

## Blair Road

The sea journey from Hong Kong to Singapore was smooth and uneventful, save for a couple of bouts of seasickness. I continued to struggle to divine the reason *Ah Mah* was taking me there and felt a foreboding of catastrophe. Given my consistent record of scoring zeroes under “conduct” at kindergarten and my grandmother’s cryptic remarks, I envisaged some vigorous form of paternal discipline in store.

The fact that no formalities attended our arrival increased my misgivings. It implied that neither my grandmother’s return nor my arrival was considered worth celebration. My introduction to members of the household came almost by the way, whenever our paths happened to cross.

The only formality lay in *Ah Mah* bringing me before a tall and elderly gentleman to pay my respects. I was told he was my paternal grandfather. He evidently knew me. He acknowledged my greetings with a nod of his sagacious head and a smile revealing a set of tobacco-stained teeth. The smile seemed suffused with genuine pleasure, though not unmixed with bemusement.

“You’ve grown taller but thinner,” *Ah Yeh* said. “Should eat more, or you’ll end up just skin and bones.”

My grandmother interjected an endorsement of that opinion.

Their remarks touched a nerve, undermining my already shaky self-esteem. They seemed to echo a point previously made in Canton by my mother and some of my maternal aunts. I had endured a degree of teasing by fellow students at kindergarten as well, with nicknames like “skinny grasshopper” and “starved ghost” flung at me. They had led to scuffles, none of which redounded to my credit in the eyes of Miss Nice.

More than that, my mother and my maternal aunts had also commented unfavourably upon my unruly hair. It tended to grow with exceptional stiffness, leaving a few strands sticking out at the back of my head, like the sickle-features of a bantam cock. No matter how much I brushed or

combed those strands, they refused to lie down.

One of my maternal aunts pointed out that, according to Chinese folk beliefs, rebellious hair indicated stubbornness of character. I was therefore marked very early as a difficult child to bring up.

The remarks by my grandparents set me back. Looking into the mirror, I could see that my head was too large for my skinny body. No one could take a liking to me because, with my unbecoming hair, I looked every bit like a scarecrow. I dreaded how my father and the rest of the inhabitants of the house would react.

I did not manage to solve the problem of my troublesome hair until I was 20 and a student at university. I decided then to cut it in the military style known as a “crew cut”. It solved the problem so satisfactorily that I have retained that close-cropped style ever since.

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Meeting my father confirmed my worst fears. During the sea voyage, I had resolved to create a good impression on him. I had heard of his reputation for charm and light-hearted repartee. But against that, there was the hard fact of his abandoning me and my mother. Therefore I decided to act in a calm and grown-up manner and to refrain from rushing into his arms as I had done with *Ah Mah* when she re-appeared in Canton. I would wait for his reaction first.

It was just as well.

“Here’s Little Ki,” my grandmother said, when presenting me.

My father did not appear physically frightening or abnormal. But his legendary charm was not on display either. His brow knitted slightly at my presence, as if someone had presented him an untimely I.O.U. for settlement. He

gave me a quick once-over, emitted a grunt with an ambiguous movement of the head, and then made himself scarce. He barely uttered a word.

How could he act so coldly, I wondered with disappointment. I had not asked to come to Singapore and I had done nothing to upset him. What did he expect from a son? Then it struck me like a thunderbolt that I might have misread the whole situation and drawn the wrong inferences from the words of *Ah Mah* and my mother. He might not have wanted me at Blair Road at all! His leaving me and my mother in Hong Kong must have been already an indication of how he felt. It stood to reason he would not want a once-abandoned boy foisted back on him, one known to be a problem child with a record for violence!

In the midst of my perplexity, another realisation erupted upon me. It concerned my mother. Perhaps she had no more use for me than my father! That must be the only reason why she had kept my brother while allowing me to be taken away. My head spun over that double rejection. Bitter confusion choked my heart. My mind went off to another universe, as I fought to stop myself from breaking into tears. I was in that condition when my three aunts and the other womenfolk in the house happened along to be introduced.

My first impressions of them were quite blurred and I must have appeared disconcerting to them as well. My oldest aunt was in her mid-thirties, rather thin, with sharp, desiccated features. Warmth, however, radiated from her melancholy eyes. Her name was Soo-Leung. Although she had been presented as my “Third Paternal Aunt”, I could not grasp where she fitted in among all the other paternal aunts. She had been informally adopted for one of my grandfather’s departed wives. On that basis, she retained her original surname of “Lee”.

