

Awakening in Canton

For someone in the autumn of his life to present what claims to be an authentic account of his early childhood must be to invite a fair degree of scepticism. When the narrator also has a record as a dabbler in the questionable craft of writing fiction, then nobody can be blamed for reaching for the salt shaker.

There is, so far as can be determined, no recorded instance of any individual commanding a total recall of his or her early childhood. There might be instances of incidents being vividly re-captured or retained but, generally speaking, things tend to slip from memory with the passage of time. They lose colour, sheen and details, like flaking paint from an abandoned house. The sequencing of events becomes confused, telescoped and reshuffled. Resonances of voices, tastes on the tongue, evocations of smells, all begin to slip away.

The science of the human mind is still in its infancy. Theories and working hypotheses abound, seeking to explain how different parts of the brain are supposed to function. Let specialists explore and argue, let them probe into the millions of individual cells. I intend only to offer my own experiences as well as those of my family members to express certain opinions or reservations.

One current theory holds that memory before the age of six can rarely amount to much. It argues that the consolidation of experiences into permanent memory is dependent upon the development of verbal skills. Since a child below six is unlikely to have much in the way of a vocabulary, childhood memories must therefore remain fairly meagre.

I can only respond with a slightly different take. My siblings and I appear to have little trouble reliving many happenings which had occurred before we turned six. The proponents of the theory may say that we have probably just reinforced illusions developed later. That may be a possibility.

But we await a better standard of proof than a mere assertion.

Another popular theory postulates there is no such thing as a permanent memory, because what is remembered is in a constant state of flux, being enhanced or altered by subsequent information, personal encounters and insights. I find such a theory easier to accept, for cases in point come readily to mind. For example, when I was in kindergarten, I was taught to fold pieces of paper into the shapes of birds and animals. I did not know at the time that such a skill was known in Japanese as “origami”. Years later, after I had learnt that term, it seemed innocuous for me to tell people I had learnt origami at kindergarten. To that extent, my memory had been altered by later information.

Again, during childhood, we constantly come into contact with wooden objects -- crib, playpen, rocking-horse, tables, chairs, cupboards and so forth. But, as children, we are incapable of distinguishing whether the wood in question is hard wood or soft, close-grained or open-grained, or the name it ought to go by -- teak, walnut, rosewood, cherry, birch, ash, ebony and so forth.

If a person remembers riding on a wooden rocking-horse at, say, the age of five, and much later discovers that it had been made of ash, would it be appropriate for him to tell his grandchildren that he remembers riding on a rocking-horse made of ash? Strictly speaking, his memory is only of a wooden horse. How should the two versions of truth be squared without going into tedious caveats and explanations?

The *ex post facto* opinions advanced on particular happenings and their motives can also be tricky. An opinion formed at one point in time may not remain the same 30 years later. As to motives, who really knows? Quite often, even the doer of a deed is unclear as to his or her motive at the time of doing it.

Yet another scientific theory holds that memories get embellished each time the past is re-lived. There may be something in that. On the other hand, a risk also exists of things being tarted up with hindsight, revisions and afterthoughts. The calculating mind may well rejig a partial memory to make it more complete or rational, or less hurtful, or for harvesting more self-esteem or the favourable opinion of others.

One ought to keep in mind the cautionary quip of Mark Twain: A memory can get so sharp that it can remember things that have never happened!

Some psychologists and psychiatrists profess an ability to regress patients, under hypnosis, to a point where they can elicit submerged childhood traumas. Since Freud, people have been dropping words such as complexes, repressions, neurosis, resentments and rejections like small change into the currency of their conversations. But what if those words were given more substance after hypnosis? What then?

During the time when talk of repressed memories was fashionable, I had been tempted to take my chances with some modern day Svengali laying me out on my bed of neuroses. If he turned out successful, some missing bits of my childhood might be reclaimed. I could then write more authoritatively about them. On the other hand, I could well end up with more than I had bargained for. Though I might be disabused of some illusions, I might also be forced to adjust to fresh unpleasantnesses. On the whole, the risk did not appear worth taking.

