife's arm. He also forcefully swatted the helpful guy's arms.

"What are you doing? This is my wife. Who are you to touch her?" White Face burst out, adamant and indignant.

The helpful guy struggled and backed off, leaving White's Face wife on the floor. Nobody dared to step forward to help her.

"Don't you all have to run your businesses? Go back, or I will make you pay. I am the committee member here!" White Face screamed with fury. I was quite sure his face was already fuming red, but it was concealed underneath the thick, cheap powder that he had applied.

Immediately after this incident, his wife filed for divorce. Rumours spread fast in the Emporium. Everybody in The Emporium had suffered under his hands and was secretly praying for his demise.

White Face quickly went to the maid agency and procure an Indonesian domestic helper the next day. The helper was a nice lady who greeted the neighbours in The Emporium behind White Face's back. Yet, she seemed to be a little too close physically to White Face. It was easy to confuse their relationship.

One Sunday, when I was helping to sweep the floor in the salon, I noticed a Filipino lady with a strong accent walking around cluelessly.

Her big bosom swayed precariously behind the red turtleneck she was wearing.

“Hi, do you need some help?” I was feeling in a good mood that day so I went forward to help the poor lady.

“Yes, could you direct me to #03-XX?” The Filipino lady spoke in a very light voice. Combined with her fashion sense and soft hands, I gauged her to be in her 20s. #03-XX? Isn’t that Ivan’s unit?

I pointed her in the direction and she thanked me.

There was no business for a Filipino woman to be looking for Ivan, what more at 8am in the morning. Ivan usually came in only at 10am so this made me even more puzzled. In Singapore, most Filipino women worked as domestic helpers. Sundays were the official off-days for them so large groups of them frequently congregated in their favourite haunts such as Orchard Road’s Lucky Plaza. Our salon had a big clientele of domestic helpers who often sought perming and rebonding services so I knew one when I saw one.

My suspicions were soon confirmed. The Filipino lady loitered at the outside of White Face’s shop. She began to scour for her mobile phone and started texting somebody. There was a subtle look of nervousness and trepidation in her brows, yet belying a certain excitement as well. It seemed as if she were about to embark on a risky deal, but with certain great rewards in it.

5 minutes later, White Face strolled into the building. With his usually, irritating high-pitched whistling of “Titanic”, he ignored me and started to open his door, paying no regard to the Filipino lady. Once he was inside, the lady would meekly open the door. Only after two hours later, would the lady emerge and leave, while White Face prepared for his customers to come.

I thought of White Face’s wife, thought about these Filipino girls and thought about White Face’s children. The more I thought, the more disgusted I felt. The more I also wondered why White Face’s wife married him. Perhaps it was the same as Helen, a marriage of convenience, to lift her from some other situation, but only to go straight into hell. Such a menace of a man did not deserve a nice lady like her.

For a few Sundays, there would be a different Filipino girl coming in. At that time, most businesses in the Emporium did not operate on Sundays, and definitely not at 8am. Without fail, these girls would be clad in such cloying perfumes that I found it difficult to breathe. They would always have such big and unnatural breasts and they would always be confused and lost. The layout of The Emporium was not easy to navigate as there were not enough direction signs guiding visitors.

Whenever they came, White Face would always follow behind after. After they both entered, it was usually after two hours that the glass doors of White Face's would unlock and the girl would walk out, clothes slightly unfurled and face slightly perturbed.

By some divine will, in the two months after the divorce, White Face's wife had submitted to the police evidence about his importing of unlicensed medicine. The news made headlines at that time as it was an unprecedented amount of illicit medicine imported for a TCM clinic. His wife took custody of both their children. White Face went for a three-week stint in jail. When he came back, he was stripped of his position as a committee member due to his records as an ex-convict.

As I passed by his unit, I would see rubbish being swept and piled high in front of *Ivan TCM*. The cleaners had conspired together and swept whatever dust and dirt that accumulated on the floor in front of his unit. The food stalls also refused to sell to him or would charge him higher prices than normal. The Old Man barber, which he visited often, now would make him wait an extraordinarily long time before serving him.

The Emporium had a way of making things come full circle.

Karma had a way of getting back at you, when you least expected it.

14

THE FENG SHUI PRACTICE

White Face had a good buddy. His name was Jimmy.

Jimmy was a short and fat man, with an oval shaped face. His features were squeezed into the centre of his face, and he often wore a tight polo tee shirt. A short crop of hair surrounded the crown of his head, and his sides were cut to skin.

Jimmy had moved into The Emporium and his shop was called “Sadhana Fengshui”. Jimmy adorned his shop with big pieces of fengshui crystal. A large purple amethyst rock that had been split half and towered at about 1.5 meters stood at the entrance of his shop. It was the talk of The Emporium when he moved in. Such an enormous chunk cost a lot, and to be intact in one whole piece with perfect formation of crystals and a rich colour tone of purple and white – it corroborated Jimmy’s credibility as a fengshui master immensely.

The ancient art of Feng Shui dates back to ancient China. It is believed that a certain method of arranging furniture, decorations and buildings helped to balance the *yin* and *yang* of a place, and improved the flow of energy. There were complex rules to follow, which were recorded in antiquated books in traditional Chinese characters.

Jimmy was also a staunch believer of the legendary Sai Baba. Sathya Sai Baba was an Indian spiritual guru born in India. He was always cloaked in plain saffron robes, with his signature Afro hairstyle. The locks of hair spun in all directions and seemed to defy gravity. Sai Baba commanded a great following in India and the world. One of his amazing feats was the ability to produce from his mouth a golden *lingam*, which was an elongated spherical object that was believed to contain the mysteries of the universe. He also claimed be able to treat any disease simply by touching his followers’ forehead.

A full-body portrait of Sai Baba was hung in the direct centre of his shop. A row of spotlights was trained on him at all times. From afar, it really looked as if Sai Baba had come to life in the shop, his flowing saffron robes embracing any devotee who wished to seek his advice.



144 As Coarse As Emporium

Jimmy's shop was filled with all kinds of strange objects. There were gemstone bracelets made of materials that I had never seen, and ornaments of various animals, along with various deity statutes. It was decked out in black and white colours, which was relatively modern compared to the traditional red and yellow.

Jimmy did not get along with the other shops who were in the same trade. In particular, on the 2nd storey, two brothers selling Thai amulets had openly denounced his practices as unorthodox and unverified. They proclaimed that Jimmy had no formal training and was nothing more than a con artist.

Jimmy's prices were exorbitant. He didn't have many clients, but the few that approached him, he quoted sky-high prices. One of our customers had some trouble recently at work and had wanted to seek some advice from "higher" beings.

"Helen, do you know about the shop on the 2nd storey? The new one called Sadhana Fengshui. How is the guy's service?" the lady in the salon chair asked Helen. She was a single woman in her 40s, and was doing her quarterly perm.

"I am not sure. You can try it out. But the man charges quite expensive fees. I would advise you to go to the Thai amulet brothers." Helen responded, in between applying perm lotion to her head.

The next day, when Helen and I came to open the shop, we saw Jimmy staring daggers at us. We had done nothing to offend him. Or maybe the customer yesterday had gone to him and told him what Helen said. Customers were like that. Most of what was said in the salon was often passed around, which was why it was paramount to watch one's word. We never knew how far and wide rumours spread in The Emporium.

Jimmy had a peculiar habit, which was his way of taking credit. In The Emporium, most businesses took cash or card payment on the spot for services rendered. Jimmy had a policy of buying something, and then forcing the shop to book the payment on credit.

And he did this through his favourite committee member.