The next aunt was in her early twenties. Her name was Sau-King. She had a slightly plumpish face and a body to match. She was not bad-looking but her features advertised a sour and moody disposition. She was the daughter

of my grandfather's Ipoh brother. She had been sent to No. 10 to study English. Being separated from her own family might have contributed to her moodiness.

The final aunt was the prettiest of the lot, full of youthful levity and zest. Her name was Kwei. She had a fresh, open face, a ready smile and a trim, fetching figure. Although she had been with the family for many years, she was still in her teens. It was never made clear whether she had been informally adopted for one of my grandfather's subsidiary wives or for *Ah Mah* herself.

The warmest welcome of the day came from a thin, wizened family servant. Her name was Ah Sei, which merely meant "Number Four", a method commonly used by illiterate families to name their offspring in the order of their births. I never found out her surname.

"Ahh!" Ah Sei beamed and chuckled. "So you're First Born. Very good, very good." Her voice was high-pitched.

She had a mop of impoverished hair sprouting from her head and a pronounced hump on her back. Her deformity caused her to walk with a scuttle, the upper part of her body bent over a good few degrees from the perpendicular. In that posture she could not have measured much more than five feet from head to toe. Though she had an outwardly witch-like appearance, she was in essence the gentlest of souls. Her age was anybody's guess. She was, however, an amazing powerhouse, the most energetic woman I have ever come across.

Over subsequent years, I was to discover that she rose well before dawn each day and continued to tackle a multiplicity of chores till long after the rest of the household had gone to sleep. There always seemed to be something she had to do, be it checking the supplies of rice or firewood or coal or merely folding away dried clothes in preparation for ironing. She worked indefatigably, seven days a week, doing the marketing, preparing meals, washing up afterwards, hand-washing the household laundry on a wooden scrub board and giving baths to children when called upon. I cannot remember her ever taking a

day off.

The dusting and sweeping of the upper floor of the house had been assigned to my aunts, for no apparent reason other than drawing a line between masters and servant. Ah Sei was discouraged from venturing upstairs. Otherwise she might have discharged duties there with equal gusto. However, my aunts also sometimes helped with the cleaning downstairs as well.

Naturally, I also met my sister, Helen, on the day of my arrival. She was a two-and-a-half year-old child, tottering between one adult and another. Her eyes suggested she was nonplussed and uncomprehending over my presence, although her face remained fairly expressionless. She had just recovered from a protracted tussle with meningitis.

Finally, the mysterious Anna made an appearance, clutching in her arms her son Tzi-Kun or Francis, then about nine months old.

My grandmother seemed to have abandoned me to my own devices after presenting me. “This is Tzi-Ki,” she said tersely, leaving me rattled.

Here at last was my mother’s nemesis, the person commonly rumoured to have contributed to the break-up of my parents. She must have at some stage wriggled a friendly finger under my infant chin at Hill Road. But I had no memory of her. I noted immediately that she was much younger and more beautiful than my mother. She was 29 and giving birth to two children had not detracted from her slenderness and grace. Rather, the reverse, for her face positively glowed with that transient after-radiance of motherhood.

There was also something in her beauty that went beyond the delicately oval face and pointed chin touted in romantic literature and classical paintings. Her beauty seemed to convey something grave, elusive, and untouchable. I suspected she must have tried to put more steel into her gaze before meeting me. But she failed. Her eyes remained dewy and gentle, suggestive of her inherent nature.



Two photographs of Anna Wong Wai-Fong. The one on the left was taken in 1925, when she was 19 and before she became the bridesmaid at the wedding of the Author's parents. The second one was taken approximately 25 years later, after she had married the Author's father in 1957.

I did not know how to address her without embarrassing or upsetting her. Should I address her as a step-mother or a cousin? Neither sounded right. I had received no advice from *Ah Mah*. In order to get around the problem, I acted as if I were confused. Anna was not fooled. Although I had no intention to make life difficult for her, she must have arrived at a different conclusion. Her pleasantly-shaped mouth, finely cut, tightened less pleasingly.

