

Shadows at No. 10

After Japan formally surrendered on September 2, 1945, I was overjoyed when confirmation arrived that no member of my family in Singapore had been killed by the Japanese. Many other families, however, had not been so fortunate. Tens of thousands had been slaughtered in what came to be known collectively as the Sook Ching Massacres.

The massacres lasted for two weeks, between February 18 and March 4 of 1942, after Lt. General Tomoyuki Yamashita, the victor of the Malaya and Singapore campaigns, had taken control of the city. The dreaded Military Police Corps of the Imperial Japanese Army, known as the Kempeitai, was responsible for the reign of terror.

The aim of the liquidations was to eliminate all Chinese who might prove hostile to Japanese plans for empire. They wanted to guard against a fifth column emerging behind their front lines. Having noted that many Singaporean Chinese had supported China against them following the Marco Polo Bridge Incident in 1937, they were taking no chances.

The Kempeitai promptly set up screening centres and ordered all Chinese males between the ages of 18 and 50 to present themselves for “examination”. For a great many, that turned out to be merely a prelude to death. Only a relatively small number of those “examined” were released.

My father was among those few. What saved him was never discussed within my hearing in the family, even though my father fell clearly within both the age brackets and the targets of teachers, journalists, intellectuals and pro-British community leaders sought by the Japanese.

I asked once or twice about his escape but nobody who knew the factd seemed disposed to talk about it. I was given the impression the whole episode had best be forgotten.

My father, in my assessment, was certainly slick enough to put on an act or to spin a credible yarn. He could have pretended to be a subscriber to the Japanese propaganda of “Asia for the Asians”. That line had resonated with

many. A fair number of Indian soldiers in the British army, for instance, quickly changed sides. In China, too, former Kuomintang members like Wang Ching-Wai turned collaborator to serve in a puppet government in the occupied territories.

It could be taken for granted that anyone detained by the Japanese would be given a thorough going-over. Although my father never breathed a word about his interrogation, I could sense it had not been a tea party. By some means or other, he must have convinced the Japanese he was incapable of causing mischief or might even be on their side against the British, because he was released after only a few days.

But on another occasion, he did not escape a beating by the Kempeitai right in Blair Road, in front of many other residents. His alleged crime was failing to bow obsequiously enough when a Japanese officer came around for an inspection. At least he was luckier than the thousands summarily slaughtered.

According to Chinese social organisations, the number killed in the Sook Ching exercise ranged between 70,000 and 100,000. The Singapore government stated later the number was between 50,000 and 70,000. The killings took place at dozens of locations and there are now four memorial tablets erected in Chinatown, Changi, Punggol and Sentosa to commemorate the victims.



One of the commemorative plaques of the Sook Ching massacres located outside the Hong Lim Complex in China Town.

Whatever the actual numbers, they could only be astounding, given that the pre-war population of the island was only about half a million. The Japanese, naturally, disputed the figures. They claimed then -- and still do -- that their statistics showed less than 5,000 deaths.

As in the case of the Nanking atrocities, the Japanese government steadfastly refused to apologise for the deaths. It claimed the matter had been settled with Britain as part of the peace process.

The British came in for criticism too. Although General Yamashita was convicted of war crimes and hanged in the Philippines in February of 1946, many in Singapore felt that Britain had failed to protect them properly as colonial subjects. They also felt that punishments for the crimes committed by the Japanese were too lenient. For example, the courts hearing the cases had accepted defence pleas from some Japanese officers that they were “simply following orders”, though that merely echoed the rejected Nazi pleas made at

Nuremberg.

Some historians and commentators believe the perceived failure of the British to secure justice for their subjects contributed to a burgeoning desire for an end to colonial rule.

* * *

Two deaths, however, did occur within my household during the occupation. The first was my grandfather's subsidiary wife, who had moved from No. 38 to No. 10 with her son, Yan-Wing, once we had left on the *Gorgon*. She died from an illness in 1944. The second one involved Ah Sei, the long-serving servant, presumably from old age and hunger.

Ah Sei was said to have insisted on returning to her "guild" of servants shortly after the Japanese had taken the city. She had probably noticed that food supplies were dwindling. There was often not much for her to cook and she did not want to add to the family's burden. She therefore simply took her meagre belongings and left. That was the last anyone in the family saw of her or heard from her. After four years of total silence, she must be presumed to have perished.

The news of Ah Sei's fate affected me deeply. That illiterate and poorly-paid servant had taken such good care of me during my childhood that I could not help being moved by sentiment and gratitude. Memories of her kept invading my thoughts. I could easily picture her scurrying around, with her disorderly hair atop a face more wrinkled than a crumpled ball of paper. She had been an unlikely kind of fairy godmother to us children, always producing on the sly delicious pieces of liquoriced lemon, coconut candy wrapped in waxed paper or other tasty titbits.

She seemed to have entertained no ambition beyond serving others

and had no expectation of reward for herself. Remaining true to form, she went to her doom to avoid burdening others. People like her truly deserve to be called the “salt of the earth”.