"Hey Ivan! How are you? Come, come, I have a new artefact that just

came in from Mumbai blessed by a high priest in a Hindu temple. It is guaranteed to give you good luck and fortune!" Jimmy's voice could barely contain his excitement.

White Face's greed was uncontainable at this point.

"Oh, then I must come and take a look."

Moments later, White Face walked past our salon. A shiny green bracelet hug tightly around his wrist. It was probably made from jade beads. Most of Singapore's jade was imported from Myanmar. White Face did not even know what he was wearing nor where it came from. But who cares? Jimmy had given it to him. And more importantly, it was free of charge.

As a result of Jimmy's constant buttering up of White Face, by extension, White Face asserted his authority to help Jimmy continue his credit policy. And in the first two months, trouble started to ensue. Some of the businesses started to ask Jimmy to pay up at the end of the month but he would only make partial payment.

"Just a few tens of dollars. Don't make so much noise. I will pay back the next month."

Jimmy assured his creditors, in a beseeching yet forceful manner. Many of the proprietors had no choice but to continue to take credit, interest-free.

It was during this time that Belinda had asked for the lucky number from the Four-Faced Buddha, which had opened as the second prize.

Jimmy was also one of the heavy gamblers in the building. He had betted big on the number and won. Paying off his creditors, he boasted, "All of you misers. See, I told you I would pay back everything. I have a shop here. Are you worried of me fleeing?"

In the same week, Jimmy started to shift more fengshui goods to his shop. Realising that he needed much more space than what he currently had, he asked around desperately for a cheap rental place.

By that time, the Four-Face Buddha had been in The Emporium for about three months. The space was big and empty. The altar and a man-

146 As Coarse As Emporium

made pond in the temple took up only about one tenth of the space. The Emporium's committee passed an internal resolution and decided to rent out the extra space to Jimmy.

As soon as this was passed, overnight, Jimmy had constructed tall steel storage structures, which created at least five levels of storage space all the way to the roof of the Four-Faced Buddha temple.

The temple was still open to public, but Jimmy had stationed his wife permanently inside the place to guard his own belongings. Going into the temple now felt like an activity in prison. Every move was watched by his wife, who had beady eyes and was often reading the newspaper. I could no longer play with the incense scones like I did previously. It was technically disrespectful to the Buddha and I never tried. Jimmy's wife looked ready to give me a good admonishing if I did.

After about three weeks of this arrangement, Jimmy once again, complained to White Face.

"Ivan, Ivan, I recently received this sacred ash powder that has been blessed by Sathya Sai Baba himself. I wanted to give you some but didn't have the chance." Jimmy did his usual submissive routine with White Face.

The two of them had met along the 3rd storey corridor, in front of our salon.

"Ahh, you are always so kind to me. Sure, let's go over to your shop later."

"Ivan, you are our committee member here! You have done so much to serve the building. What would the building do without you?"

As they walked off, White Face put his arms around Jimmy's shoulders. The two of them looked like brothers, but deep down, both pursued their own agendas.

Shortly after, the Four Faced Buddha Temple became closed to public access. A notice was pasted on the door that read.

"The Buddha altar is now closed. For any inquiries, please contact the management of The Emporium at 6XXX XXXX"

As I stood outside the transparent glass walls, I could see that Jimmy had stacked even more of his supplies all over the entire place. He probably was too stingy to spend money on coating the glass panels, which were transparent and allowed a full view into his supplies.

The Buddha now looked dismal and gloomy. There was no longer any offering made to it. Jimmy had removed all the incense bowls and paraphernalia.

Jimmy had also contracted with a local lion dance troupe to store their belongings. Lion Dance was a form of traditional dance in Singapore where performers wore costumes resembling fierce lions. There were performed on auspicious occasions, with loud drumming and trumpet sounds and were believed to enhance the energies of the place. Countless lion dance heads now were stacked against the walls. They rose all the way to the high ceiling, casting a long, dark shadow over the Buddha.

I peered in and imagined myself still lighting up incense cones and talking to Belinda. Even seeing Old Chicken now would be comforting. The Four-Faced Buddha seemed to look squarely at me, its eyes pleading with me to release it from Jimmy's clutches. Jimmy had possessed the entire space, together with the Buddha. Under the influence of White Face, there was nothing that anybody could do about. Only the seven-member committee could override White Face, but they were not in The Emporium all the time. These were big businessmen who owned many other properties in Singapore. They were newly elected and had a Christian majority. Nobody cared about the Four-Faced Buddha.

For the next few months, Jimmy racked up big debts with many businesses in The Emporium. He did not pay for his food, for tailoring, for stationery supplies, for his haircuts. He had also made big bets with Big Backside, who had also gone around telling tenants in The Emporium that Jimmy did not pay his dues. It was one of the tactics to force punters to pay up. Social pressure was something that was overlooked, yet extremely potent.

One day, Jimmy's Sadhana Fengshui shop became padlocked with two thick bicycle chains. His landlord had come down, wanting to repossess the place but because Jimmy still had his belongings inside, it was

14 8 As Coarse As Emporium

illegal under the Singapore law to forcefully enter the premises. Hiring a lawyer to sue him in court for 3 months of rental arrears would cost too much for his landlord, who had rented the place to him for a cheap price.

It was an embarrassing sight. His landlord had pasted a white, A4 paper notice.

“TENANT HAS NOT PAID 3 MONTHS RENTAL. LOCKED BY LANDLORD MS ANG.”

That was not all. Jimmy had accumulated a mountain of debts in the entire Emporium. His name was thoroughly sullied, and he had accumulated lots of bad blood. He quietly surfaced only in the deep nights to retrieve his stuff. This news was spread by Henry, the chief security officer at The Emporium, who was also an ally of the creditors and would inform them if he saw Jimmy in the premises.

Following the conviction of White Face into jail, Jimmy had also mysteriously disappeared one day. He cleared of all his belongings without a trace.

The Four-Faced Buddha was also gone. As to why the committee did not pursue this, nobody knew. They probably did not want to have anything to do with a Buddhist relic.

Helen and I often wondered where Jimmy now ended up. Together with his wife and daughter, the trio left The Emporium as soon as they came, causing only destruction and trouble in their wake.

And with that, the Four-Faced Buddha temple became no more.

Drowned into the sea of colourful history in The Emporium.

15

THE THAI AMULET SHOPS

The 2nd storey of the Emporium was a rectangular layout. Below our salon, was the electronic store held by Big Backside. On the opposite side of the building, directly facing Big Backside was “SOMCHAI BUDDHIST AMULETS”.

Somchai was the titular owner, a lanky man in his 30s from the northern part of Thailand. He often wore a black striped polo-tee which did nothing much to cover the strange, esoteric tattoos on his arms. His face was broad at the forehead and thinned out to a sharp chin, resembling a diamond shape. Each of his fingers also had a different coloured gem stone of varying sizes. A trio of Thai amulets hung from a white ivory necklace around his neck.

Somchai had been in The Emporium slightly earlier than when our salon had shifted in. His shop was a squarish layout, with three sides of jeweller display cases. Each of the display cases held dozens upon dozens of rare and collectible Thai amulets of different deities.

There were deities such as the *Nine-Tailed Fox*, which was believed to confer extraordinary luck in human relations to the wearer, and the *Pitta*, which was a buddha that covered its eyes and was thought to help its wearer remove all obstacles in life. Still, there were other less orthodox deities such as *Kuman Thong*, which was a venerated young boy who would bring luck and fortune if properly worshipped, and the *Palad Khid*, a Thai amulet shaped like a penis which would grant its wearer protection from dangerous objects such as knives and bullets. Whatever problems you had, Somchai would be able to refer a Thai amulet to you to solve your problems, at a price.