Awkwardness soon insinuated itself between Anna and myself. She

appeared not particularly thrilled by my presence at Blair Road. I, for my part, increasingly felt I did not want to be there. But at least she did not rush from my presence as quickly as my father had done.

What Anna's thoughts might have been at that time or during the years that followed, I was never to know. Both of us refrained from articulating our individual concerns. Wariness of each other dogged us like shadows, causing each to stay out of the other's way and to keep verbal exchanges down to an absolute minimum.

I learnt later that I had been wrong in assuming that my father had already married her. He had not done so and was not to do so till 1957! And even then, only because Anna had threatened to leave him unless he went through with it!

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Six and a half decades later, when one of my sisters, Pauline, and I were reminiscing over our childhoods, she suddenly remarked: "You know, what has stuck in my mind since I was very little was that you constantly dealt with my mother at arm's length."

"Yes, that's very true," I replied. "Because she also always dealt with me at arm's length."

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Blair Road was a short street sapped by equatorial sunshine into a sleepy indolence. Its construction had begun shortly after the turn of the twentieth century and it stands today as a monument to the limited imagination of property developers and architects of that era. As a consequence, two-storeyed terrace houses eyed each other across a heat-soaked belt of asphalt, with

many structures displaying mismatched features drawn from traditional Chinese designs and more recent strokes of Art Deco boldness. Yet, the end result was not without charm. It was decidedly an improvement over the dilapidated hurly-burly of Canton.



Scene of Blair Road in 1930's, No. 10 is second from left

Back in the 1930's, the road consisted almost entirely of domestic dwellings, except for an old-fashioned coffee shop, tangentially opposite No. 10, and a capacious garage next to it. The coffee shop sold mainly cigarettes, sweets, refreshments and snacks. The garage housed the motorcars of Europeans living along the adjacent Spottiswoode Park Road. The vehicles were uniformly driven by Malay chauffeurs who had quarters above the garage. They and their families were the only Malays in a totally Chinese-inhabited street.

At the other end of the road there was a small escarpment, overlooking to a network of railway lines leading to the Tanjong Pagar Station. That network held both a dread and a fascination for me. I was half-fearful that if I did not fit in at No. 10, I might be consigned to another train journey to another strange town. On the other hand, if I managed to settle in well, I might

be allowed to take a train later to explore other towns and cities in Malaya.

Of the two-storeyed tenements lining both sides of the road, those on the No. 10 side had even numbers. Their upper floors jutted out over the pavement and were supported by large and ungainly pillars. About a third of the houses on the opposite side had not been built to their full plot potential. That minority stood recessed, leaving in front of each a small patio or garden. The rest were like No. 10.

All the houses were painted in different pastel shades of pink, blue, green or beige. Most had moulded stucco decorations over their tall doorways, which were flanked on either side by stoutly barred windows.

The doorway of each house consisted of two sets of doors. The first set, reaching only about half the height of the doorway, was more for show than for security. It had no lock and was only held shut by a simple wooden bolt or latch. They featured intricate lattice-work, however, often gilded, and sometimes exquisitely carved with cranes and other auspicious motifs. The second set, solid and massive, covered the entire opening.

It was not unusual for both sets to be left open during the day, especially when inhabitants were taking the air on the doorsteps or when children were playing outside. In retrospect, that was a time of innocence. Fear of kidnappings, child abductions, sexual assaults, paedophile molestations, petty thefts and other personal insecurities had not taken on the dimensions they have today. Children often played on the wide pavements or on the street itself. My siblings and I did so, shooting marbles, kicking shuttlecocks, spinning tops or playing hopscotch.

Except for the cars using the garage, motor traffic hardly existed on our street. Transport for the well-to-do sometimes took the form of private rickshaws with red or black painted shafts and adjustable overhead coverings. One or two, together with their pullers, could normally be seen idling outside

selected residences.

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The interiors of the Blair Road houses followed a basic minimalist design. The ground floor consisted of a large reception room, behind which stood an equally large family room. The latter had an L-shaped flight of wooden stairs to provide access to the upper floor. The stairs were lodged against the wall to the left before turning at right angles half-way up to follow the wall separating the reception and family rooms.

