

Tricks and Treats

When I arrived at No. 10 early in 1935, I found three generations of my family living under a single roof. Such an arrangement did not, in itself, constitute an extended family, at least not in the traditional sense of the term. Certain key elements were missing.

First of all, extended families were rooted in the rituals of ancestor worship. Mine was a purportedly Christian family and no longer practised ancestor worship. The only vestige of it took the form of the two portraits of remote ancestors decorating the reception room. No one performed any rites before them.

The ideal condition aspired to by extended families of old was to have five generations residing within the same home. It was a goal rarely attained. Even if a family were favoured by longevity, economic circumstances came into play, for considerable space was required to house such a family. In the days before the mercantile classes came into their own, extended families were largely confined to the land-owning gentry and perhaps to the more elevated members of the mandarin class. They were often the only ones capable of maintaining and handing down large estates. Each would likely be a substantial residence encircled by a wall, complete with enclosed gardens, arbours, courtyards, sky wells and room sufficient for children to run around and play in, to fly kites and set off firecrackers.

An ancestral hall in such an establishment would be *de rigueur*, where records of births, deaths and marriages could be kept. It would also be the place for paying homage to ancestors on anniversaries and red letter days when the family assembled to celebrate weddings, births and other key events. It would be located to the rear of the building, with high exposure to sunlight and close to where the most venerated members of the family would have their quarters.

Next in importance to the ancestral hall would be a school room with a retained tutor in charge, to instil in children the Confucian precepts and rites

essential to their lives. This would include the due observation of the main festivals scattered throughout the Lunar calendar. Each would call for an assembly of family members to feast, to strengthen bonds and to make offerings.

The family home would also have several wings, to provide a degree of privacy for the married sons and even grandsons, and room enough for each to expand his progeny. Adequate facilities would likewise be required to accommodate visiting relatives and guests. Work annexes, storerooms and servants' quarters were common accessories. Adjuncts to kitchen facilities were also essential because each festival entailed significant preparations beforehand. For instance, dumplings had to be wrapped before the Dragon Boat Festival and moon cakes baked before the Mid Autumn Festival.

Funerals, too, had to be anticipated. It was not uncommon for fine coffins to be stored within the home, to cater for the anticipate transitions of the spirits of elders into the next world. In olden days, fine coffins made of camphor wood would be installed long in advance, to be regularly lacquered and polished until they reached an awesome sheen.

Space at No. 10 was inadequate to meet even a fraction of those requirements. That was why children were permitted to play outside on the pavement and why the house at No. 38 had to be leased to accommodate one of my grandfather's subsidiary wives and their child.

Since many of our family members were scattered far and wide, their coming-together for family occasions and festivals was totally impractical.

My grandfather's father had been the one who started our family diaspora. It would have been impossible even back then to muster all my grandfather's siblings and their off-spring at one place. Indeed, those who had grown up in foreign parts would have got more accustomed to the rhythms of a Gregorian calendar for paying utility bills, rents, mortgages, school fees and so forth rather than to the advent of the many festivals dotting the Lunar one.

At No. 10, the only person who uncannily kept tabs on festivals was

the illiterate Ah Sei, for she would always produce, without any reminding, the appropriate dishes for each occasion.

Over time, other forms of forgetfulness would gradually set in. Few would remember where ancestral tombs had once been. My siblings and I, for instance, have no knowledge of where ancestors beyond our grandparents had been buried. For our children and grandchildren the would be even more out of the question.

In all likelihood, our ancestral tombs in China no longer existed. Graves left unattended in China for well over a hundred years must have attracted the attention of Communist Party officials charged with modernising the country. They would have been long bulldozed to make room for factories, apartments and other modern needs. That is not an uncommon fate in many other countries.

Such developments are bound to undermine further the fading sense of family and roots, leading ultimately to the loss of what someone had once described as “the piety of the native place”. The sad fact is that when a man departs from his native place, voluntarily or otherwise, he indubitably foregoes a piece of his past. Though he may fool himself into thinking he can reclaim it later, it is more likely the connection will be lost forever.

In the case of my family, the peregrinating tradition seems to have been firmly established after several generations. Those members of my generation and of the ones that follow are now free-floating autonomous units, each leading his or her own life as a modern nomad, each pursuing individual dreams. They wander from one replicated city to another, earning their living where the money is best. Each may flourish a document conferring some form of citizenship but such a document is seldom likely to evoke any grand passion of association with the issuing authority.