* * *

With the war formally ended in September of 1945, my siblings and I had naturally expected a speedy repatriation. In keeping with that expectation, we did not enrol for fresh courses after our school year finished at the end of 1945. I myself had at least achieved what was known as a “Junior Certificate” issued by the University of Western Australia Public Examination Board, with passes in eight subjects.

But a quick departure proved elusive. The family was simply told to standby and wait. Marine transportation was in great demand for redeploying troops and moving civilian administrators to take over from the Japanese. As the weeks and months dragged on, we existed in a manic-depressive limbo of impatience and boredom. My job at the restaurant fortunately kept me occupied. It was not till May of 1946 that we finally secured passage.

By then, Uncle Hok-Keung had still not been released by the Australian Army, though he might have in fact signed up for a further stint. In any case, the rest of us travelled home without him. I do not know when he got back to Blair Road. My impression was he had not returned by the time I left for Canton at the beginning of 1947. He subsequently married one of my Singapore cousins, Kan Pik-Kwai, an elder sister of Fook-Chuen’s. They later migrated to Australia.

* * *

The layout of the furniture on the ground floor of No. 10 was little changed. I noticed, however, that a great number of books were no longer in the cabinets. I was told that on the very evening we boarded the *Gorgon*, *Ah Yeh* and my father had made a great bonfire in the rear courtyard to destroy all books the Japanese might take exception to. Most of them were contemporary ones in Chinese. Needless to say, incriminating photographs, letters and private papers implying criticisms of Japan also went up in smoke. In the light of subsequent events, the precaution proved extremely far-sighted.

Another thing I quickly noted was the absence of bird song, though the cage was still hanging empty in the family room. It appeared my grandfather's pet canary had died soon after the start of the occupation. I could not understand why he did not replace it after the war had ended, for it would have been one of the simplest and least expensive things to do.

Another notable absence was Aunt Sau-King. I was told she had returned to Ipoh with her family.

Apparently my grandfather's brother from Ipoh suddenly descended upon Blair Road to seek refuge immediately after the occupation had started. The old gentleman came with his wife and his two daughters, both in their late teens. He was under the impression a big city would be safer than a small town in turbulent times, on the supposition that enemy troops would be more inhibited from acting capriciously in the midst of a large civilian population.

Once they had arrived, my grandfather had no alternative but to extend hospitality. They remained throughout the war, and when they left, Aunt Sau-King went home with them. After my departure for China the following year, I never saw Aunt Sau-King again. Nor did I ever get to meet any other member of her family.

* * *

One of the first problems to confront us children upon returning to Singapore was getting back into school. The local school year had started in January, which meant we were all seriously out of step.

I was particularly anxious. I had already lost a year repeating an unnecessary primary class in Perth and I was determined not to lose another. My aim was to sit for the Cambridge School Leaving Certificate examinations at the end of that year -- by hook or by crook. That meant getting myself inserted into the senior class at a secondary school. St. Andrew's seemed an obvious choice, for I was a graduate of its primary school and it was the first school in Singapore to re-open its doors to students after the war.

While travelling there on a bus, however, I was struck by certain sensations. The medley of sounds and colours somehow felt alien and jarring. The Sri Mariamman Temple at South Bridge Road, a monument which I must have passed at least a thousand times during my boyhood, suddenly struck me as garish and out of place. Its multi-coloured Hindu deities and elaborate Dravidian ornamentations appeared to grate. Perhaps I had been away too long.

Then another more disturbing awareness hit. Some of the Chinese characters on the signboards along the way met me like half-forgotten strangers! My tongue stumbled over the pronunciations of a goodly number. How could that be?

I suddenly saw the point behind Tutor Tam's incessant drilling over characters. I had forgotten many of them because I had not opened a single Chinese book or newspaper for more than four years. None had been available, as it happened. I could have, if I had been so minded, written down such passages I could remember from the *Three Characters Classic* and got *Ah Mah* or Anna to help me continue with my Chinese.

As I continued my journey, it became evident I was just groping for justifications to explain my quasi-alienated state. The truth was I had been too culturally passive, like water, assuming the shape of the vessel I was poured into. For four years I had surrendered to the unhurried tempo of Perth, adjusting its European ways.

Glancing at the faces of my fellow passengers, I saw not a single white one among them. Out on the streets, pedestrians also displayed a range of hues. The city I had returned to was no longer my home. I had been displaced again. I had turned into a cultural chameleon, adrift like a free-floating sponge. Something in the blood was crying out for me to belong somewhere, to become part of a *volk*, to have a national destiny. All at once I understood why my grandfather had focused his dreams upon a far off land. Though he never realised them, he had at least fought the good fight. I had no meaningful dream. I merely fell in with agendas set by others.

Even as I hurried towards St. Andrew's, whose buildings still carried the black painted stripes of war-time camouflage, my concern did not go much beyond sitting for the Cambridge School Leaving Certificate. The requirements were set by others. I could not choose Ming Dynasty history over that of the European Renaissance, nor Li Po in preference to Keats. Yet, when the headmaster admitted me to the senior class, I congratulated myself as if I had surmounted some great hurdle.