To the rear of the family room, a large window looked out upon an airy courtyard. A short distance to the right of the window, a doorway opened onto a kitchen, beyond which lay a bathroom and the only flush toilet in the house. That doorway also gave access to the courtyard. Another small door at the far end of the courtyard led to a surprisingly wide back lane, used normally for the delivery of household provisions and for depositing rubbish outside for collection. A similar row of rear doors ran along the other side of the lane. They were the rear entrances for the shophouses and tenements fronting the next street, Kampong Bahru Road.

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The reception room at No. 10 was furnished in a style popular then among middle class Chinese families. Ebony, a much prized hard wood, was almost *de rigueur*, especially for families with some connection to officialdom. A Chinese superstition had it that ebony furniture, besides generating a feeling of power and grandeur, also brought good luck. My grandfather never gave credence to such a belief, though he did acquire the collection of arm chairs,

divans, settees and side tables there. Their backrests and armrests were modestly decorated with carvings. What drew me to them, however, was the deliciously cool feel they imparted upon the skin on a warm tropical day!

An oddly-shaped table, roughly the size of a *mah-jong* table, stood at the centre of the room. Its shape and construction introduced an air of foreignness. It was squarish and yet not quite square. Instead of four sharp corners, it had four protruding wedges. Its legs were even more intriguing. They took the form of round, tapering limbs, artistically bundled together more than half-way down, and then allowed to flare out again into four massive paws, as if they were grasping the floor. Four round stools clustered around it. The entire set was made of ebony, with their tops inlaid with grey marble.

I was later told the table represented a local attempt at re-creating an English Rococo style of furniture. That description was as incomprehensible to me as double Dutch.

Two fair-sized paintings of distant ancestors, in black wooden frames, hung on the wall facing the main entrance. No one paid more attention to them than to the other decorations in the room. The latter consisted of a couple of unimpressive vases, a brace of nondescript figurines and some table lamps, none of which commanded much intrinsic value. My own favourite was a miniature indoor plant now generally known as a bonsai.

Children were enjoined never to play in the reception room and on the whole everybody obeyed.

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The furniture in the family room, by contrast, was more eclectic. The room was dominated by a large, round wooden folding table top, resting on a smaller but quite sturdy table underneath. The top was seldom folded away

because the family had evening meals around it. A miscellany of chairs and stools surrounded the table.

My attention was attracted by two large cupboards. One stood against the wall between the large window and the doorway leading into the kitchen. It was made of cherry wood and had glass doors. Its use as a bookcase was patent, for a large number of impressive volumes, bound in tooled leather and stamped with golden lettering, were inside. Such books intrigued me, for I had never seen their like before. They in fact comprised a complete set of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and the volumes of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. The case also held a collection of Chinese books, some held in sets within blue cloth covers.

The second cupboard was of rosewood but its opaque doors hid its contents. It stood at right angles to the first cupboard, a short distance from the foot of the stairs. Not only were its doors opaque but they could not be opened for more than a tiny crack because a reclining lounge chair made of rattan and mahogany was positioned smack against them. Opening them by a tiny crack was nonetheless sufficient for a musty smell to escape and for me to discern the dim shapes of more books inside.

That knowledge played havoc with my imagination. I reasoned that books, so carefully hidden away, must represent dangerous manuals, possibly holding secrets about casting magic spells or instructions on deadly Chinese martial skills. I was determined to get at them. My ambition was, in the circumstances, quite absurd for I was illiterate save for the dozen or two of characters learnt during lessons by Miss Nice.

As pointless and irrational as the enterprise was, I could not deflect my mind from it. Moving the reclining chair out of the way was a necessary first step. But that chair happened to be my grandfather's favourite and he often rested upon it, to read newspapers, to take naps or to allow Helen to pound on his

arms and legs with her little fists, simulating the percussion massage he had taught her.

I had to wait till *Ah Yeh* was out of the house, on one of his trips to No. 38, before the chair could be moved. I bided my time, like a criminal planning to rob a bank, for I thought it had to be against the rules for a boy to get at those books. It was a high risk operation, for adults were forever going to and fro. Any one of them could demand to know what I was up to. When I eventually attained my objective, I was shocked by the first volume I had extracted. It was filled with gruesome illustrations of bones, skeletons, muscles stripped of skin, twisted intestines, internal organs of peculiar shapes, coloured blood vessels snaking through sections of limbs. I was to discover it was Gray's *Anatomy of the Human Body*, a leftover from my grandfather's student days.