Scientific and pseudo-scientific theories must inevitably come and go. I am rather reassured by the notion that the science of the mind still has a long way to travel and may never come close to a full understanding of the workings of that unique organism. What scope would be left for the imagination once everything can be forensically laid out? Perhaps the human

mind, like the human soul, should forever remain partly hidden, with some elements undiscoverable, even under the closest scrutiny.

The purpose of this long preamble is to inform readers that, though I intend to do my utmost to be accurate and authentic in these recollections, I have also employed, where appropriate, the glue of logic and reasonable suppositions. Readers will have to accept my accounts for what they are or else draw their own conclusions.

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My first childhood recollections revolve around feelings of bewilderment, abandonment and incomprehensible loss. Those sensations washed over me as if I were a bit of flotsam caught in unfriendly tides. They left me with no chance to steady myself or to find a hold. A general feeling of helplessness haunted me for more years than I would care to remember.

I had little inkling of the marital problems unfolding between my parents. I only experienced a succession of separations -- from my father, my mother, my grandmother and familiar servants -- without knowing why. My childhood was remembered largely as a furtive quest to uncover the reasons for my predicament. But enlightenment was hard to come by. Even some timing of events had to be worked out piecemeal.

My best reconstruction was that my parents split up in the spring of 1933, with my father leaving us for Singapore around May or June of that year. When *Ah Mah* left me was a date more difficult to pin down. Logic suggested it ought to have been at the same time as my father's departure. My conclusion was that she must have considered my father and my grandfather more worthy of her attention than myself.

I did not realise until long after I had reached adulthood what a

complicated business love was. By then *Ah Mah* had passed away. I could see in retrospect that her love had been bound up inextricably with duty, duty not only to the living but also to ancestors and the generations yet unborn. It was a Chinese thing, rarely spoken of openly, but always there like a magnetic field or the pull of gravity. If it was conveyed at all, it would be through inferences and silences, looks and gestures, odd remarks casually dropped during the multifarious activities of each fleeting day. Under that convention, individuals were not free-standing and autonomous, like they tend to see themselves nowadays, but only links in a continuous life stream. Westernised upbringings had eroded some of those former attitudes. I doubt if such a change is for the better.

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I must have been a thorn in my mother's side during our period in Canton. She had brought me and my infant brother by train to the residence of my maternal grandparents. The exact layout of their home has been lost to me, except for a large flat roof, which was used as a playground for a host of children.

The precise time of the journey in 1933 is also unclear. It was after my father and grandmother had left. Both the change in location and the kinfolk and strangers I was put in contact with disconcerted me. My desire to know what was going on collided with my mother's reluctance to say much. Our relationship became one of frustration and petulance on my part and of irritation on hers. I plagued her with questions she found vexing. Our conversations, which usually began on an innocent note, often ended poorly. The following instance was typical:

“Why didn't *Ah Mah* stay with us in Hong Kong?”

“She had to be with your *Ah Yeh* and their son in Singapore,” came the reply.

“Why couldn’t we have gone as well?”

“I have a job here.”

By then my mother would begin to be flustered. Nonetheless, I would press on, convinced she was hiding something from me. “Couldn’t you get a job in Singapore?”

My mother’s eyes would redden and her voice would sink into an almost inaudible mumble: “Not that simple.”

I knew instinctively that if I were to pose yet another question, she would probably break into tears. So I reluctantly desisted. After all, she was my mother, someone I ought to love, cherish and protect. But my curiosity was such that I could not muster any of those feelings. I just became resentful over being kept in ignorance.

The best I could manage was to withhold further questions till the next opportunity. My off-and-on probes got me no closer to the matters I longed to know. They did not endear me to my mother either. I began to regard her as a kind of adversary, one who, for some unfathomable reason, was blocking my path to understanding.

I could not visualise then how she herself might be struggling with momentous challenges. Should she live on in limbo, as an abandoned wife, or should she seek the clean break of divorce? Back in those days, a stigma was firmly attached to a divorced woman. And what about the custody of children? Had she to give them up? If not, how could she manage financially? She could not possibly impose an additional burden upon her own parents.