Another problem soon surfaced. The deterioration in my written Chinese rendered it impossible for me to choose it as the second matriculation language. I had to fall back on French, though that language was not taught at St. Andrew's. It became a matter of mugging it up on my own, based on the foundations laid by Mr. Zines.

Soon after I had joined the senior class, a sense of being an interloper strengthened in me. It became obvious that, unlike my classmates, I had been spared the horrors of the Japanese occupation. They had gone through a crucible whereas I had not. I was a gate-crasher into that first post-war class, when most members were anxious to make up for lost time.

After a while, I gained a civilised acceptance of my position but failed to cement very many firm friendships that outlasted the few months spent together. It became a matter for regret afterwards because many in that class made names for themselves in their chosen callings. Notable among them was an Indian boy named Joshua Benjamin Jeyaretnam, who eventually became a staunch but solitary opposition member in the Singapore Parliament for many years.

While I was wrestling with my educational problems, Anna and my grandfather made arrangements for my siblings. Helen went back to studying Chinese with Mrs. Leung. Francis made do temporarily with Monk's Hill School, before entering Raffles Institution the following year. Pauline gained entrance to Raffles Girls' School while Herbert joined Pearl's Hill School.

My frenzy over school work caused me to devote less time to my siblings. We each had our own educational boat to row. A reshuffling of our previous sleeping spaces upstairs also became necessary. I was able to retain my former bed beneath one of the front windows. I did my work either upstairs at the small desk next to my bed or downstairs at the marble-topped table in the family room, depending on my mood.

* * *

Being inside the home for longer periods inevitably meant more

frequent interfaces with my grandfather and with the other adults there. I became more conscious of the changes in *Ah Yeh* in his seventieth year. His scraggy beard had grown more gray. His movements had become less spritely. He had turned even more chary of speech. But what touched me most was a vague, haunting shadow of sorrow inhabiting his eyes, replacing their former satyr-like sparkle.

I surmised the deaths of the last of his many wives must have affected him in a deeper way than I could grasp. That might be the explanation for his refusal to acquire a replacement canary. A bird given to song might remind him too much of happier times.

Some of his closest chums had also gone the way of all flesh. He certainly left the house less frequently than before. The purpose of his former strolls from No. 10 to No. 38 no longer existed. He still went out for an opium-smoking session with his few remaining friends now and then but he no longer asked me to tag along. He did, however, take Pauline with him on one or two occasions, though the ban on opium-smoking had been retained after the occupation.

In order to cheer him up, I tried to engage him in conversation. I had an ulterior motive. I was keen to learn as much as I could of the family's experiences under the Japanese. But he was not responsive.

When I asked him about his silver watches, one of which rightfully belonged to me, he replied gruffly that -- except for the one he was still wearing -- they had been "taken by the Japs". I got a similar reply when I enquired about his stamp collection.

After further failures to jolt him out of his introspections, it dawned on me that "taken by the Japs" might simply be a way to avoid spelling out painful details. It did not take great cleverness to figure out the terrible times the family must have gone through. His British pension, the mainstay of the

family, must have ceased once the city fell. My father had lost his job. At around that same time, the family burden increased significantly due to the arrival of kinfolk from Ipoh. During those bleak years, everything tradable must have been sold or bartered away for food.

So I left my grandfather to his increasingly solitary life, puffing on pipes or reading newspapers. Later, when his eyesight began to dim, he took more to listening to the news broadcasts on the BBC.

* * *

As curious as I was to discover how my father had escaped the Sook Ching slaughters, I knew I would learn nothing from the man himself. He had never been talkative in front of his children and that trait had not changed. Indeed, his long separation from us probably deepened it. He apparently still held that children should speak only when spoken to.

Outwardly, in spite of his mantle of handsomeness and charm, he remained as unreachable as ever. At 17, I was no longer a child. I had longed secretly for a day when he would place a hand on my shoulder and invite me for a man-to-man talk. The *Three Characters Classic* had asserted that the ties between father and son constituted one of the three fundamental bonds in society. But when would it be made manifest to me?

My father surprised me in one respect, however. After my return, I heard he had started a medium-sized eatery called the Blue Willow on High Street soon after the Japanese took over. His decision was puzzling because he had previously shown no interest in business. His continuation with it after the war, however, was less surprising. The economy was struggling to return to normal, and employment opportunities were few and far between. The English newspaper he used to work for, the *Malaya Tribune*, had difficulty to remain

viable in the hash post-war conditions. He had to make a living somehow. Given his lack of other professional skills and his need to support the family, the eatery appeared a reasonable stop-gap solution.

* * *

Apart from *Ah Yeh*, my two remaining aunts also seemed to have tempered their characters. They likewise became less interfering in the activities of their juniors and more inclined to keep each other company. They took to discharging household chores jointly instead of separately as before, and they spoke to each other with a new closeness, in almost conspiratorial undertones. I did not read anything into their changed behaviour at first. I simply assigned their closeness to the reduction in the number of women in the house. Aunt Sau-King was gone and they obviously no longer needed to attend to *Ah Mah*. Ah Sei had been replaced by only a part-time cook.