At first, my rummaging among the books was met with consternation among the adults, for they feared my damaging the tomes. Later, after they had accepted my interest in them as a harmless quirk, they allowed me to thumb endlessly through them. Those which aroused my greatest interest were books on anthropology, containing pictures of naked black people, some with lower lips the size of a saucer, some with elongated necks wrapped in metal rings, some with spikes through their noses. Those illustrations turned my childish notions of humanity upside down. I had previously thought that all people looked pretty much alike, except for the pigmentation of their skins. Thereafter I had to contend with a world inhabited by so many strange and different human types.

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There were a few other items in the family room. Among them were a pair of long ebony couches, standing against walls, set at right angles to each

other, like the arms of a semaphore signal. My siblings and I often clambered on them during play.

At the foot of the wooden stairs, there was usually a collection of untidy shoes and slippers because the rule of the house required all footwear to be discarded before going upstairs. Wedged beneath the first section of the stairs was a gloomy cubby-hole constituting the sleeping quarters of Ah Sei. The old servant often abandoned it at night, however, in favour of one of the two ebony couches in the room.

A small table with a bevelled white marble top stood in front of the window looking onto the courtyard. In subsequent years, I was to do much of my homework on that table. The real pleasure to be derived from working there came from the birdsong of a canary in a beautifully handcrafted cage hanging from a hook in the ceiling right above it. The cage was complete with ivory fittings and a tiny porcelain water bowl. The bird was my grandfather's pet and it was an indefatigable singer. My grandfather sometimes took it for strolls and I occasionally tagged along.

The canary had a taste for grasshoppers and *Ah Yeh* pandered to its appetite from time to time by buying it such insects from a nearby pet shop. If he secured a really big one, he would spike it on a fork that came as an attachment to the cage. The bird would peck ravenously at the insect even as its limbs clawed helplessly in agony. Watching a creature being devoured alive was not a very edifying spectacle.

Nonetheless, hunting for grasshoppers soon became an excuse for me to plunge into clumps of tropical grass as tall as myself. Those hunts were thoroughly exhilarating, though the grasshoppers usually proved quicker than I. I kept telling myself all I needed was a single stroke of luck to gain a disproportionate amount of merit in my grandfather's eyes. On the few occasions I was successful, I would be rewarded with the promise of an ice

cream or some other goodie the next time he took me out.

But the promise of a treat did not prevent me from being pricked by a slight twinge of guilt when I watched my captive being eaten by the canary.

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The courtyard outside the family room took up two-thirds of the width of the building. The remaining third was taken up by a long semi-open kitchen featuring two concrete benches. One was set against the wall separating the kitchen from the bathroom. Upon it rested a number of wood or charcoal burning stoves. Those fuels were stored in the space underneath. The second bench was set at right angles to the first, against the wall separating No. 10 from the house next door. A round wooden chopping block stood on the bench, together with a variety of jars, bottles and containers for salt, sugar, soy sauce, sesame oil, vinegar and other cooking ingredients. There was also a blue and white porcelain cylinder containing a sheaf of chopsticks made of different materials. Pots and pans were stored in the space beneath.

A sink and a large larder completed the facilities in the kitchen. The upper compartment of the larder had doors and sides made of meshed metal with holes big enough to permit a flow of air but too small to permit the entry of flies and other insects. The lower compartment was made of wood and was used to store bowls and plates.

Incongruously, a large oaken dining table, much weather-beaten but still sturdy and serviceable, stood in the courtyard, right outside the window. It looked as if it had been exposed to the elements for a good while. It must have once belonged to a person of substance, though no one appeared to know how it got there. Its uses were multiple. Children played games on it, under it, and around it. On sunny days, the three aunts sometimes lay out books to air on it.

On evenings, Ah Sei or one of the aunts might use it to do ironing. The iron they used was of the ancient metal variety, heated with glowing chunks of live coal inside and provided with a wooden handle for steering.

The bathroom and the toilet were located next to the kitchen. The bathroom contained a large open-mouthed and pot-bellied earthenware jar, about three and a half feet tall, just a shade shorter than I was at that time. Its water was replenished from a tap in a corner, connected to the jar by means of a short length of rubber hose. A large metal ladle stood handily, for scooping water for ablutions, laundry and other purposes. Should it sink accidentally to the bottom of the jar, which seemed to happen frequently during bath times, one of my siblings or I would volunteer to plunge into the jar's inviting waters to retrieve it.