I often went over to play with his daughters. In the backroom, a giant gold-gilded Buddha statue sat peacefully. A white string stretched from the Buddha's index finger, all the way to the ceiling and hung from the light panels. The string extended into a complex tapestry of folds and led to the front of the shop. Somchai often used the string to conduct blessing rituals for his customers, as it was believed that the string





15 2 As Coarse As Emporium

directly tapped on the spiritual powers of the big buddha statue, across the entire energy of the shop and into the customer. The string was white to symbolise purity and an undisturbed flow of energy.

A few units adjacent from Somchai was Phet, his younger brother. Phet's shop was aptly named "PHET BUDDHIST AMULETS", and also featured the same layout as Somchai, but he had chosen a pale-yellow colour theme unlike Somchai's pastel pink. While Somchai was a slenderer man, Phet was big and obese, his paunch often stuck out from under his white shirt. Phet dealt with the same deities, but he offered a much more premium, high-end pricing. His amulets came from a thousand-year-old temple in Thailand, and were made by highly revered and popular monks. One such amulet could run into the thousands, a significant amount at that time.

It was well-known in the building that the two brothers were not on good terms. Their dad, Anong, had opened his shop on the 2nd storey and business was so good that he had bought another shop to serve as a warehouse. However, he had a sudden heart attack one day and died in his sleep. He had passed down one shop to each of his sons. The two of them had worked together for a year before a grave fallout over the distribution of income affected their relationships. People close to the matter say that Phet had cheated Somchai and brought back some of the shop's customers to serve privately. He had not come clean with these earnings, and should have divided the money as per their arrangement. Somchai had forgiven Phet time and time again but Phet's greed knew no bounds and thus, both decided to go their separate ways.

Many of Anong's ex-customers visited both shops, unaware of the bad blood. For them, they were only interested in the perceived power of the amulets and their prices. Often, a customer would get a price check from Somchai before going over to Phet. With his persuasive rhetoric and expert sales techniques, Phet would convince customers to spend a bit more to get an increased blessing, rather than buy something amateurish and in turn, affect their future prospects. For some strange reason, though both of them sold the same merchandise, Phet's business fared much better.

However, for most of the old-timers in The Emporium, we knew that

Somchai had been his father's top apprentice and had been the better of the two brothers.

The annual seventh month festival was a typical Chinese tradition for most Singaporeans. It is believed that during this month of the lunar calendar, all of the deceased would be released from the gates of hell and be allowed by King Hades to roam the earth. In particular, a custom of this month was to offer food and paper offerings to these spirits, in order to appease them and receive their blessings. If one did not do this, then the spirits would go hungry and cause problems and misfortune for them.

Hence, the festival was also known as the "Hungry Ghost Festival", which had been popularised by several Singaporean film-makers. Although I didn't personally believe in it strongly, there had been statistics to show that the accident and fatalities rate increased in the 7th month of the lunar calendar.

Like many other buildings in Singapore, The Emporium also celebrated the 7th month by holding an outdoor Chinese banquet, complete with a live stage of performances. This was a common practice at that time as it allayed superstition and improved the building's luck.

The live performances provided a "concert" to appease the spirits. The first row of the performances was always kept empty, as they were seats reserved for the spirits. This was often accompanied by large amounts of paper offerings and joss sticks offered to the hungry ghosts. To top it off, a banquet was thrown, whereby the food is first offered to the spirits, and then consumed by the banquet attendees.

For the tenants and proprietors, it was truly a time of gathering and merry-making. Everybody, regardless of their differences supported the event and purchased tickets to the banquet. Each seat at the banquet was priced slightly higher than its cost, and the excess funds went into the building's sinking fund. From the Old Man barber, to the beautician Iris, to Big Backside and White Face, the TCM practitioner, everybody could be seen at the event.

Somchai and Phet were both seated at different tables, but premium tables that were near the stage. These special tables had a higher price

154 As Coarse As Emporium

than the rest due to their proximity to the limelight. Somchai was seated with his family, while Phet with his.

A single table had ten seats and June had bought tickets for the 3 of us. We were seated together with Loh from the Recruitment Agency and his family. The banquet was held under large pitched tents just outside The Emporium, in an open space on the road which belonged to the building. It was used as extended parking space for The Emporium but prior to the event, marshals had cleared out the cars and the event-organisers had pitched the tents, together with the live stage performances. The banquet was about to start at 7pm and everybody sat down excitedly.

Most of us had reached at around 6.30pm and started inquiring about each other's business. I saw many familiar faces, tenants who operated all kinds of businesses in The Emporium were seated and chattering like they were long-lost friends. There was a total of fifty tables, and a full-attendance of 500 for the event. Every seat was snapped up, just as with every other year.

The banquet tables were wooden, portable round tables draped with a deep pink tablecloth. The food was prepared outdoors, on-site by a local famous restaurant. Each table had a lazy Susan, with a few copies of the menu, and appetizers of wok fried peanuts. Condiments of vinegar, cut chilli and soy sauce were also on the table for diners. Loh was chatting non-stop with June about their businesses, while Helen and I nibbled at the appetizers. The peanuts were crunchy and coated with a layer of caramelised sugar.

I was famished and couldn't wait any longer for the food. I took a copy of the menu and Helen asked me what was on it. I read it aloud to her.

**BANQUET FOR THE 7TH MONTH
CELEBRATION AT THE EMPORIUM
HOSTED BY LUCKY CHAN RESTAURANT**

1 Cold Dish Platter – Preserved Jellyfish in Plum Sauce, Freshly Peeled Prawns, Fresh Chicken Slices, Assorted Veggies

2 Abalone with Stir-fried *Kailan* (Kale)

3 Steamed Whole Chicken Marinated with XO Sauce

4 Shark's Fin Soup

5 Braised Scallops with Black Fungus

6 Crispy Suckling Pig with Steamed Buns

7 Braised Duck in Traditional Teochew Style

8 Steamed *Soon Hock* Fish (Marbled Goby)

9 Stir-fried *Ee-fu* Noodles

10 Desert – *Guilinggao* served with Honey, Dates and
Dried Longan

Drinks provided are complimentary – water, soft-drinks, beer and wine.



THE EMPORIUM 7TH MONTH



As I read the menu, I could see Helen drooling slightly. The menu every year was kind of standard, but each dish was deeply rooted in Singaporean Chinese tradition. For instance, the steamed Soon Hock Fish had been a constant staple of Chinese restaurant menus for the longest time. The freshwater fish was most suitable for steaming due to its white flesh and delicate texture. It was also expensive because it was difficult to farm the fish and almost all of the supply was caught from the wild.

Not long after, the emcee for the day started to announce the start of the banquet. There was a soft cheer and gasp of relief from the diners. Just like us, many of the other tenants of The Emporium were famished and had just closed their businesses for the day. The smells of the food from the cooking area beside our tables had started to waft in to our side and was too tantalising to resist.

Upon the announcement, fifty waiters, dressed in black shirts started to file out from the makeshift kitchen. They each held the first dish – the mixed cold plate platter and served it to the tables. Each table was assigned a waiter, which would tend to the needs of the diners, much like in a restaurant. As the waiter placed the large plate in the centre of the lazy Susan, she removed the lid to reveal a masterfully arranged platter with 5 triangles of the different foods. The 5 triangles had their sharp edges pointing inwards towards the centre in beautiful symmetry. While the food naturally whetted appetites, the stunningly beautiful design also added on its appeal. As we marvelled at the food, none of us wanted to be the first to disturb the shape.

“You first lah, Loh, please eat.” June tried to get Loh to stick his chopsticks in first.

“No, no, June, you’re the eldest here, please have the first bite.” Loh resisted.