I naturally tried to elicit from them their experiences during Japanese rule. But they offered little beyond generalities of hardships and privations. There had been times they had to make do with tapioca roots and sweet potatoes, like everybody else, they said. No one in the family got beri-beri, however, thanks to leftovers brought back from the Blue Willow. Quite a number of less fortunate families had to hunt for sewage rats to survive, they allowed with a shudder.

They had been virtual prisoners inside the home for three and a half years. They did not dare to go out, for fear of being accosted or abused by enemy troops. Even the menfolk in search of provisions had to be inconspicuous, venturing out only via the back door.

Nonetheless, Aunt Soo-Leung turned out to be more fertile with information of another kind -- of relatives in far-off places.

It appeared that after the war my grandfather asked her to contact family members in Hong Kong and China to find out what had befallen them during the long years of disrupted communications.

Among the many relatives she contacted were, naturally, my Aunt Cheuk-Yin in Canton and some of my grandmother's eight siblings in Hong Kong. After that, Aunt Soo-Leung kept up correspondence on her own, in the expectation that *Ah Yeh* might have a continuing desire to be updated. A somewhat erratic flow of family news, rumours and tittle-tattle thus came into being.

While this was going on, I was wrestling with whether I ought to ask Aunt Soo-Leung to trawl for news of my mother and brother. I had a desire to know. Yet at the same time I was quite fearful of bad news. Before I could approach her, however, she let drop that my mother and Tzi-Choy were both safe and sound and had resumed residence in Canton.

She added, however, in a nonchalant way, that my mother had re-married. Her new husband was to a Filipino doctor, whom she had met some years back while playing tennis in Shanghai.

The news came as both a relief and a surprise. It immediately left me on the horns of a dilemma. Should I write to my mother or should I wait for her to write first? On one hand, I saw it as a duty for a son to ask after his mother. On the other, I remembered she had sent only one single letter in more than 11 years! Hardly evidence of any deep maternal attachment.

Moreover, the situation had altered radically. She had acquired a foreign husband, a total unknown to me. Intruding upon their relationship might be less than welcome. Once bitten, twice shy. I dreaded being drawn into another Anna-like war of attrition with a man.

I needed to consider as well the possible reactions of a virtually unknown teenage brother. Would he perceive me as an intruder, elbowing my

way into his territory? I recalled the photographs that had come with my mother's solitary letter, of Tzi-Choy smartly dressed in a suit and riding a pony. He might have turned into a mummy's pet, spoilt beyond salvage. As the first-born, I would have a problem with that, for I considered my status as one bestowing a right to have a say on the conduct of juniors. Conflict loomed as a real possibility.

One other consideration crossed my mind. My educational future was highly uncertain. The Blue Willow did not appear to be a money-spinner and I had a number of siblings waiting to be educated. The chances of support for university therefore seemed problematic. If my mother was financially well off, might she underwrite higher studies for me? Even restricting it to a period for improving my Chinese would be a plus. Otherwise, all I had to fall back on was a modest stash of Australian currency hidden inside an old sock. That would not get me very far.

After mulling such considerations, I decided to allow the wheels of Fate to spin of their own accord. The family grapevine which had conveyed my mother's circumstances to me could as easily relay mine to her. If she were keen to restore contact, she could write. I hoped, without very serious expectation, for a letter from her. But none came.

* * *

One afternoon, I was studying at the small desk upstairs while my aunts were dusting and cleaning. They conversed in low but earnest tones while they worked. During that process, I caught Aunt Kwei emitting a sigh and muttering words to the effect that death was preferable.

"What could be so terrible as to make death preferable?" I called out cheekily, with an intention to tease.

“Nothing!” Aunt Soo-Leung interjected sharply. “It’s just women’s talk. Go back to your studies.”

The alacrity with which Aunt Soo-Leung attempted to cut me off suggested that I had got hold of something intriguing. My inquisitive instincts caused me to tug at what I had caught hold of, rather than to let it slip away.

“Death’s not the exclusive province of women, you know,” I recklessly declared. “I’m 17 and if the war were still going on I would be out there facing death or dishing it out.”

At that point Aunt Kwei burst into tears.

The tears threw the whole dynamics of the situation into confusion. Aunt Soo-Leung tried to console Aunt Kwei, and in the process started to shed tears herself.

“I’m sorry,” I cried out, in a fluster, without quite knowing what I was apologising for. “I had no intention to upset anyone.”

Amidst the tears and the confusion, a horror story slowly unfolded. It was an account of rapes having taken place within the very precincts of No. 10, carried out by a trio of Japanese soldiers!

* * *

The bare circumstances leading to the crimes, as recounted, were simple enough. Not long after the Japanese conquest, my grandfather’s subsidiary wife and the wife of his elder brother went out of the house on an afternoon errand and returned by way of the rear lane when it was getting dark.