An *ad hoc* chicken coop had at some stage arisen in a far corner of the courtyard, opposite the toilet. Three or four hens were kept there. Their movements were restricted by strings tied to a leg of each. A squawking and fighting tangle often resulted, which entertained the children enormously but inflicted upon Ah Sei the job of untangling them. They seemed to produce a prodigious number of eggs.

The coop could have been my grandfather's idea, because he religiously kept count of the number of eggs harvested each morning. The feeding of the chickens was essentially left to Ah Sei but none of the children was slow in tossing them scraps.

The courtyard was straddled by two massive parallel wooden beams. They must have served some obscured structural purpose. They enabled Ah Sei to rest between them bamboo poles laden with limp and perspiring shirts, shorts, bed-sheets and pillow cases. On days after a massive wash, the poles would resemble bedraggled banners of a defeated army.

In later years, after the end of World War II, I was to attach to one of those beams a sandbag and a set of Roman rings. I wanted to toughen myself

through exercise, before venturing into the world on my own. Needless to say, I was not successful, for I remained a scrawny reed of a lad until my early twenties.

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Apart from Ah Sei, the inhabitants of No. 10 slept on the upper floor. Its layout replicated that of the lower floor, except for a much larger front section, due to the floor being extended over the pavement. The staircase, nestled between retaining walls, neatly divided the upper floor into two sections. The front portion was ventilated by three large barred windows, each equipped with a set of green wooden shutters. All windows commanded a fine view of the street and its surrounds.

My grandfather had his bed adjacent to the window on the far right. The wall above his bed was decorated with framed photographs of himself pictured with friends and associates, some obviously taken in foreign parts during his younger days. It was not always easy to identify him because his weight and appearance seemed to have fluctuated quite a lot throughout the years.

A handy medical cabinet with two compartments stood a short distance away from the foot of my grandfather's bed. The top compartment had glass doors and two shelves inside. Both were crammed with bottles and containers of different shapes and sizes, each labelled with words I could not read. Their contents came in the form of liquids, crystals, pills and balms. I was in due course to become familiar with the bottles holding iodine, Mercurochrome, castor oil and cough mixture.

The bottom compartment had wooden doors and also two shelves inside. Several shining metal boxes containing medical instruments rested there,

together with a stethoscope, a blood-pressure measuring instrument, a small spirit lamp, two thermometers, a few syringes, a stone mortar and pestle, and an assortment of bandages, dressings, sticking plasters and rolls of cotton wool.

Alongside the cabinet, a large teak wardrobe loomed, almost as impressively as a Praetorian guard assigned to protecting the medical trove. My grandfather used it to keep his clothes and some of his other personal belongings.

Back to back with those two facilities, were two equally substantial wardrobes of less identifiable wood. One had a full-length mirror installed in its middle section, between two small doors. Both wardrobes held women's clothing and household linen. The positioning of those four items of furniture had the effect of forming a neat enclave within which *Ah Mah* had her bed. At one time or another, one or another of my growing siblings also slept therein, as had one or more of my aunts.

I did not know on arrival in Singapore that it was commonplace for people to sleep on wooden floors and that it was not a necessity forced only upon paupers. Aunt Kwei, for example, slept on the floor a short distance from my grandfather's bed. Since I had previously always had a bed, I was horrified when I was told to sleep on the floor next to Aunt Kwei. I had taken that instruction as a reflection of my lowly status within the household. After a few months, however, I was assigned a bed directly across from my grandfather's. It was flush against the opposite wall, beneath another of the windows. I cannot remember whom I displaced. Sleeping space, I then realised, was pretty much a moveable feast within No. 10. As my father sired more children, most of us got shuffled around.

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To create a bedroom for my father and Anna, a wooden partition had

been erected to enclose the rear portion of the upper floor. The partition rose to only about seven feet, with a doorway cut into it. But, in keeping with the tradition of living as a communal unit, no door had been fitted. Only a sliding cotton curtain fitted to a rail hung over it.

That enclosure had a large window overlooking the courtyard. Its dominant furniture was a large four-poster bed with a gleaming brass bedstead. Metal rods protruded from each of its four corners for installing a canopy but none had been fitted.