Incapable of imagining such problems, I saw only my own state of ignorance. Everybody I met in Canton seemed to wrap layers of evasions

and half-truths around what I was desperate to discover. I wanted to tear them all away, to reveal whatever they might be trying to hide.

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Canton struck me as a place of estrangement. It left me adrift, cut off, separated from the familiar presence of *Ah Mah* and her servants. Although my mother and brother were with me, I found little comfort in either of them. The former remained at best a quasi-stranger, unsympathetic to my needs and growing progressively more tense in her speech. The latter was no more than a bundle of squealing limbs, with no particular appeal.

The home of my maternal grandparents housed numerous adults and children, all of whom seemed to speak more loudly than I had been accustomed to. Some of the children were around my own age and they played boisterously on the flat roof of the house. A few were cousins, the abundant progeny of my fifth maternal aunt. Her husband, Lam Yau-Kun, was then working for the Chinese Maritime Customs in Canton as well, so his family was living in the city.

I saw little of the city itself. What little I saw conveyed an impression of dilapidation and disorder, the atmosphere infused with gloom. People seemed oppressed by unspecified concerns. Pedestrians contested pavements and roadways with beggars, hawkers, coolies, street urchins, bicycles, rickshaws, handcarts, lorries and buses. Motor horns hooted, peddlers yelled, shoppers bargained, the hampered cursed and policemen blew whistles. Litter lay everywhere. Children and adults alike expectorated with gusto. The sour odours of human toil, rotting perishables and blocked drains tainted the air.

With hindsight, I realised the people had plenty to be gloomy

about. Shortly before my arrival, Canton had been the scene of a proletarian uprising. Similar upheavals had occurred in Wuhan, Nanchang and elsewhere. All had been put down at some loss of life and considerable damage to public confidence. Communist supporters in Shanghai were chased out as well, but only to establish soviets in more remote rural locations. The country was in a state of *de facto* civil war.

Taking advantage of Chinese disunity, Japan had seized Manchuria in 1931, imposing its rule over more than 30 million Chinese citizens. The following year, it set up a puppet government with the last Ching emperor, Puyi, at its head. China duly complained to the League of Nations but all it got was much hand-wringing and crocodile tears.

I had no awareness of such issues then. The anxiety and dread etched upon the sallow faces of my countrymen were noted in passing. I was far more concerned with the changes in my own life.

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I had barely found my footing in Canton when my mother revealed, for the first time, that I was a Christian. I had been baptised soon after my birth, she said, because Christians believed in each inheriting the original sin of someone called Adam. It meant everyone was born bad and needed the grace of God to be saved. Without being baptised, a person's soul would go straight to hell and be roasted in everlasting hellfires. My Christian name was David, she added.

I was astonished. Nobody had hinted at such startling and abstruse ideas before: certainly neither *Ah Mah* nor my father. What did my being born bad mean? Was that why *Ah Mah* had left me? I had been uncomfortable with my Chinese name but I was not taken with my Christian

one either -- at least not till almost two decades later when a beautiful Jewish girl told me it meant “beloved”.

Adults and elders continued to address me as Tzi-Ki or Little Ki. I myself did not attempt to use my Christian name until I fled to Australia as a refugee in 1942.

A second surprise of a slightly different nature awaited me before I had fully taken on board the fact of my baptism. I was introduced to a solid and jovial Englishman called Mr. James Key. He was said to be my godfather and I was encouraged to address him as “Uncle Jim”.

For a young child, the Christian chain of causation which ran from an unseeable God fond of issuing warnings and commandments, through some unremembered process known as baptism, to an unexpected foreigner called a godfather was not an easy one to follow. Whatever explanation given sounded fractured and about as clear as mud.

I tried to come to terms with a godfather with an elevated forehead topped by a thinning thatch of brown hair. He also had deep-set eyes, a nose of some nobility and an inauspicious mouth with a thin upper lip. He was employed by the Chinese Maritime Customs as well and came irregularly to do voluntary work at my grandfather’s church.