They were spotted by a Japanese patrol consisting of three soldiers. Though they tried to hurry through the back door, the soldiers caught up with them and forced their way in. Each was armed with a rifle and a bayonet. They ordered household members to gather in the family room for the checking of

identity documents.

The assembly consisted of my grandfather and his subsidiary wife; their son, the seven-year-old Yan-Wing; my grandfather's elder brother and his wife; Aunt Soo-Leung, Aunt Kwei, and Aunt Sau-King and her two younger sisters. As it happened, my father was absent on some business.

The original intentions of the soldiers were unclear. They might have been at first only after alcohol or spoils. But when they saw two pretty nubile teenagers, their eyes lit up and they decided to have some fun. After some jabbering in their own tongue, one of the soldiers fixed his bayonet and stood guard at the foot of the stairs. His companions separated out the two teenagers and dragged them upstairs. The two girls started crying and screaming but no one could do a thing.

There the halting narrative of my aunts ended.

* * *

I was so shocked by what I had heard that I was left speechless. When my aunts had staunched their tears and got back to work, my imagination went into overdrive. I began conjuring up the tableau formed by the remaining seven adults and one small boy in the family room, even as the screams and the sounds of violence reverberated from upstairs.

My three aunts would probably be cowering on one of the ebony couches, trembling and terrified, clinging to one another, as far away from the guard as possible. No cries of horror could escape from their throats, for the slightest outburst would be met by a sharp rebuke or the threat of blows from the guard.

What next? Each of them must have trembled over that question, either simultaneously or in sequence. If nothing could be done to help their

kinfolk upstairs, whose turn would be next? Surely the guard must demand his own gratification. Would he defile further the unfortunates upstairs or would he choose a fresh victim? If so, which one?

Their minds must have been churning like whirligigs caught in a tempest. Should they make a concerted dash for the front or back doors, even at the risk of being shot or bayoneted? If a single one of them could get outside, an alarm could be raised. But who would respond and come to the rescue, after the horrors of the Sook Ching slaughters? The plain truth was that no one would take a stand against armed Japanese! They were the new lords of everything they surveyed. Their victims had only the choice of submission or death.

My grandfather, ejected from his favourite rattan reclining chair, might be perched on either one of the chairs around the dining table, or on the other ebony couch. His eyes would be bright with impotent anger, his thin beard quivering with agitation. Thoughts every bit as daunting and desperate would swirl in his mind.

Here, after decades of political *engagement* and despairing disappointments, another moment of truth! The worst enemy of his country was right in front of him, face to face, more bestial and inhumane than all other enemies. And the creature had only the crude power of a single gun and a bayonet to subdue them!

Aged and frail as he was, the time for an affirmation of his life had arrived. If he flung himself at that creature, would the others take the cue? The rascal could be easily overwhelmed through sheer numbers. He could be killed and his weapons used to rescue his nieces. But would the rest respond to his initiative?

His old bones could be sacrificed. They did not amount to much. But a different kind of fear stopped him in his tracks. It was not a question of

immediate success or failure. It was the fate of the entire household after the event. Any act of resistance would see all inhabitants of No. 10 put to the sword. He had no right to risk the lives of so many for the sake of one vainglorious gesture.

From that moment on, the bitterness of defeat must have entered his mouth and some flame, infinitely more precious than life itself, must have begun to flicker out inside him.

Somewhere else in the room, Yan-Wing's mother would be sitting, petrified. Her brain would be dominated by thoughts of the child of tender years beside her, now being traumatised. But she could do no more than to clasp him to her bosom, to shelter his eyes from the ugliness of the intruders and to muffle his ears from the unbecoming noises from above. She felt culpable for the unfolding fiasco, for the soldiers must have been emboldened by her flustered demeanour when she made her inopportune return.

What of the parents of the two young victims, an aged couple in their late sixties? They had hurried their daughters out of Ipoh, in the hope to shielding them from harm. Yet the fruits of their loins, raised in splendour, were now being cruelly ravished. Their cries for deliverance, mingling with the sounds of blows and ugly Japanese expletives, rang in their ears. As those cries subsided into helpless whimpering, their hearts must have fractured inside them.

Yet what could they do? Any attempt to stop the outrage would invite certain injury or death. Death would have at least one advantage. It would free them from the need to explain afterwards why they, as parents, could do nothing to save the honour of their daughters.

And what of the two young aunts I have never met? I could picture them as younger and prettier versions of Aunt Sau-King, struggling and crying to defend themselves, as their clothes were being torn off. Their defilements

would be taking place where my siblings and I had spent years luxuriating in the dreamless slumbers of innocence. That very thought revolted me.

My imagination had by then acquired such momentum that it was no longer under my control. Images and possibilities charged off in all directions, ricocheting wildly inside my head. What if my father had returned at a crucial moment? How would he have reacted? How would I myself have reacted if I had been there, not at the actual time of the happening but right now, at the supposedly matured age of 17?