Loh’s wife and children, and Helen and me looked on while the two of them did their back-and-forth. I was too famished at this point and just moved my chopsticks forward to grab a prawn. Upon seeing this, Loh and June both relented and started to just grab food.

“Let’s eat together Loh, else the food will get cold.”

“I agree June, let’s eat.”

While we savoured the food, the highlight of the 7th month festival was about to begin.

The performance stage had now been cleared and three strong staff had hoisted several tables onto the stage. Artefacts were then brought out, along with numbers pasted on them. Every 7th month festival, The Emporium would also organise an auction to along with the dinner. The auction consisted of blessed items, which diners could bid on and take home. This had been a longstanding tradition for the building and favourites included the *Orb Kim*, or black gold, which was a huge piece of charcoal that one could bring home to ensure prosperity for the entire years; the coin banks, which were gold-gilded ornaments in the shapes of different animals that one could place on their countertops to attract business.

The announcement by the emcee got everybody excited and riled up. This was a main draw because much The Emporium’s tenants were avid gamblers, who were also superstitious. It was rumoured that in one of the years, a tenant had bought back a pile of the auspicious *Orb Kim* and had won the first prize at Toto the next year. Everybody wanted a piece of the hype and good fortune. The auction and the energy of the emcee, coupled with the entire atmosphere of the outdoor banquet served to make diners go crazy with their pockets, and this was a good sign for The Emporium, which would use these funds to carry out improvement works for the building.

The auction started with small items such as deity statues and lucky items. Another reason why the auction typically followed the dinner was because in the days leading up to the dinner, there would be mass prayer sessions conducted by engaged monks. Many of these auction items would have been pre-blessed during this 7th Month prayer, and devotees believed that the annual prayer greatly imbued the items with spiritual energy. It was a marriage of convenience.

Soon, the main draw of the auction came. Every year, there were a few big-ticket items that were hotly contested every year. These were items that had a proven “track-record” of granting the bidder enormous blessings.

One perennial favourite of The Emporium was this giant scroll that had the Chinese character “Buddha” written in calligraphy ink. It was a single piece of parchment, which measured around 180 cm in length and 70 cm in width. The signature of the artist was stamped boldly in a squarish, red seal at the bottom. The paper showed some signs of yellowing, and had a single piece of string at the top, which allowed it to be hung onto a wall. From afar, it looked like plain calligraphy artwork but anybody who knew something knew that it was far from simple.

The scroll had been donated by Anong, Somchai and Phet’s father some three years ago, when he had moved into The Emporium. The origins of the scroll were rumoured to have been around hundred years back, when a few of these scrolls were commissioned by a highly respected Buddhist monk for a temple in Bangkok. The scrolls had sat in the temple behind several ancient Buddha Statues, receiving the energies of the Buddha and the prayers. When the temple closed down due to a civil war, the scrolls were dispersed throughout the world. One of the scrolls ended up in Anong’s family line and had been passed down throughout the generations.

A hallmark of this scroll was that when Anong gave it to The Emporium, the stipulation was that it was to be sold at the auction every year with only a one-year time-frame. This meant that whoever won the bid for it had to sign a legal deed that promised the return of the scroll to the building for re-bidding next year. It was one of the weirdest rules made but everybody respected it.

The reason why Anong donated it to The Emporium is shrouded in mystery. Some say that in the previous year that Anong donated the scroll, he had experienced severe health problems with his kidneys and he wanted to do some good deeds to earn karma and replenish his life energies. Some say that the scroll had come with a prophecy that it was to be passed on to another needy person when the time was up, or it would bring catastrophic disaster upon its owner. Whatever the story was, one thing was clear – that the scroll’s prowess had been proven in several peculiar incidents over the decade.

“Ah Bee, you want to hear a story about the scroll?”

Helen interrupted my eating. I nodded.

Helen continued to recount to me that in the first year that it was put for bidding at the 7th month festival, nobody paid any heed to it. There was only one bid and scroll sold for a measly \$10 to a gentleman who owned a small supermarket business. What happened next was simply bewildering. The man had such extremely good fortune in his business and wealth and relations that the supermarket business kept growing as customers boomed and investors flocked to him. The supermarket raised a few hundred-thousands in capital, which was an astronomical sum at that time and expanded to become one of the handful of successful, privately owned supermarkets in Singapore. The owner had seemingly transformed in person, from a weak, unmotivated businessman to a very firm, decisive and successful owner. Everybody was curious about what he did or which medium he went to, but the guy also didn't know. He could only say that he felt extremely lucky for the entire year.

The following year, it was time to return the scroll for rebidding. It was only then that the now big boss pinpointed the reason down to possibly the scroll. An editorial was written and featured in the local newspaper Straits Times. When the scroll was put back up for bidding, the prices this time skyrocketed and the next owner paid a lot of money for it but also enjoyed similar success and wealth. Whether it was pure coincidence or just business acumen on that guy's part, everybody seemed to rush to discredit his efforts and instead, attribute the success to the powers of this mysterious scroll.

Tonight, this mysterious scroll was up for bidding again. Despite the reverence of it, it only appeared once every year, during this time and during the bidding. The previous owner had returned it and the committee had checked the scroll for blemishes before reinstating it for the bidding. The moment it was wheeled out from the storage area, there was an unearthly silence before the diners started chattering about the stories behind it.

There it was, the legendary scroll. It had been placed on a rosewood pedestal and unrolled to its full length. The single character “Buddha” or 佛 was painted onto it with soft, delicate strokes. The calligraphy of it was done precisely, while the strokes were purposefully carefree. It seemed to absorb all of one's attention, compelling you to helplessly be

162 As Coarse As Emporium

in awe of its beauty. The yellowed parchment looked old and powerful, harking back to the better days that the scroll had seen.

Tonight's bidding started at a hefty \$10,000 SGD. The bids were raised upwards in denominations of \$100. For the first few minutes, a flurry of hands kept shooting up from the diners. Last year's bid ended at \$15,000 and now, the scroll had surpassed \$18,000 in bidding. Some of the diners, who were invited guests had genuinely bewildered looks on their faces as they probably thought to themselves why everybody was bidding furiously on an old piece of paper.

Even though the two brothers Phet and Somchai didn't look the part, they were actually filthy rich in the building. It was well-known that Anong had made a killing in his Thai amulet business, and counted several Cabinet Ministers and famous celebrities among his clientele. Other than his Thai amulets, Anong was also consulted by others for his psychic powers and supernatural advice. When he passed on, his wealth was equally split among the two brothers.

I am not sure how Somchai and Phet felt about seeing their family heirloom once again on stage but they must have been swept by a wave of nostalgia. I could see their wives explaining to their children the history and legacy of the scroll, while Somchai and Phet hid their expressions behind poker faces. Both of them had not made any bids at this point and seemed uninterested.

Soon, the bidding started to slow down as the scroll neared \$19,400. It had broken every past record and the highest bid was now placed by Lionel, the owner of an interior design firm on the 2nd storey of The Emporium.

“\$19,400 going once, going twice and...”

A hand shot up at the front. It was Phet and his stocky arm was unmistakable.

“We have the gentleman in the front for \$19,500, going once, going twice.”

Lionel still seemed enthusiastic about the bid. He wanted to raise his arm once more but his wife tugged his arm. He quietly listened to his

wife and lowered his hand.

“SOLD! For \$19,500 to this gentleman at the front. This very special item was donated by …” The auctioneer started to repeat and explain the history of the item all over again but Phet was not listening anymore. Somchai seemed to look extremely disturbed by Phet’s winning bid. As Phet went backstage to settle the payment amount, I saw Somchai following behind him closely. I was curious to find out more about this legendary scroll and the history behind it so I quickly made an excuse to Helen to go to the washroom. I followed behind the two brothers.