Upon introduction, Uncle Jim delighted me by presenting a package of sweets and amused me with attempts at conversation in a quaintly accented but understandable Cantonese. The sweets and the effort to speak my language seemed like good auguries. There was something more to being a Christian than I had originally thought. I took a liking to the godfather and he assumed a greater importance in my eyes than the unseen but supposedly all-powerful and vengeful God my mother had been telling me about.

I can only remember seeing my godfather thereafter only on a couple more occasions but each time he gave me some sweets. One time he

also gave me a signed photograph of himself, which I still have. By the time I left Canton, I still had no idea what our relationship entailed beyond the sweets and the photograph. He never entered my life again.

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Soon after my introduction to Uncle Jim, my mother began telling me stories from the Bible, explaining that they formed part of the ethos of her family and, presumably, mine. She asserted there was only one true God and He was the Christian one.

She was unable, however, to show me any picture of God. She only managed pictures of His son, Jesus. That made it difficult for me to get an impression of Him in the way I could the multiplicity of Chinese gods and goddesses. Their images were commonplace and everywhere -- in homes, in shops and in gaudy temples, often protected by fierce and grimacing guardians.

Since there existed some kind of hierarchy among Chinese gods and goddesses, I asked where the Christian God fitted. She replied that the Christian God was the only real one. The Chinese ones were just fantasies, created out of superstition and ignorance.

Her explanation did not sound convincing. How could so many people be so easily taken in by fake gods and goddesses? Since she could not give me a believable explanation, I doubted her assertions. Sometimes I would ask questions out of curiosity; at other times out of sheer disbelief. Our sessions often ended unpleasantly.

The following was a typical example:

After the story of Jesus turning water into wine, I asked: "Can Jesus turn water into sarsaparilla as well?"

“There wasn’t any sarsaparilla back then,” came the reply.

“But Jesus could have invented sarsaparilla, couldn’t he, if he had wanted to? He’s supposed to be the Son of God.”

My mother made a vexed exclamation before continuing: “Why can’t you have more faith? Just *believe* what I’m trying to teach you. Why must you keep asking a lot of silly questions? If you keep this up, I must leave *Por-por* or *Kung-kung* to teach you.”

But *Por-por* got on no better. Her tales, too, seemed to leave loose ends. After her story of Lot’s wife turning into a pillar of salt, I asked how long the process had taken.

“Very quickly,” she replied, in an indulgent tone.

“Did the change start from her feet up or from her head down?”

My *Por-por* hesitated for a moment. “That’s not important,” she said. “What’s important is that disobeying God leads to very severe consequences.”

She then placed her hand on my arm and gave it a squeeze. Her hand felt dry and chapped on my skin, like contact with a rough bark. I knew she meant to show affection but the sensation she gave was not agreeable. It took all my willpower to stop myself from recoiling.

The sessions with my mother and *Por-por* left me wondering whether there might be something wrong with me. I might have been born bad but did that mean I was deficient in some way as well? If not, then why was I incapable of grasping what was being imparted by them? I started pondering, too, whether the acceptance of biblical stories was a pre-condition to being allowed to play with other children on the roof.

On the chance it might be, I began adjusting tactics when my *Kung-kung*, then an Archdeacon of the Church of England, tried his turn.

I nodded at suitable intervals as my grandfather’s tales unfolded

in that clerical voice of his, about Noah building his ark, Jonah being swallowed by a big fish, Lazarus rising from the dead. I gave every indication of having taken in everything, though that was far from the case. My grandfather's solemn face broke into a smile once I had ceased to pose questions.

I never knew whether it had been a coincidence, but after two or three unquestioning sessions with *Kung-kung* I was allowed to join the other children on the roof.

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There were other forms of reward for good behaviour as well. The one I relished most was to be allowed to suck quietly on a delicious Hsin Hui orange.

Though the fruit was of a modest size, its skin was tough and rubbery, so that it did not split under pressure. It was therefore ideal for what children called "sucking an orange jar".