The crucial gaps in the story, passed over in silence, pierced my consciousness again. The image of the third soldier, leering and repulsive, demanding his share of fun, fastened itself upon me like a steel trap. Would he ravish the two girls as well or would he insist on a fresh victim? If so, which one? Aunt Kwei or Aunt Sau-King? Spinsterish Aunt Soo-Leung would be too old and her sharp-features too uninviting -- unless she put herself forward as a sacrifice! She was fully capable of that. And what if the other soldiers also wanted more fun?

My mind boggled with the dire possibilities. I wanted desperately to know everything, every disgusting detail, but my conscience would not permit me to probe further. I had already inflicted too much pain on my aunts. I could only fall back on inferences, drawing from their terse and tearful accounts.

There was no doubt they had suffered terribly but the actual extent did not bear thinking about. Since I could do nothing to ease their hurt, I tried my best to shut out the full implications of their words about a fate more terrible than death. The dark knowledge thus gained could not be shared with anyone, least of all with my under-aged siblings.

* * *

For days afterwards, a state of high agitation possessed me, as I tried to make sense of the world gone so incomprehensibly awry. Was I living on the cusp of a new barbaric age? Was it not enough for nations to massacre civilians and obliterate cities? Must their henchmen be allowed to break into homes and rape as well? Where had justice gone? The pain suffered by the families of those caught up in the Sook Ching massacres had been brushed aside in the interests of *realpolitik*. The purity and good name of my aunts had been sacrificed upon the same despicable altar of political convenience, without their pain being assuaged by any element of justice.

Where was that all-powerful God worshipped by my family? Why had He not granted deliverance to my aunts? Were they being punished because they also had been born bad? I became determined I would one day root out the logic to such puzzles.

* * *

Before I could fully absorb the horrifying story of my aunts, however, I got another shock.

One day, when classes at St. Andrew's were dispersing, a classmate casually asked whether I was heading home.

"Yeah," I replied. "But I'm stopping at High Street first, to grab something to eat at the Blue Willow."

"Why do you want to eat there?" he asked, sounding a little out of countenance.

"Why not? What's wrong with the place?"

"That dump used to be a hangout for Jap officers and local collaborators. Everybody knows its history."

His assertion hit me like a kick on the crotch. I was glad I had not revealed to anyone at school that my father was running the place. I went directly home, covered in confusion.

After I had calmed myself, I approached my grandfather and asked, in as neutral a voice as I could muster, whether Japanese officers used to frequent the Blue Willow.

“Who can stop Japs from going wherever they want?” my grandfather replied.

It was not the answer I was seeking but I did not know how to frame a non-provocative question more appropriate to my purpose. I dropped the subject with *Ah Yeh* and attempted to seek elucidation from Aunt Soo-Leung.

“I never went to the Blue Willow during the occupation,” Aunt Soo-Leung said. “I can’t tell you what its clientele was like. The place was your father’s idea. I suppose it must have attracted all kinds of customers during the occupation. We were just grateful he could bring leftovers home.”

Upon hearing her answer, a few vile seeds of suspicion began to sprout inside my head. Whilst it had to be true that no one could control the patronage of a public eatery, nonetheless there had to be ways an operator could employ to cultivate or deter certain types of patrons. Having worked in a restaurant myself, I knew some of them.

If the Blue Willow was generally perceived as “a hangout for Jap officers and local collaborators”, then those officers must have found the place congenial. It followed naturally that collaborators would wish to go where enemy officers could relax and enjoy themselves. Did my father go out of his way to make our enemies feel at home at the Blue Willow?

My ruminating led me onto treacherous terrain. I sought firmer ground but found none. Apart from his obvious handsomeness and charm, my

father was an enigma. He had the status before me of a father, a person I should respect, regardless of how much beyond understanding his actions might be.

I trawled my memory for evidence of hidden strengths. He was loquacious and well read, if those could be considered strengths. He could no doubt have held his own in discussions on Zen Buddhism or the Meiji Restoration or the spirit of bushido in the samurai warrior. But why should he do so with enemy officers, beyond serving them the food and drink they might order?

I began mulling over why the Kempeitai had released him, when so many others had been slaughtered. Had he sealed some Faustian pact? Otherwise, why demean himself by bowing and scraping before enemies, not just for a day or a month, but year in and year out? And even after he had been publicly beaten and his cousins raped within the precincts of No. 10, he had shown insufficient backbone or pride to do anything different.

The possibility that he might be a coward at best or a traitor at worst thrust itself upon my consciousness. My tenuous relationship with him, hitherto almost wordless, became more so. Though his blood flowed in my veins, I wanted to get as far away from him as possible. My retreat before the drunken Australian and my behaviour upon the approach of my grandmother's death had marked me with cowardly inclinations. A fear of meeting a shameful and inglorious end accumulated inside me.

After weeks of torment, I arrived at the only decision I thought rational under the circumstances. I picked up pen and paper to write to my mother. It was a simple letter, revealing no more than absolutely necessary. After the opening formalities, I stated that I would be finishing secondary school at the end of the year and would like to visit her and Tzi-Choy for a while. Would that be convenient?

A cordial reply duly came back, slightly formal in tone, but in compliance with the normal nature of correspondence between a Chinese mother and her son. I would be welcome, she said, but she made no offer of financial assistance for my passage. She must have assumed my father would meet those expenses.

