

Disillusioned

By Cassandra Jane Ang

Ellie, 9

I heard Grandma and Grandpa arguing as I was hiding behind the sofa waiting to be found. I was scared. Grandma was shouting and crying, "I've kept quiet throughout the embezzling but this is the most egregious act ever committed. Stop letting Lim and your other despicable business partners line their pockets on the backs of the suffering poor!" Embezzling? Egregious? - I had not heard of these words. And how were pockets were lined with poor people's backs? And why was Grandma sad?

I peeked and saw Grandpa shrugging, "I suggest you know your place and stay in it. This strategy is genius - I come up with seemingly well-intentioned minority policies like "sedentarization of nomads" and "minority scholarships" to make it seem like this government cares for those good-for-nothings, achieving some semblance of political legitimacy. Then I'll allocate their resources to my partners' relatives - keep them beholden to me for future favours. Why grant them free reign of the lucrative coconut plantations when they can't utilise them? Stupidity at its finest. Anyway, I've resettled them into a swamp, where they should make something of their sorry lives. I dare say it's an improvement. Remember, dear - "he who holds the honey is bound to lick his fingers" and it's well-deserved, given all the stops I pull for this damn country. Before you get on your high horse, try to think about what sustains this lavish lifestyle, will you?" As he talked, grandma's eyes grew sadder. "And if you even think of going against me, consider your sister's new job at Central Bank, the shelter I let you open - privileges I gave that I can easily revoke."

Grandma had run out of words, only whispering "This city has lost its soul".

Ellie, 18

That day, a wave of nostalgia had filled me with a longing to reminisce. I reread old diary entries and my knees buckled as the gravity of what I had heard then hit me in unrelenting, merciless waves. Time had eroded those memories.

Growing up, I wasn't naive in thinking that Grandpa was a well-liked politician. I knew people were unhappy, there were riots (though immediately suppressed) and that Grandpa was ruthless in pursuing goals or as he put it — "advocate of Utilitarianism - means to a greater end for most parties". I was skeptical, but rationalised this, telling myself life was a zero-sum game. Particularly so in politics, where conflicting interests

were innumerable. It was after all, impossible to please everyone. But perhaps, Grandpa counted his personal interest as “best for all”. Now, I needed to see the repercussions of people’s apathy, greed and selfishness, and my Grandpa for who he was.

As I trudged along unfamiliar streets that was definitely be out of bounds to tourists and myself, I thought of Grandpa’s ostentatious lifestyle - five cars, a gold tap and more, as I avoided potholes - the prelude to shoddy houses with shattered windows. It was hard to believe these two worlds existed alongside one another. At their markets, crude language and vociferous haggling ensured my clean dress and gentle demeanour set me apart. Hostile, wary glances, until their attention turned to a teenager’s thievery. Unfazed, everyone merely gave cursory glances. Abundant crime was quotidian, but at least they were open about it.

I was not disgusted at my privilege. Rather, I was revolted by Grandfather’s utilisation of this privilege, to further oppress the disadvantaged, relegating them to good-for-nothings when poor social mobility was probably due to his own regime perpetuating an entrenched culture of patronage and corruption. There is a Chinese phrase about the frog in the well. All this time, I thought my first-rate education enlightened me of the world’s ways. In actuality, I was living in a bubble. Those disdainful glances from schoolmates - stares I had originally primarily attributed to the envy that was part and parcel of human nature, were actually ones of repulsion for Grandfather’s acts.

I recalled Uncle Lim’s son being accused of drug use and being cleared of charges the next morning. And how, a poorer schoolmate whose mother had cancer, had taken the rap. All of them in perfect positions to receive impunity, regardless of the atrocities committed. From connections to state-owned media - they ran this country, could ruin lives with a word.

As a child, I believed the world to be fair and in black & white, that greed and selfishness would always manifest themselves physically - bad people looked evil and got just deserts, good people shone prettily and received happy endings. But now, I saw.

How does one fight against an entire system of deeply entrenched patronage and corruption? — You don’t, if you want to survive. Disillusioned, but alive. Otherwise, you die trying, like Grandma’s hopes and spirit.

(800 words)