They were now at a small grass patch behind the tentage.

“… What are you doing, Phet, you cannot take this scroll back home! Father left it here for a precisely good reason!” Somchai was huffing and puffing at this point, like a big brother berating his younger brother.

“… …” Phet replied Somchai in his deep voice and Thai, and of course, I couldn’t understand a word of it. He brushed off his brother roughly, and went to the administrative counter.

Somchai turned around to head back to his table.

In the month that followed, a famous Cantonese pop singer entered the compound of The Emporium and looked for Phet. He was dressed inconspicuously but still, some of his fans had managed to recognise him. The news spread like wildfire, and everybody rushed to Phet’s shop to have a look. Several people, who were probably reporters, were armed with those ancient, mega-sized cameras and hand-held voice recorders.

When the singer left the shop, his single bodyguard had a difficult time fending off the crazy crowd. Some women started shouting hysterically and tried to lunge forward, while the bodyguard started swatting them away like pesky flies.

The singer smiled and quickly signed an autograph before taking the stairs to the carpark and leaving. After that, many people started to throng Phet’s shop. Reporters wrote full-page introductions to his advisory services and a few other well-known people descended on Phet’s shop for consultations. His amulets sold out quickly and batches

164 As Coarse As Emporium

upon batches were replenished. Phet bought two other units beside his shop and expanded the business quickly. When people asked him what he told the Cantopop singer, he would only smile enigmatically and say that

“I cannot divulge the secrets of the Heavens”.

All this while, the scroll sat right in the middle of his original shop. A daily, elaborate offering of fruits and flowers was made to it and changed without fail. Phet had procured a famous architect to design a marble dragon carving which hung from the ceiling. A single spotlight exited from the dragon’s mouth and shone into the scroll, revealing its elegance and mystical abilities. Phet forbade everybody from touching the scroll, and it was only used when he received important guests.

In comparison, Somchai’s clientele declined rapidly. The only reason why people still went to Somchai was when Phet’s shop was too full and they couldn’t get a staff to attend to them. Many customers started to question the difference in abilities between the two of them. Some even passed sarcastic remarks when they walked by Somchai’s shop, and it was clear that his ego was severely wounded. The two brothers had received the same set of teachings and opened at the same time after their father, Anong passed away but now, it seemed like Somchai was a complete blithering failure while Phet was held in immensely high regard. Somchai closed down his business soon after and relocated to another place. He could not do business anymore under the toxic environment in The Emporium.

A few months after the Cantopop singer came, he committed suicide from a high-storey hotel on Valentine’s Day. When the news spread out, even more people came to look for Phet, curious about what Phet had advised him. The following week, Phet was found dead in his shop one day, when his wife came to open the shop. Foul play was ruled out by the state coroner. The shop was closed down the very next day. His family did a hasty funeral and left Singapore for Thailand. The scroll disappeared along with them.

The following year, The Emporium had been bought out by another large commercial group. They owned close to 80% of the building and replaced the entire committee. The 7th month festival had been receiv-

ing mounting complaints from the residents around the area due to the deafening sounds from the live performances. It was decided that the previous year's 7th month festival would be the last. With Somchai's and Phet's disappearance, the scroll too disappeared and nobody asked about it anymore.

Strangely, today, when I asked Helen and other tenants about it, everybody has vague memories of the incident. Helen recalls Phet and Somchai but only in bits and drabs. Even the most gossip-prone of all people in The Emporium, a longstanding security guard called Henry who had worked in the building for 20 years, has very vague memories of the scroll and the debacle with Somchai and Phet. The other children that I played with in the building remember piecemeal parts as well, but I have only kept in contact with two of them. It seems as if the entire existence of this incident has mysteriously slowly dissipated into oblivion.

I do not think much of it these days, for I know that just like this incident, many other events have also entered the forgotten realms along with the mysteries of The Emporium.

16

THE SEAFOOD RESTAURANT

“BBBBBBBBBBBOOOOOOOOOOOOOOMMMMMMMMM”

“BBBBBBBBBBBOOOOOOOOOOOOOOMMMMMMMMM”

A heavy sound shook the entire structure of The Emporium.

I shifted in the beauty bed. It was a little past 9 am and nearing the end of the December school holidays. Helen and I came to the salon daily now. June had called in earlier that she would not be coming down. She had sprained her foot while tending to her pineapple plants in the garden of her sprawling semi-detached house. Since the business in the salon was not so good these days, June decided to stay at home. Anyway, whatever Helen had earned, June always took half of it, so there was income for her no matter what.

Of course, it depended on Helen and I reporting earnestly to her how many customers had come. But we didn't dare to cheat her. June had many informants in The Emporium. It would be stupid to risk lying to her for a few dollars. The consequences would be unimaginable.

“BBBBBBBBBBBOOOOOOOOOOOOOOMMMMMMMMM”

I was shaken out of my skin by the sudden thud again. It was not allowed for businesses to commence heavy-duty construction work this time in the morning. There was a rule about it in The Emporium, as with most other commercial buildings in Singapore. If everybody did their construction during business hours every day, then it would be highly inconsiderate towards people who needed peace and quiet, such as the offices or tuition centres. The rules were in place for a reason. Otherwise, there would be anarchy in The Emporium.

Every building has a manager who took care of operational matters. In its long and illustrious history, The Emporium had changed its managers many times over. The latest was Patrick, an extremely tall man in his early 40s. He had just joined The Emporium and reported directly to the committee of The Emporium, including White Face at that time.

I peeked out from the glass balustrade near the salon corridor. Manager Patrick had rushed up the escalators to the 2nd storey. He was now confronting the boss of the seafood restaurant, from where the sound had emanated.

The 2nd storey had a mega-big unit that was similar to De Sauna's. It was a stretch of several units that had been hacked clean and combined into a giant, unblocked space. A famous seafood restaurant in Singapore was aggressively expanding and had managed to negotiate a comfortable price with the landlord. They were now moving into The Emporium.

The boss of the seafood restaurant was an extremely short man, at about 160cm. His name was Angus. Desperate to assert his presence, he had worn an oversized blue suit, which seemed to pump up his entire figure like a peacock extending its plumage. His hair was cut short in a buzz cut. As he stood beside the towering Patrick, it seemed like case of David and Goliath.

I could hear Patrick admonishing Angus for the construction works. Angus did not seem too bothered and made a signal to his foreman. The works stopped, and Patrick had done his job. In a place like The Emporium, it was important for the manager to stand his ground. Certain tenants and proprietors could be difficult to deal with, especially with their money and connections. And yet, the manager had to remain a bastion of order in the building.

Today, it seemed that Patrick had successfully stopped Angus.

For now.

On some other days, Helen had told me that Patrick had accepted bribes from some of the tenants to overlook particular matters. The position of manager puts one between a rock and a hard place.

The renovation works would resume after 6pm for Angus. He had probably paid the contractors the contracted sum and now, he seemed slightly frustrated that the works would be delayed.

Night soon approached as Helen and I started packing up in the salon. We swept the floor clean, and sterilised the tools. It was important to maintain high standards of sanitation in a salon. Many skin diseases

168 As Coarse As Emporium

could be passed on through the usage of the tools, such as hair lice and cold sores.

“BBBBBBBBBBBOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM-
MMMMMMMMMMMMMM”

The sound was now much more unbearable. I went out to take a look. Angus had resumed overseeing the works of the different workers. A massive food chiller was now being transported up the escalators from the 1st storey to the 2nd storey. It was a three-door, stainless steel fridge that would keep the ingredients nice and cool. The size of the chiller was enormous, and probably could not fit through the lift doors. His workers had loaded the chiller onto the moving escalator, which was screeching under the weight of the chiller. It took ten men, five at the back and five at the front to support the chiller. Another man was controlling the speed of the escalators, careful not to cause the entire chiller to topple.