Although the arrival of a letter from China should have signalled to the household a contact with my mother, I made no mention of my intention to go to China to anyone. Thus the die was cast.

An unexpected development arose out of that exchange of letters, however.

When I first secured my mother's address, I noted that she lived along a road unusually called "Six Two Three Road." I figured it must refer to some historical association but none came to mind. So I asked *Ah Yeh*. It caused him to depart from his normal taciturn nature to speak at some length about several episodes in modern Chinese history, episodes which caused my jaws to drop. What he told me stirred me out of my long neglect of the history of my own country.

* * *

A short while after I had sent off the letter to my mother, I encountered a former student at St. Andrew's. He was several years my senior but I remembered him as someone who had coached me in soccer before the war. I therefore greeted him.

"Haven't seen you in ages!" he exclaimed. "Have the Japs put you back much?"

"I've been lucky," I said. "Managed to sit out the war in Australia. Only lost a year. Expect to sit for my School Cert this year."

“That’s good. At least you escaped that particular hell.”

“What are you doing back here, at school? Surely you must have finished long before now?”

“Oh, I’m just paying my respects to some of my former teachers, before I leave for China.”

My ears pricked up immediately. “What are you going to do there?” I asked. “I’ve been planning of going there too, after School Cert.”

“I’m joining the army,” he said. He then explained he had come across an appeal by the Chinese Nationalist government for English-speaking recruits, to form part of the international occupation force in Japan. Generous pay and smart uniforms had been promised.

“I’ve got scores to settle with the Japs,” he added.

I sensed from his tone he had grievances. After the harrowing story of my aunts, I had no wish to open up the old wounds of anyone else. So I said: “Sounds a good idea. Say, you don’t mind keeping me posted, do you? I may try for the army myself. It would be great if we could end up in the same unit.”

“Sure, why not?” he said, and took down my address.

After we parted, I went home much elated. An unexpected opportunity had opened up. But my elation did not last long. I soon realised I was in no physical shape for any army. I still weighed only 102 pounds, little better than a walking skeleton!

In order to build up my physique, I had a sand bag and a set of Roman rings installed on one of the wooden beams in the rear courtyard. Although I worked religiously on them, my muscles remained unresponsive.

Shortly before the Cambridge School Leaving examinations, I received a letter from that school friend, warning me against being taken in by talk of a Chinese occupation army in Japan. Since he joined, he said, he had been assigned to nothing except manual labour, loading and unloading supplies

to fuel China's expanding civil war. He was looking for an early opportunity to get out.

The door to that perceived opportunity thus slammed on me and I never heard from my friend again.

* * *

The period following the completion of the School Leaving examinations was quite stressful for me. I was impatient to be on my way but knew that the results would take months to emerge. I was confident of passing most of the subjects, except perhaps for French. Everything turned out right in the end, however. I secured a First Grade Certificate, passing in eight subjects, including French and Religious Knowledge.

In the meantime, I had made enquiries about the cost of a passage to Hong Kong. The cheapest one on offer was on a Messageries Maritimes vessel proceeding via Indo-China. I found that by converting part of my Australian hoard, I had more than enough to pay for it.

I also took the precaution of writing to my Fifth Maternal Aunt, to seek temporary shelter with her in Kowloon, in case I needed to stop over for a day or two before taking the train to Canton.

My aunt delighted me by not only offering hospitality, in spite of our not having been in touch for some 14 years, but also by telling me that one of her sons, John, who was slightly older than myself, would soon be paying a holiday visit to Singapore, at the invitation of one of his father's relatives. He would make contact after arrival.

Although I had no memory of John and no certainty over whether he had been the cousin I had assaulted at the home of *Kung-kung*, I looked forward to the opportunity to showing him local sights. I knew from

experience that if the chemistry was right it was often quite jolly to link up with my innumerable cousins.

* * *

The most stressful aspect of waiting around for School Certificate results involved avoiding my father, for fear he might ask me to help out at the Blue Willow pending results. It proved easier to do than I had expected. He usually woke late and would head for the Blue Willow right after breakfast to prepare for the lunchtime trade. All I had to do during that critical period was to keep out of sight somewhere in the front part of the upper floor.

During late afternoons, if it was not raining, I would spend time on the punching bag and the Roman rings. One day, when I was furiously pelting the bag, my grunts and yells brought young Uncle Yan-Wing into the courtyard. He watched me for a while and then he commented: “Gosh, you look as if you really mean to take it out on someone.”

“Yeah!” I replied, as I let off a further flurry of blows. “On any traitor or collaborator of the Japs.”

Yan-Wing continued to watch me punching away in silence. When I had finished and was about to take off my gloves, he said very quietly: “You were not here during the occupation. You don’t know what it was like. When your father brought home even a crust of bread, it tasted like manna from heaven.”

Yan-Wing’s statement jolted me. He had been observant beyond his 11 years. Although I had known a little hunger in Perth, I had not known it to the extent that he and others must have experienced during the long years of occupation. And without taking that kind of information into account, I had judged my father. I began pondering my rash assessment anew.