I did not know when I first arrived in Singapore that I, like my ancestors before me, would be engaging in just another long saga of

displacements. Mine has yet to end even after eight decades!

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Although the household at No. 10 did not represent a standard extended family, it did not mean that no traditional courtesies and etiquette had to be observed. Children had to greet their elders by their titles when they met for the first time each morning. Certainly no one dared to resort to the modern egalitarian casualness of addressing parents or elders by their given names. Children also had to be punctual for dinner and to assume their allocated places in an orderly manner, without having to be summoned or cajoled. Neither could they reach for food before *Ah Yeh* or *Ah Mah* had initiated the meal by raising their chopsticks.

There would normally be six adults at the dinner table, excluding my father, who might or might not be there, depending on his work schedule. When I first arrived, Helen and I were the only children at the table, because Tzi-Kun or Francis was not old enough to be thus elevated. Children were usually sandwiched between adults, so that they could be assisted to get at out-of-reach dishes or to ensure that bones were removed from their helpings of fish.

My place was located between *Ah Mah* and Aunt Sau-King. I cannot remember exactly how seating arrangements evolved as more children became old enough to be added to the table. At the beginning, *Ah Yeh* had Helen on one side of him while Anna always had her youngest child on one side of her.

Individual places were marked out by pairs of personalised chopsticks, set on the table before each meal by one of the aunts. Most sets were made of ivory, each shaped a little differently. Some, like my father's, had names engraved in red. My grandmother, however, used a pair made of silver. In due time, I was also given an ivory pair with my name.

Apart from the laying the chopsticks, my aunts were also responsible

for bringing in dishes prepared by Ah Sei from the kitchen and for serving each of us with a bowl of boiled white rice. Adults seldom needed more than one bowl but I would normally consume at least two or three. Initially, one of my aunts would help me with re-fills. Later, I did that for myself. My aunts were also responsible for clearing up the table afterwards.

Most of the fare prepared by Ah Sei was exceptionally delicious. They were of the commonplace household kind seldom offered at restaurants. I enjoyed most her steamed meat patties, which came in the thickness of a pan pizza. One I relished particularly was made with minced pork, water chestnuts and cuttlefish. Another was conjured out of chopped beef and sweet pickled gherkins. Dishes made with eggs as a base were popular with all the children. I was always on the lookout for her custard eggs, steamed with minced pork and the yokes of salted eggs, or even just eggs scrambled with slices of barbecued pork.

Should Ah Sei present a dish which particularly took the fancy of the children, like sweet-and-sour pork prepared with chunks of pineapple, there would be a scramble to scoff as much of it as quickly as possible. But at some stage *Ah Mah* would say: "That's enough. Leave some for Ah Sei." After that, everybody would desist from any further helping. Servants of middle and upper class families ate left-overs during that era.

In later years, when I reflected upon my favourite dishes, I could not help wondering if my choices had been dictated by a low animal cunning born out of an extraordinary appetite. My choices had all revolved around dishes that could be mixed readily with rice and swallowed without much chewing. Since I ate more than anyone else, speedy wolfing ensured I could satisfy for my appetite before *Ah Mah* called a halt.

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Although I was seated next to my grandmother every evening, it took me a while to notice that the bodily fragrance I first detected during my infancy was no longer present. I made surreptitious sniffs on a number of occasions to confirm that dismaying discovery. I even bent close to her once, pretending to examine her jade bracelet, just to get a good sniff of her arm. Yes, her fragrance had gone. I put that down to living in the tropics, where everybody took at least two showers a day.

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Another household convention was started about a year after my arrival. It involved *Ah Yeh* taking Helen and myself for a *dim sum* lunch after Sunday school each week. Later, when Francis was old enough, he came along as well. Aunt Soo-Leung would usually join us. Sometimes one of the other aunts would too. But *Ah Mah*, my father and Anna never did so. The reason remains a question mark to this day.