Manager Patrick had already gone home at 5.30 pm after office hours. There was nobody to govern how Angus wanted to carry out his renovations.

“Helen, isn’t that going to spoil the escalators?” I tugged at Helen’s arms.

“Bee, don’t bother. It is not our place to stop them. This boss is a rich guy featured on newspapers. We don’t want to cross him.” Helen told me.

I was slightly upset. Even though I didn’t own any part of The Emporium, I had grown up in these very four walls. For me, the building had a life on its own. We had to keep everything in good condition, else, it wouldn’t be here for a long time. Angus was only a tenant in the building. When his lease expired, he would leave the building. Even if the escalators broke down, it wasn’t his property. This was also why he didn’t seem to give a hoot about damaging common property.

The next day, Helen and I also came into The Emporium early. It seemed like Angus and his foreman had successfully transported much of the furnishings through the night. Right now, his workers were rushing the work, before the curfew at 9 am.

Loh had now come over to talk to Helen.

“Helen, do you know about the seafood restaurant?”

“Yes, what about them?” Helen asked Loh.

“I heard that the unit doesn’t have an exhaust pipe leading to the outside. It also doesn’t have an grease trap. The boss has to spend lots of money to get these two things installed, else, he cannot get a license from the government.”

Loh’s business acumen was right on point. No wonder he was so successful.

“Mom, what is oil trap and exhaust pipe?” I asked Helen.

“Ah Bee, these are simple things. In every kitchen, a lot of oil fumes are produced when there is heavy cooking such as deep-frying. The oil fumes need to escape the building, to the outside. An exhaust pipe is a pipe that has filters in it and will suck the oil before dispersing it out.

The grease trap is another important equipment in restaurants. When the chef cooks, the used oil must be thrown away. It cannot just be thrown down the sink into the pipe. The sewer pipe is not meant to process big volumes of used oil. A grease trap is an installation that collect the excess oil when it runs down the pipe. It is then removed and thrown separately. Understand?” Helen smiled at me, proud of her detailed account.

Her explanation was rather technical but simply put, Angus had to spend quite a sum of money to convert the place into a usable kitchen.

The Emporium also hired an electrician called Chai. Chai was in charge of making sure the air-conditioning worked, the lights worked, the toilets didn’t choke, and everything ran smoothly. If he did his work well, nobody would notice a thing. He was an unsung hero in The Emporium.

Chai was a customer of Helen’s and came in almost every month for his haircut.

“Chai, you know about the new seafood restaurant that is moving in?”

Helen quizzed Chai one day.

“Aiyo Helen, don’t talk about them. The boss is giving me so much trouble. They have redirected some pipes and structural furnishings in the building for their business. Aiyo, it is a headache.” Chai started to burst into a tirade against Angus.

“You know one thing, Helen? That unit doesn’t have a grease trap. I managed to talk to their foreman and there are no plans in it for a grease trap and exhaust pipe! The foreman asked me what these things were …”

Chai had revealed a telling piece of gossip. Helen already had the suspicion that the floor plans for the place were never approved for a restaurant. There were too many structural deficiencies. The place had been rented to an Indian dance studio for the past ten years before they recently folded. It was unlikely that the seafood restaurant would be approved for opening by the relevant authorities.

Yet, we knew that money could buy out any kind of situation. And Angus had loads of it.

Soon, the seafood restaurant opened to much fanfare on its opening day. Angus had bought several premium advertisements marketing the new venue. Business was brisk for the first week.

In The Emporium and with most restaurants in Singapore, it was an unspoken tradition to host a meal for the neighbours. This was a sign of goodwill to establish good relations with everybody in the vicinity.

Seafood Restaurant did the same, hosting a grand buffet lunch, that was spread along the atrium at the entrance of The Emporium. All of the tenants and proprietors could help themselves to the food, talk and eventually get to know Angus.

As a congratulatory note, June ordered a small standing bouquet of roses from Hunt Flowers, a young and trendy florist, in The Emporium. Along with the many opening floral stands given to Angus by his friends and neighbours, a whole parade of flowers, balloons and messages stretched out along the sides of the restaurants, making for an impressive sight.

Chai passed by our corridor and Helen pulled him in.

“Eh Chai, so how did they get approved?”

“Shhhh, Helen. I checked the plans once again. No exhaust pipe nor grease trap. They are likely to fail their annual inspection. We will just wait and see.” Chai winked, but I had a feeling that nothing untoward would happen.

Angus hired a few staff who seemed overworked and always tired. The place was understaffed and this forced the staff to always be on their toes.

The seafood restaurant always shipped over its supplies in the morning, when the crowds were low. This gave the chef enough time to prepare the ingredients. Handling seafood was a messy affair. The prawns had to be deveined, and the crabs had to be cleaned before cooking.

The Emporium had two toilets on every storey, and an additional pantry that allowed for tenants to retrieve water more easily. The basins were deep and allowed for easier washing of kettles. Angus soon realised that this was a loophole in the system. He instructed his staff to wash the seafood in the pantry, as well as process them there. He could save on water costs and use The Emporium’s resources to his own benefit.

Siti, the cleaner in the morning shift often groused to Helen.

“Helen, I hate going to the 2nd storey to clean the pantry.”

“Why, Siti?”

“Don’t you know? The seafood restaurant staff are always cleaning all their mussels, clams, prawns in there. All the shells and sand are just left in the sink and they clog up the pipes every day. Chai and I have to clean the pipes every day! It’s damn disgusting.”

“Wah, their business is so good ah?”

“Helen, you better don’t eat at the restaurant. I see the boss ordering a lot of crab every time. Some of them smell so bad. I think he bought them very cheap. The staff will take buckets of water from the pantry

and dump whole packets of sea salt. The crabs are then soaked into the brine solution and left in their chiller. Nothing is fresh there.” Siti spoke in broken English, but the message was clear. Angus was a despicable businessman. I could not imagine what the customers were putting into their mouths at the restaurant. Most consumers really couldn’t tell how the crabs tasted. The heavy seasoning of black pepper sauce or chilli sauce overpowered the entire smell of the crabs anyway.

It was sheer dark genius on Angus's part. That was probably how he made his fortune.

As to why Manager Patrick didn't do anything regarding the illegal retrieving of water, it was probably because Angus had also bought him off.

By some divine fate, Chai soon recounted an incident to Helen. It turned out that two weeks after the opening, White Face had come into The Emporium early and went to wash his hands at the pantry. The staff were washing the prawns in basins, leaving only one basin empty for him.

“АААННННННННННННННН”

The staff had dumped the crab into the brine solution and miscalculated the weight. Slimy, fishy brine solution splattered and splashed onto White Face's pristine shirt. Some of it had also landed in White Face's eyes.

"Shit! Shit! My eyes! I am going to become blind!" White Face bellowed and screamed. The staff quickly brought antiseptic wipes to him but White Face continued to kick a fuss.

"If I go blind, you have to take care of me for the rest of my life!"

The damage wasn't severe but White Face was adamant to blow it up. He subsequently demanded considerable compensation from Angus.

After that, White Face brought the matter to the committee the next day and Angus was barred from washing his seafood at the pantry. Patrick was also sacked from the job promptly, for dereliction of duties.

In The Emporium, there was another legendary figure. If you asked

around in the building, everybody knew this guy.