An adult would slice some skin off the top of the fruit, leaving an opening of about an inch across. A child would then suck out the juice and the pulp slowly, by gently squeezing and kneading the orange. Depending upon a child's own chosen pace, enjoyment could be prolonged to a good 15 or 20 minutes.

If other children were being offered the same treat, a competition might ensue as to who could suck the fruit out most cleanly and completely. The result would be compared when the skins were opened up to devour the final remnants.

When I was told that Hsin Hui was the ancestral home of the Wong family, I began to imagine a place filled with trees swaying with golden fruits. It must be wonderful to be able to suck as many oranges as one

wished. Part of the reason I have avoided Hsin Hui throughout my life was the fear of reality destroying such a precious childhood illusion.

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It did not take me long after gaining access to the roof to get into trouble. One afternoon, while I was playing with a toy on the roof, one of my maternal cousins took it from me and refused to hand it back.

There was a storage shed on the roof holding, among other things, bundles of firewood. Since my cousin was bigger than I, my instinctive reaction was to pick up a piece of firewood and to hit him on the head with it. The blow caused a slight cut on his scalp and he surrendered the toy. When a trickle of blood started to seep out, he began squealing like a stuck pig. All the adults on the roof at once rushed to his aid and made an almighty fuss. They showered him with attention and took him downstairs to have his cut dressed.

My mother came up to me, gripped me by the shoulder and scolded me. “It is wrong to hit people, absolutely wrong,” she said, severely, puckering her brow. “You’ve injured your cousin, making him bleed. Good Christian boys do not do things like that.”

“He took my toy and won’t give it back,” I responded.

“Then you should have come to me. Or complain to your aunt or *Por-por*. Any one of us could have settled the matter. You are not allowed to hit other children, or to take matters into your own hands.”

I stood in a sulk, without attempting a reply. My way of thinking was entirely different. My cousin had done me wrong. He had coveted my toy and tried to take what was not his. He deserved to be punished. Yet he got all the sympathy and attention, just because of a little scratch on the head,

whereas I got scolded for defending my rights. The unfairness of the whole situation fastened itself upon my memory like a leech. Besides, why should I get adults involved in a matter which I was fully capable of handling myself? Adults had such unreasonable ideas. I began to distrust them even more.

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Before long, I was bundled into a kindergarten, which was located a short distance from the home of my grandparents. One of my cousins was already enrolled there, albeit in a slightly older group than mine. The kindergarten had a large yard in which children were allowed to play during recess and before and after classes.

I enjoyed the activities there. My classmates and I were taught to play games, to draw pictures with crayons, to make objects out of Plasticine, to fold sheets of paper into the shapes of planes, birds, frogs and cups and to sing the Chinese version of songs like *Little drops of water, little grains of sand*.

We were also taught to recite simple Chinese poems. The first one I learnt was one which most Chinese children would be familiar with. Although it had been written by the celebrated Tang poet, Li Po, it remains taught today, pretty much as English children would be taught *Jack and Jill*. The words were simple. Translated word for word, they would read roughly as follows:

Bed front bright moonlight,
Suspiciously like ground frost.
Lift head, regard bright moon,
Lower head, think village.

I memorised those words easily enough. In the poem, the word

“village” referred to home. I soon began to wonder if the home of my maternal grandparents was now to become my home as well. I did not seem to have any other.

The teacher who taught my class was a nice lady whose name I have forgotten. So I shall call her “Miss Nice”. She looked about 30. She normally wore baggy, plain-coloured long-gowns, in grey or blue, which invariably reached down well below her knees. Their side slits were so modest they eliminated all risk of revealing any thigh. Her shoes were flat and sensible.

Her face was plain and unremarkable, without obvious beauty. Her hair, like my mother’s, had been tortured into stiff curls in front, which apparently had been the fashion at that time. The air of kindness which surrounded her and the painstaking patience that her voice conveyed rendered her an exemplary teacher for small children. She was well past the age when Chinese maidens would generally be married but I felt it somehow inappropriate when overhearing parents of other children describing her as a spinster.

In spite of the many fine qualities of Miss Nice, I quickly got into trouble again.