Outside that makeshift bedroom a generous passageway provided access to a wide rear balcony and a large communal bathroom that also held a large earthenware water container, accompanied by a ladle. There was no door to it, only another cloth curtain. Family members could bathe there and those wishing to urinate often saved making the journey downstairs by using the bathroom floor and flushing away the discharge with a few ladles of water.

In the passageway, there was a sideboard laden with cups, glasses, thermos flasks, bottles of water, tins of biscuits and ingredients for making a variety of beverages.

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Although Blair Road was a quiet suburban street with little motor or human traffic, it had a rhythm and tempo all its own. A regular flow of itinerant hawkers throughout the day contributed to its liveliness. Each had his own distinctive calling card and adults and children alike welcomed their arrivals in equal measure.

There would be the Indian nut-seller, offering everything from peanuts to almonds in cones made out of old newspapers. Then there would be the “aeroplane olive” man who, in exchange for a coin tossed from an upper

window, could send a small packet of either preserved or fresh olives flying right into that upper room. A sharpener of kitchen knives and scissors would let out a cry that sounded like an exaltation. And he might be followed by a seller of fresh tropical fruits.



Author in 1946 enjoying a piece of papaya bought from a fruit vendor outside No. 10 Blair Road

The most eagerly awaited sound for children was the “ting-a-ling” of the man coming by on afternoons, to sell what we called “iced sticks” and what were known in North America as popsicles. He would bring along in his cart frozen lengths of flavoured liquids, tasting of vanilla, chocolate, lime or orange. Some would be embedded with grains of yellow corn, others with red beans. For any given sum, the vendor would cut off an appropriate length, stick a flat piece of wood into it as a handle and then present it to the customer.

However, on top of his cart, the vendor would display a circular wooden disk resembling a medium-sized dish. The disk would be divided into

segments, in much the same way as the “wheel of fortune” in a modern casino, except that the disk would lie flat. A wooden device with a dangling wire would be affixed to it whereby, with a flick of the finger, it would twirl until the wire stopped at a section promising a certain length of the iced treat. The contraption was by no means a scientific instrument but it did hold forth the possibility of gaining twice, three times or even five times the length paid for. Of course, most of the sections penalised the customer into receiving less than what was due.

That method of selling popsicles harked back to ancient times in China, when candy sellers also sold their wares on the roulette principle. Children welcomed the chance to try their luck. I cannot recall seeing any child resist the invitation to take a spin. That observation has caused me to wonder in subsequent years how many of my generation actually secured our first lessons in risk-reward ratios that way!

After sunset, a noodle man would make an appearance to offer hot snacks, announcing his presence by a distinctive tock-tock sound produced by striking together two pieces of bamboo. A wonderful bowl of steaming noodles, with or without *wonton*, could be had for a very modest sum.

The colour and atmosphere of the street would also be enhanced by the laughter of the children of the Malay chauffeurs. They would make boisterous use of the street for their multifarious activities, running about wrapped only in sarongs with their upper bodies naked and glistening with sweat. Their favourite game seemed to be called *sepak raga*, a game invented in the Malacca Sultanate during the fifteenth century. It involved two teams forming a circle, with the side in possession of a small rattan ball having to keep it in the air by hitting it with feet, knees or heads but not with any part of the arm. Later the rules became formalised and international competitions were organised. It then took on the name *sepak takraw*.

Even in its earlier form, it was a fast and exhilarating game. The

cries of the players easily invaded the precincts of No. 10. Although I could not understand what they were yelling about, they sounded so filled with manic fun and uninhibited happiness that I longed to join them. But I noticed that no Chinese children ever played with them. When I asked one of my aunts why, she said the children of chauffeurs belonged to a lower class in society. Their behaviour and manner of speech were not refined. That was my first awareness of the divide of class separating people from each other.

\* \* \*

In 2010, having been absent from Singapore since 1989, I visited briefly those of my siblings and their families still living there. My second son, Tien-Kay, from Canada, joined me. I wanted to take him for a stroll down Blair Road to show him where I had spent my boyhood. One of my sisters, Pauline, by then a silver-hair grandmother, also came along. Although she is a Singaporean and had been living on the island for many years, she had never revisited Blair Road after the family moved out in 1956.