Plastic Bag Man was this dark-skinned guy who had a messy crop of black hair that parted to a slight left on his crown. He always wore the same thing every time I saw him. A white shirt that was unbuttoned at the top, and black long pants that were rolled up to his knees. He carried two giant red plastic bags, one in each hand.

Plastic Bag Man had a grotesque face. His eyes were big and bulging. His nose was crooked and his nostrils were gaping big, enough to jam in a tube of Mentos. There was once I happened to walk right into him along the corridor. He bared his teeth and a pair of dentures popped out from his unbrushed teeth. It scared me so much that I made it a point to avoid him as much as possible.

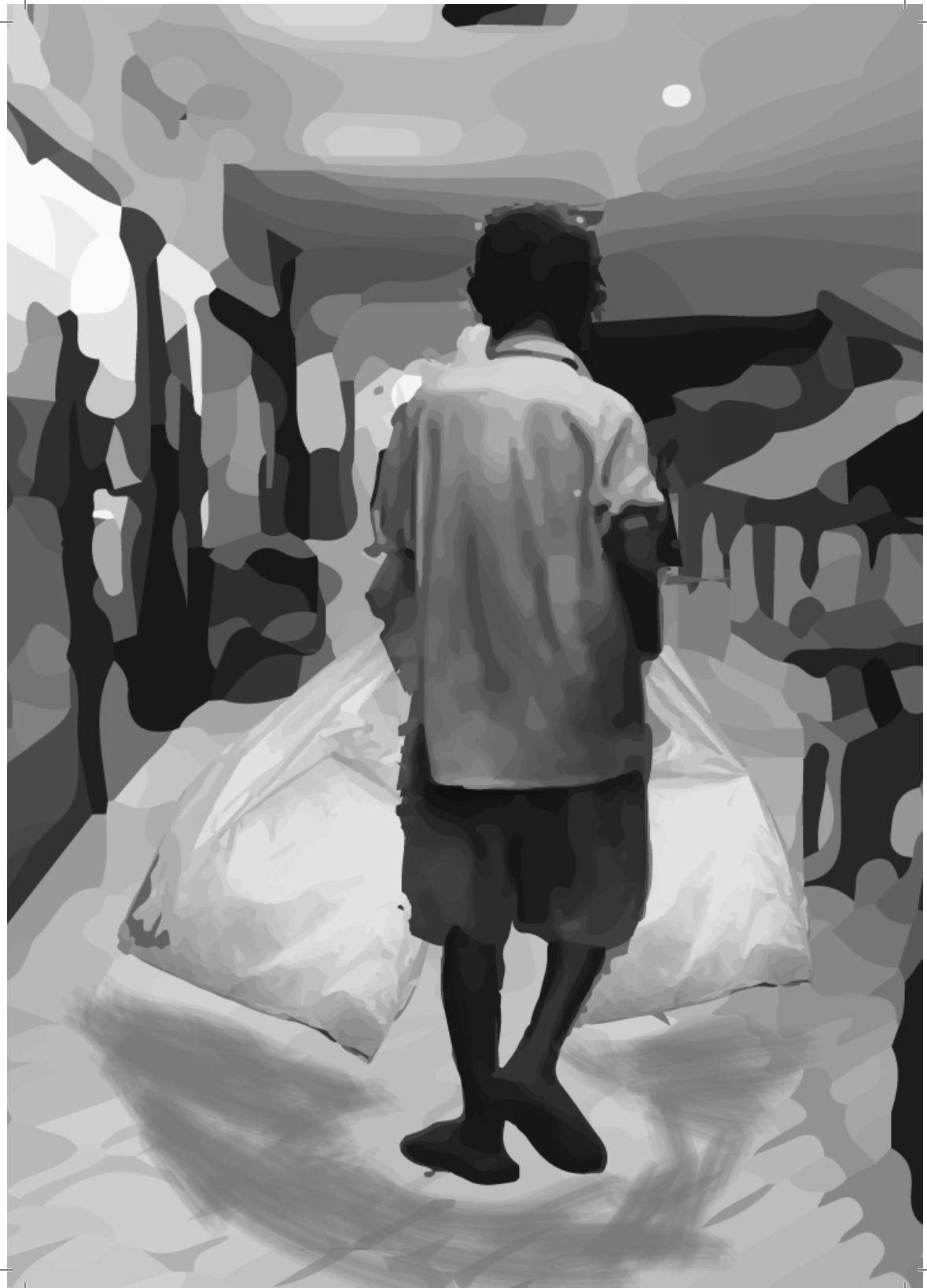
Nobody knew what he carried in the two plastic bags. Some say that he carried rotting carcasses in them. Some say that his whole life's possessions were in the bags. And yet, others said that he collected used condoms and did black magic on people. A rotting stench lingered in the air around him. He would walk around the entirety of The Emporium from morning to night, several times through. His pace was slow and ungainly, like a giant lumbering through the muddy swamp.

"Helen, who is that man? He's super scary." I cried to Helen the day that I bumped into him. He had smiled at me disarmingly before breaking into a frightening grin. The dentures popped out and I turned to run in fear. At the age of ten, I still didn't know what dentures were. I thought I had seen 3 sets of teeth in his mouth, which was supernatural.

"Bee, if you see that weird man, run away and come back to me. He kidnaps children. If you want your limbs to be severed and sold to China as a beggar, then go near him."

From that day onwards, I avoided him at all costs. It was Helen's way of teaching me to steer clear of strangers. There had been a sensational news article recently describing how syndicates abducted children and forced them to beg for money in metropolitan cities such as New York and Paris. I certainly wanted to keep all my fingers and toes.

As soon as the seafood restaurant opened, it became Plastic Bag Man's





new target. I had seen many older businesses offer free food and snacks to Plastic Bag Man. The Emporium had a way of taking care of different people in the building. Many people knew that he was probably homeless and thus, took pity on him. Some of the proprietors even offered him money.

It was certainly a divisive issue. Helen was highly abhorrent towards the Plastic Bag Man.

“Bee, these people are perpetuating evil.” Helen felt strongly that these businesses were abetting the devil by pitying Plastic Bag Man. He continued to live off the good will of these people, and went around scaring other children. The staff of the tuition centres in The Emporium had put their children on high alert, as several children had reported that Plastic Bag Man flashed his crotch at them.

Angus didn’t seem to pity Plastic Bag Man, but was interested in exploiting him. Everybody in The Emporium knew about Plastic Bag Man’s plight, and were eager to see how Angus would take to him.

Angus started to offer Plastic Bag Man steaming hot *bee hoon* (Chinese stir-fried noodles) every lunch, making a big gesture of showing off to everybody that he had a heart of gold. This earned him much favour from several of the businesses, who started to dine in at his restaurant.

On seeing the goodwill that Plastic Bag Man earned from the other proprietors in The Emporium, Angus started to treat him better. He handed Plastic Bag Man a uniform and gave him simple chores such as mopping the floor and cleaning the glass walls.

When Helen and I left the salon late at night at 10 pm, we would see Angus closing the restaurant. Plastic Bag Man would also loiter around inside the unit. It seemed that Angus had given Plastic Bag Man free lodging inside the restaurant.

“Henry, is the Plastic Bag Man sleeping inside the compound?” Helen asked Henry one day. Henry was a junior security officer of The Emporium at that time and all matters were reported to him via ways of gossip. If anybody, he would know.

“Pssstt, Helen. Don’t tell other people. I have seen the Plastic Bag Man sleep inside before. But we cannot do anything. This is private proper

ty." Henry whimpered feebly.

One fateful day, late into a Friday night, at around 10 pm, Henry started to make his round in The Emporium. Most of the tenants had already left the building. A customer had booked Helen for a hair-dyeing at 9 pm and it had stretched till 10 pm. We were packing up at the salon and saw Henry lumbering along the corridor.