There was a well in the middle of the yard of the kindergarten. A two-foot high stone wall surrounded its opening. A sturdy wooden frame with a windlass bridged its mouth, which was itself covered by a hinged metal grille securely fastened with a padlock. On top of the grille rested a wooden bucket attached to the windlass by means of a length of rope. It was clear that the well was still being used out of school hours.

One day, during recess, I was standing near the well with a few classmates. We peered through the grille into its depths. We could see the water glittering mysteriously far below. A dispute arose as to how deep the

well was. Various guesses were bandied about.

Eventually, I said: “If we lowered the bucket into the well till it reaches the water, we can measure the length of the rope and know how deep it is to the water.”

“Good idea,” someone said. “But we need to remove the grille to put the bucket in. We don’t have the key.”

“Don’t need a key,” I countered. “The clasp securing the grille looks weak. If we jemmied it, we can remove the grille without bothering with the lock. We need a jemmy.”

“I’ve got a ruler,” a classmate said.

“Go get it,” I said.

Needless to say, the six-inch wooden ruler he proffered snapped before I could get very far.

Miss Nice soon came running. “Little Ki!” she cried. “What are you up to?”

I looked at her dully, with one half of the broken ruler in my hand. The other half was jammed beneath the lip of the latch. “Just trying to put the bucket in the well, to find out its depth,” I replied.

“Don’t you understand that the covering is there for a very good reason?” she asked, removing the broken ruler from my hand, as if disarming me of an offensive weapon. She then squatted down on her haunches, so that our eyes were at about the same level. “The cover is to prevent little boys and girls from falling inside and getting hurt.”

By then, more children had gathered, along with another teacher.

“I just wanted to drop the bucket in,” I persisted. “Nobody was thinking of jumping in.” I was feeling uncomfortable over being ticked-off under the gaze of so many.

“That is something far too dangerous for little boys to attempt,”

Miss Nice said. “And you’ve broken your ruler in the process.”

“It’s my ruler,” its owner chipped in, unhelpfully.

Miss Nice turned her head towards the speaker. “Ah, so you wanted to break the lock too, did you?”

“No, Miss, he just asked me to bring my ruler.”

Miss Nice turned her head back towards me. “Now, on top of a bad deed, you’ve broken somebody else’s ruler. What are you going to do about that?”

“He can have mine.”

Just then, the bell rang to signal the end of recess.

“We’ll see about that,” Miss Nice said, standing up to escort the pupils back to the classrooms. “You stay back after school,” she added. “We must talk about this.”

The outcome of that talk was more or less what I had expected. Miss Nice said she would replace the other boy’s ruler but, as punishment, I would have to spend the recess period throughout the following week by myself in the classroom.

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In truth, I did not mind being restricted to the classroom during recess. Many objects in the classroom warranted my attention. The room had, for example, several cupboards. Left to myself, I proceeded to peek into them to explore them. I found that they contained boxes of coloured chalk, blackboard dusters, notebooks, pencils, sticks of Plasticine and piles of paper used for folding into birds and animals. There were also items of interest stacked on top of the cupboards.

The most attractive item was a *papier mâché* globe of the world.

Miss Nice had brought it down the previous week to show the class where China was located. She had also indicated, as she spun the globe around, that the places in red represented the British Empire. I had been quite awed by the number of red patches.

It had struck me afterwards that the British must be a very special people. They must have some form of magical power, more potent than any possessed by heroes in martial arts stories. Otherwise, they could not have dominated so many parts of the world. The proof of this lay in the fact that my maternal grandfather's bishop was British. So was my mother's boss at the Chinese Maritime Customs, not to mention my British godfather. At that time, I had no inkling that *Ah Yeh* had also worked for a succession of British bosses, both in the civil service and on board ships.

I was thus curious to count the number of places the British ruled over. I got a chair, stood on it, and tried to reach the globe. But I could not. I then remembered that Miss Nice had a wooden pointer at the blackboard. I got it and was in the process of dislodging the globe when Miss Nice arrived on the scene.