As we sauntered down one side of the road and up the other, I noted that the coffee shop and the garage had gone and had been reconditioned like the rest of the residences. We paused here and there, particularly outside No. 38, and I took in such features as I could remember. The exteriors of the houses, apart from those once occupied by the coffee shop and garage, appeared pretty much as they used to be back in the 1930's.



Contemporary view of Blair Road. No 10 is the first house on the right.

The reason for the lack of change was due to the Singapore government's decision in 1991 to designate Blair Road as part of the Blair Plain Conservation Area, which meant that the facades and a number of other features of buildings had to be preserved.

But I could not work up any real sense of nostalgia. The facades might have been retained but the atmosphere had definitely altered. Its former insouciance had gone and had somehow been replaced by a cocksure air of efficiency, order and prosperity. The number of swishy cars jamming both sides of the street provided ample evidence of that. It seemed odd that the once quiet road, built for the use of all, should within a few brief decades have been usurped for the priority of vehicles, with pedestrians and others merely tolerated on sufferance, provided they adhered strictly to rules designed for the convenience of polluting motorists.

There was also a strange quiet, occasioned by the absence of children at play. Possibly that was due to our arriving relatively early, at an inopportune hour during term time.

Far fewer doorways stood opened compared with the number during my childhood. Why was that? It could not have been due to any spiralling fear of crime because tourist pamphlets proclaimed Singapore to be one of the most orderly societies in the world. Could it be only a manifestation of more isolation accompanying an urbanised age, when armed with a few electronic gadgets one could hide away making pitches, making money, making love and making mischief without ever connecting with one's neighbours? A thought worth pondering.

Our amble ended up outside No. 10. The latticed door was ajar but the more massive door was firmly shut. On an impulse, I asked my sister: "Do you think the people inside would allow us a peek?"

"Can try," Pauline replied, with a burst of tinkling laughter that was part of her nature. She reminded me of a child anticipating an adventure. I pressed the door bell or buzzer, mildly amused by that innovation which had not been there during my time.

A young man in his late twenties or early thirties eventually answered the door.

"Yes?" he asked. He oozed alertness and efficiency but his face was shut and unwelcoming.

I explained that my sister and I used to live in the house before the Pacific War. Could we possibly sneak a look to see what has changed since, I asked.

"Can't let you in. I'm not the owner. I'm sorry," the young man said. To me, he did not appear sorry at all. In fact, he wore a mask of barely concealed annoyance. Ah, who knows! We might have interrupted him plotting a dawn raid on the stock market or in the midst of short-selling some dicey share. Through the partly opened doorway, I could spot some photographic equipment in what had once been my family's reception room. The place had the makings

an office of some kind.

“I’ve come from London,” I persisted. “It would be a great kindness if you would allow us to have just a look. We won’t take more than a couple of minutes.”

“I’m not the owner,” the young man repeated, ignoring the plea.

“When might the owner be here?”

“Not sure.”

“We could come back later, if that’s more convenient.”

That desperate suggestion was met with silence. I could not think of any further plea that would move him. “Thank you,” I said. “Sorry to have troubled you.”

With that the door was quickly shut.

As we walked away, I said to my sister: “It’s your ravishing head of white hair, you know. A dead give-away of criminal intent.”

We had a laugh.

Tien-Kay looked slightly baffled by the absence of Eastern hospitality. I was not sure what he felt, for he had spent most of his life in North America.

We decided to call it a day and repair for some coffee.

\* \* \*

Afterwards, I could not help reflecting on our unsuccessful attempt to gain access to No. 10. The lack of desire on the part of the young man to connect with a couple of old fogies was understandable. But it troubled me a little nonetheless.

The Singapore I had known as a child, and where I had subsequently contracted my first marriage, had made enormous economic strides as an island

state. But did it pay some price in human terms for that achievement? It was a conundrum I was ill-placed to tackle after so many decades away.

The cost of a home along the road is now in seven figures and well beyond the reach of the average citizen. Those fortunate enough to live there can at least rest assured that no cries by itinerant hawker would ever disturb their peace.

I am told that the hybrid style of the houses along Blair Road has now been designated -- for architectural reasons I do not pretend to understand -- as "Coarsened Classical Chinese Baroque". I wonder if one day a classification would emerge to describe the latter day occupants of the houses along the road as well.