At 50 years old, his slow gait could not belie his advanced age. He had taken the night shift that day and had to patrol the entire premises, making sure to clock at the designated points. An electronic system warned the manager whether the security guards had done their job.

Henry scowled. It was the finals of the World Cup and Italy and France were facing off each other in a fierce competition. Henry had to quickly do the clocking and get back to his television at the security counter.

Plastic Bag Man had been sleeping peacefully in Angus's restaurant when the rumbling of his tummy awakened him. He had not eaten enough in the day and wanted to make something for himself now. He knew where the crabs were stored in the chiller. He took a smaller piece from the brine solution bucket, which he was sure Angus would not find out.

As he started to fire up the wok, Plastic Bag Man also rummaged a few other ingredients from the chiller, including leftover rice and some sauce. He would heat up the rice and crab, and then pour the heated sauce over the dish. It would fill his tummy, and nobody would know.

By this time, The Emporium was eerily quiet. Everybody had gone home, except the security guards and the duty technician. Plastic Bag Man smiled to himself. He had managed to find a place that gave him food and shelter after all these years.

As he was thinking, a piece of rag near the stove that he had lit was now slightly burnt from the heat. The edge of the rag started to flicker and a small fire started to dance around. Plastic Bag Man was still lost in thought and oblivious to the fire that had started.

Due to the illegal structure of the restaurant, the kitchen had been constructed with shoddy materials and non-compliant with regulations.

There were no sprinklers attached, and the walls were also not made of fire-proof material. The fire started to spread quickly to the kitchen towels, and everything that was flammable.

Plastic Bag Man soon realised this as he felt the thick clumps of dark smoke start to envelop the room. He ran to the doors, forgetting that they had been locked for the night. He needed to get the key and unlock the doors from the inside.

By this time, the fire had started to spread out of the kitchen. Henry had by now realised that a fire had broken out. Helen and I had also realised that there were faint traces of a chemical odour in the air. We called out to Henry and the three of us went to investigate. The Emporium was normally dimly lit with minimal lights in the night but there was now a bright light coming from the seafood restaurant.

We could not be wrong now. There was a fire.

And it was growing fast.

Henry quickly rushed over to the restaurant while Helen and I moved around to alert other tenants who were still in the building. Fortunately, we attended the fire drill that was held annual in The Emporium and knew where to evacuate in situations like this. We knew that the sprinkles would activate anytime, so any real danger would be extinguished.

But we also realised that the Plastic Bag Man could be in the restaurant.

As Henry walked past the transparent glass panel walls, he thumped furiously. The Plastic Bag Man was indeed inside the restaurant, but was now slightly delirious, probably from the inhalation of the large amounts of smoke. He had seen Henry and was also pounding the glass from the inside. He had not found the key in the darkness, and the flames were starting to encircle the unit.

By now, Henry knew that he too had to run. The sprinklers were not working in the kitchen, and the fire was now a monstrous ball of crimson, black smoke just bellowing out from the holes in signboard. As he called the fire brigade, he looked back one last time. The Plastic Bag Man had fainted, and he almost unrecognisable. It was just a dark silhouette in the thick fumes.

The sprinklers along the corridor had turned on but the water was so insignificant compared to the blazing inferno. It only seemed to encourage the fire to grow bigger and brighter.

The alarm had already sounded and most tenants had already exited the building at this point.

The fire brigade would soon arrive to the scene to put out the fire.

But we could not save everybody.

It was announced the next morning in the morning papers that a man had suffered extensive fourth-degree burns and died.

His two red plastic bags were consumed by the fire.

Nobody knew what he had put inside.

And nobody would ever know.

Once more, somebody was lost to The Emporium.

And into the deep recesses of our memories.

17

THE EMPORIUM II

“Bee! Bee!”

I stirred to the shouts of Henry.

“Bee! Wake up, Bee!”

With heavy eyes, I squinted at the glaring light. There was a group of people huddled around me. I realised that I had probably fallen into a stupor after seeing the body bags outside Dorothy’s. All the memories of the Emporium had assailed me at that moment, overwhelming my senses.

“Bee, are you okay?”

I heard Henry’s voice once more. I looked at his face, and into the distance. The policemen had now cordoned up the area.

“Bee, you fainted for a while! You had us so worried!”

Henry was now shaking me vigorously. I stood up, one hand still on his shoulders.

“I’m okay, Henry. Why are the police here?” I managed to ask him softly.

“Oh, they discovered a mass suicide pact inside the shop. They were under the influence of drugs and almost ...” As Henry rambled on, I examined the KTV lounge once more.

The police had already transported the body bags back to their vehicles and were starting to clear out from the place. Several reporters with their press lanyards strapped around their necks were interviewing the by-standers, ready to get a piece of the action to make it in time for the evening tabloid.

Helen was now running towards me.

“Bee, Bee! Are you okay?” Helen burst into tears. After hearing about

my dizzy spell, she had run down from the salon. Her hair was now visibly grey, the sides of her fringe licking her forehead as they flapped in the aircon breeze. All those years of working in The Emporium had taken a toll on her, but her strong facial features were still recognisable.

Age was always on our tails, reducing our senses and physique till we were no more one day. Just like how it had consumed so many people over the years in The Emporium.

“I’m okay, Mom.”

Helen put her soft hands around my face. Her fingers were masses of crumpled skin, irreversibly damaged from the salon work.

As I looked at the body bags being taken to the ambulance and the police clearing out the place, I sighed. A long report would have to be tabled to the annual general meeting that year regarding the incident. As a committee member, I would have to delve into the horrid details.

What had made them commit suicide?

Why Dorothy’s?

Was it the occult? Or money and sex?

I thought back to all that had happened in The Emporium.

Ever since I was ten-years-old, strange things had started to happen in The Emporium. There must have been a source, an explanation for all this.

And as I peered into the shop, I saw it on the wall.

A yellowed scroll.

It had only a single character on it.

The Chinese character.

The character for Buddha.

佛

It could not be the same scroll, could it?



The one that the Thai Amulet brothers had squabbled over...

A cold shudder ran down my spine.

And at that precise moment, I knew that I did not know anything about
The Emporium.

The kindness.

The debauchery.

The darkness

The mystical.

The money.

The sex.

The humane.

The tyranny

The business.

And the noir of it all.

184 As Coarse As Emporium

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Hunter Ng received double degrees in Accountancy and Business Analytics in 2020. He graduated amidst the Covid-19 pandemic and founded Hunt Flowers Singapore, a floral school guiding students to make beautiful floral bouquets. He has taught floristry to classes in universities and banks.

He is also a licensed realtor and enjoys helping local and international clients with their housing needs in Singapore. In his free time, he does soap-making, goes to the gym and listens to Anita Mui hits.

He would like to thank all readers for their time in reading this work and warmly invites all feedback and opportunities to

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186 As Coarse As Emporium

A CHILD'S INNOCENCE RUDELY ROBBED BY DARK TENANTS

IN A SINGAPORE SHOPPING MALL known only as The Emporium, ten-year-old Bee finds himself dealing with many weird and strange tenants. From a mysterious shop selling illegal gameboy cartridges to the disappearance of a Four-Faced Buddha Statue, Bee witnesses these incidents and must make sense of them.

Together with Helen, his adoptive mother, who works in a salon to make ends meet, Bee matures quickly to handle what The Emporium throws at him.

However, can the duo take on the odds in this building? Or will they burn their hands playing with fire? Join them in this uniquely Singaporean noir thriller.

PRAISE FOR THE BOOK

“An excellent bird’s eye view from a little boy as he takes you back on a roller coaster ride through a historical journey of an old mall in Singapore.”

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