"Stop! Stop at once!" Miss Nice cried, as she rushed towards me. She quickly relieved me of the wooden pointer. "Don't you realise you can get seriously hurt if the globe fell on you?"

I looked at her glumly, as she signalled for me to get off the chair. I thought the possibility of injuring myself quite remote, for I had enough sense to push the globe in a direction away from myself. But I did not argue the point. I merely said: "I just want to count the number of places in red."

"Well, classroom equipment is not for playing with whenever you choose. You'll have to forfeit your intervals for another week; and I shall see to it that you get up to no more mischief."

Miss Nice was as good as her word. The next day, as I remained in the classroom during recess, she also took up a position behind her desk to supervise me.

After a couple of days of fidgeting uncomfortably under her surveillance, I began to consider her punishment rather silly. Why impose a penalty which entailed equal suffering on oneself?

A similar thought must have dawned on Miss Nice, for at the end of the week she came over to me and pulled up a chair.

“Do you know, Little Ki, you can be the top of the class, if you would only behave yourself better?” she said, as she sat down opposite me. “You’re brighter than any of your classmates. You can easily do it. But you will never be top of the class. Do you know why?”

I shook my head, not sure whether I ought to be pleased or worried, as I had given no thought to coming top of the class.

“I’ll tell you. It is because you always get a big zero under ‘conduct’. I know your *Kung-kung* and *Por-por*, and your mother too, would be enormously thrilled if you could come top of the class. Wouldn’t you like to make them happy?”

Her statement represented such a tangle of revelations and unconsidered possibilities that I was left speechless. My first thought was that adults must approach kindergarten differently from myself. I had regarded it as a means of making friends, having fun and possibly learning a few things. But adults apparently expected children to compete against one another, to be graded and differentiated. What for? Why should that please them?

And how was the grading to be achieved, with what kind of performances to be taken into account? I had reportedly earned a big zero under a category called “conduct”. What other headings were there and how

had I performed under each? I could recite poems well enough. Did that count? What about singing, which many girls could do much better than I? And what of running, where many boys could outpace me? The classifications and the methods used for reaching judgements seemed thoroughly baffling.

Moreover, Miss Nice seemed to know something about my *Kung-kung* and *Por-por* besides my mother. Could confidences have already passed between them? As my mind raced around such issues, I warned myself to watch my step.

In the light of my total silence, Miss Nice said: “You would like to be a good boy, wouldn’t you? You will try to behave better from now on, wouldn’t you?”

I nodded, for lack of any other meaningful response.

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After I had spent the better part of a year at the kindergarten, Miss Nice began distributing books to the class. They were picture books, with just a few characters on each page. They represented the kindergarten’s way of introducing children to written Chinese.

I can clearly remember, even today, the first two lessons in the book. The picture in the first lesson depicted a running puppy on the lower left hand corner of the page, in a rural or garden setting. The characters on top read: “Little dog, little dog, run, run, run.” The same picture re-appeared in the second lesson, except that a yellow chicken had been added to the top right hand corner of the page. The text read: “Little dog bites little chicken. Little chicken runs away.”

The entire book was made up of such pictures, with only a few

characters on each page. I took the book home. With the aid of my mother, my *Por-por* and some of my aunts, I mastered reading the whole book within three days. That was not to say that I could write or reproduce all the characters. But I could recognise them and knew what they stood for. The illustrations virtually gave their meanings away. I quickly memorised the sounds of the characters and could rattle off the entire book, as if I knew all the characters by heart.

That minor skill caused me to lose patience with the slow pace with which Miss Nice tackled each lesson in class. She proceeded at the pace of the slowest, taking at least a couple of days for a lesson, explaining painstakingly where chickens came from and how eggs were hatched. Each member of the class was asked to indicate whether he or she had ever seen a live chicken or had played with a dog. Those who had were then asked to share their experiences with the rest of the class.

Her approach bored me. So I often interrupted her to urge her to go faster. I was keen to lay my hands on the next book, to see new pictures and learn new words.

At the beginning, she responded by saying with a smile that “all little friends must make progress together and no one should be left behind.” Later, she told me rather sternly to stop interrupting. Otherwise, she would need to speak to my mother.