There was no doubt that the 10 adults and one child sheltering at No. 10 needed to eat throughout those years. The abrupt termination of my grandfather's pension and my father's loss of his job meant no income was available. Among the adults, only my father could assume the responsibility of feeding everybody and keeping them alive. I began slowly to glean his calculations behind the opening of the Blue Willow.

In a time of scarcity, only rulers could be assured of food supplies. A restaurant catering to Japanese officers would get priority in rations. An opportunity must then arise to divert some tiny portion of that to the hungry mouths at home.

It struck me like a thunderclap that my father *had* to keep his Japanese clientele in good humour and that he *had* to debase himself before them for the sake of the family! It also reminded me that courage could manifest itself in many shapes and forms. It was not necessary to stand against Tartar hordes at the northernmost outpost or to perish at Thermopylae to be a hero. A prolonged and dangerous pretence in front of hated enemies might require even more courage. I began to understand my father a little better and my earlier disdain turned gradually into admiration.

But the whole mess was, in a sense, *his* fault. If he had not been so tight-lipped, if he had taken me into his confidence and explained his actions, I would have understood sooner.

I thought briefly of going up to him to apologise. Then I saw the ridiculousness in such a move. I had never told him how poorly I had thought of him. If I went babbling about making a mistake now, he would have no idea what was possessing me.

Then another thought followed. Could his very silence be in itself a form of instruction, a deliberate lesson from the school of hard knocks? Perhaps he had meant for me to discover for myself the risk in hasty

judgements. Life suddenly appeared more complex. Well, if that was his approach, I figured he could jolly well discover for himself too what I really thought of him! I therefore kept my own counsel.

I did, however, tell him I had been in touch with my mother and that I would be visiting Canton for a spell. He received the news by merely nodding his head. Perhaps he had expected that development. I could not tell whether the nod represented approval or mere acquiescence, for the news coming out of China was not good. He made no enquiry about the cost of my passage. He must have assumed my mother was paying for it. If he had entertained any other plan for my future, he gave no hint of it. Taciturn to the last.

Meanwhile, Anna had gone back to work at the Special Branch. That development, coupled with the fact that the household was relying only on a part-time cook, suggested that family finances were tight.

I had also caught a slight whiff of some dissonance between my father and Anna. But I knew them so little that I could scarcely guess a cause. The implication for me was that my chances of getting into university were unlikely to be enhanced by their discord.

* * *

Many years later, I became firm friends with a Japanese from Yokohama by the name of Ted Fujii. Ted was a linguist, who earned his living by providing translation and interpretation services to Japanese corporations trading with overseas companies.

Whenever he visited Hong Kong on business or when I happened to be in Japan, we would meet up either for meals with a few mutual friends or else go carousing. We would discuss all subjects freely, except for the many

old conflicts between his country and mine.

But once, when I was in Japan, the subject of the Kempeitai came up, most probably because the news contained an item about the election of an ex-Kempeitai officer to the Japanese Diet or parliament. We readily agreed the Japanese military police used to be a nasty piece of work. Possibly because I had consumed too many bottles of warm *sake* with Ted, I blurted out that my father had once been detained by the Kempeitai and on another occasion beaten up by one of its officers.

Upon my remark, Ted jumped up, walked in front of me and bowed deeply, saying he wished to apologise on behalf of his nation for any harm done to my father.

I was both moved and embarrassed by his actions. I could only respond as best I could. It seemed his gesture was a quintessentially Eastern one, for I could not visualise any of my Western friends apologising or taking responsible for any act done by their governments.

And I had not breathed a word to Ted -- or to anybody else for that matter up till now -- about the rapes of my aunts!

* * *

The results of the Cambridge School Leaving examinations were announced around the time of my eighteenth birthday. Since I had passed reasonably well and no one had given the slightest inclination of sending me to university, I decided to head for China.

In my heart I felt I needed to clarify my amorphous relationship with my mother and to discover whether China, the home of my ancestors but now spiralling into civil war and economic chaos, was indeed the place where I rightfully belonged. I also hoped for some miracle, centring around my mother

financing my further education.

Upon such filmy expectations, I set out for Hong Kong on a Messageries Maritimes ship travelling by way of French Indo-China.

When the time came for leaving, I found family ties more difficult to cut than I had anticipated. Sentiment and affection tugged at my heart. I recalled that on the previous occasion I left No. 10, I had returned to find Ah Sei and my grandfather's subsidiary wife no longer there. Human lives seemed to come and go like puffs of smoke. I wondered if I would ever see all the inhabitants of the house again.

As things turned out, Fate was kind. Aunt Kwei was the only one I never saw again. She married a Chinese seafarer a couple of years after my departure and the pair migrated to Australia. We then lost touch. I managed to reconnect with all the rest, either singly or collectively, in the decades that followed.

Thus, with a modest sum in Australian currency in my pocket and my few possessions packed in a small rattan suitcase, I began another stage of my itinerant life.