A meeting with my mother inevitably came to pass. I never found out what they said to each other. All I knew was that on the day after their meeting, Miss Nice asked me to stay back after school. She said she wanted to talk to me.

“Little Ki, have you ever seen a talking movie?” she began, after the rest of the class had dispersed.

I shook my head.

“Would you like to see one?”

I nodded. Up till then I had only seen a silent film featuring Charlie Chaplin. I had laughed out loud at the comic’s antics.

“Well, your mother says I can take you to a talking movie, providing you will agree to something I want. How about it?”

“What do you want?”

“I want you to stop interrupting the class. You must remember that everybody must be given a chance to learn, not just the smarter ones like you. This kindergarten belongs to the Anglican Church and your *Kung-kung* supervises all of us. We have to follow the policies he sets. If you want to progress faster, I am sure your mother or your *Kung-kung* can help you at home. Is it a deal?”

I hesitated and then nodded with a thumping heart. I had not known about my *Kung-kung* being involved in the running of my school. That might explain why I had not been more severely disciplined for my misdeeds or, indeed, why I had not been kicked out of the place long ago.

Thus it came about that I was taken by Miss Nice to see the film *King Kong*, starring Fay Wray. It gripped me with excitement throughout. The great beast, its terrifying roar and its power over puny men enthralled me. But towards the end of the movie I felt a deep sadness, particularly while I watched helplessly as the great ape plunged from the top of the Empire State Building, done in by little men firing guns from flying machines.

I thought about the ending of the film for days afterwards, feeling strangely uneasy and sad, not knowing what conclusion I ought to draw from the story. The giant ape had wanted a fair-haired woman, as a child might want an exciting toy. And it had given up its life to defend what it had seized. Was the moral of the story a need to fight to the death for whatever one wanted? I recalled *Kung-kung* saying that Jesus had allowed himself to

be crucified because he believed in his mission. Did the great ape believe in the same way? I could not figure it out.

* * *

I was soon deprived of the opportunity to mull that question further, however. My sweet-smelling *Ah Mah* suddenly re-appeared in Canton. I had been so overjoyed that I had simply rushed into her arms. After a period of catching up, she asked me to go out and play. She said she had important matters to discuss with my mother.

My grandmother and my mother did hold discussions, on and off over several days. But I was kept in the dark as to what was being discussed. The upshot was that I was told I should go with *Ah Mah* to see my father in Singapore. The necessity for doing so was not explained.

While I was travelling by train with my grandmother to Hong Kong, I asked her why my mother and Tzi-Choy were not going with us.

“You’ll have to ask your mother that,” she replied, placing an arm protectively around my shoulders.

The reply troubled me. It sounded like another evasion. What were grown-ups cooking up for me now? Why could adults never give straight answers? I had, of course, long ago already asked my mother that very question about going with us and she had pleaded the impediment of her job in Canton. That explanation had not rung true for me earlier and my grandmother’s reply still did not reassure me.

A host of other questions came flooding through my mind. Was I being taken to Singapore for a visit or for good? What did the journey mean, a temporary or total separation from my mother and brother? Would they come later? If not, why not? Had I been sent for by my father? If so, why

did he not come himself to fetch me? Was *Ah Mah* acting on his behalf or on her own initiative? A more disturbing possibility was that my mother wanted *Ah Mah* to take me away because I had not been behaving myself, showing too much of the badness inherent in me.

I was filled with a strange ambivalence mingled with resentment as I rode on that clattering train. I yearned for answers and yet was fearful of what they might turn out to be. So I ended up remaining silent, a silence I was to maintain for many years as I wrestled with the imponderables plaguing my life.

At that time, deep in my heart, I blamed every adult I have ever dealt with for short-changing me, for not being straight with me. The only exception was Miss Nice. She at least went out of her way to explain things and to listen to my point of view.

It had taken another 30 years -- until my own first marriage began hurtling towards a train wreck -- before I discovered how excruciatingly difficult it could be to explain to children, in words they could apprehend, why their settled family routines had to veer off the rails.