The place we went to was a restaurant called Southern Sky. It was located not too far from Blair Road. If the day was pleasant, we would go on foot, with *Ah Yeh* ambling in the lead, sometimes holding Helen's hand, and with Aunt Soo-Leung shepherding from the rear. The most enjoyable feature of the restaurant was its endless parade of trolleys offering a mouth-watering variety of savouries and desserts -- spring rolls, shrimp dumplings, beef balls, preserved eggs and ginger, abalone and goose webs, yam cakes stuffed with pork, glutinous rice cooked with chicken, octopus seasoned with chilli and many other such morsels. The unanimous favourites of myself and my siblings were steamed barbecued pork buns and custard egg tarts.

For a time, those Sunday meals became the highlight of our week and they are still fondly remembered as jolly occasions by some of my siblings after more than 70 years.

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After leaving Canton, I had received no communication from my mother. Then, suddenly, after more than a year, a parcel arrived. It contained a short letter, several small photographs of Tzi-Choy, a number of mechanical toys and a replica rifle.

The letter in Chinese was read to me by *Ah Mah*. It was a stiff, conventional letter, of the type normally sent by a mother to a child. She enquired about my well-being and asked if I was being obedient and studying diligently. The only nugget of information contained was about her leaving for Shanghai to take up a post with a German trading firm. She made no declaration of love or a wish for a speedy reunion.

I did not reply to the letter because I did not know how to put my disappointment into words. I figured I might be able to work something out by the time her next letter arrived. But I miscalculated. No further letter or parcel ever came.

One of the photographs of Tzi-Choy showed him sitting on a pony led by an attendant. My brother was dressed in a smart suit and looked quite happy and contented. I had never ridden on a pony and I felt envious. I was resentful, too, over his living within the bosom of mother-love whereas I had been cast out to fend for myself. The fact that I had my grandparents and a number of aunts around me did not seem to make up for being abandoned by my mother.

The mechanical toys in the parcel were of the kind not yet widely available in Singapore. Among them were a car and a tank, both of which could be wound up to run along a flat surface. They were interesting novelties but my focus was on the rifle. A notion came into my head that when I was old enough I would get a real one and change the world. I had it in my head it was unfair for

children to be separated from their parents. It required changing and I saw dimly the way to do it had to be with a gun.

The advent of the parcel of toys did produce an unexpected side-effect. My siblings and I had hitherto regarded one another warily, for Anna had kept them close to her. I, for my part, had kept my distance, being afraid to intrude into forbidden territory. The toys quickly elicited curiosity in both Helen and Francis. I unhesitatingly gave them free rein to everything except the rifle, which I kept solely for myself. That sharing allowed me to bond with them.

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In the meantime, Anna became pregnant again. She gave birth in May of 1937 to my sister Po-Ling or Pauline who eventually grew up to become a teacher. She married Gopal Baratham, a Singapore neurosurgeon and short-story writer.

Half a century later, when Gopal and I were both attempting to write fiction, we engaged in a desultory correspondence, mainly criticising each other's fictionalising skills. One of the points I made to Gopal -- which he readily accepted -- was that he was over-fond of using sexual symbolisms in his stories. He explained he could not help it, because he saw the world in sexual terms and every time he sat down to write he would think of sex!

He had at the time also written a novel entitled *A Candle or the Sun* that he said no Singapore publisher would touch because they all considered it seditious. His plain view was that a novel about Singapore ought to be published locally, but that was eventually done by Serpent's Tail in Britain.

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Following Pauline's birth, Anna took on a job with Nestlé. That

might be due partly to her being bored at home and partly because, with an expanding family, financial resources were being stretched. One of her responsibilities involved overseeing a milk bar at the vast entertainment complex known as the Great World Amusement Park. The park contained cinemas, dance halls, eateries, shops, an opera theatre, a wrestling ring and the various standard attractions of a fun fair, like a carousel with bobbing wooden horses, a coconut shy, juggling acts, magic shows and so forth.

The milk bar served not only milk shakes but also a rainbow range of ice creams. After being introduced to the park on a Saturday evening a couple of times, and after sampling the voluptuous delight of licking on numerous ice cream cones, the mere prospect of a visit had all of us salivating more greedily than Pavlov's dogs. But the outing was always conditional upon our having behaved ourselves during the week.

Aunt Soo-Leung normally went with us, but mainly to lend a hand at the milk bar. One or both of the other aunts regularly tagged along to help supervise the younger children. Back in those less jangled times, adults were inclined to give young children more leeway to run around unescorted than they would today. Although I was only about nine when those Saturday excursions started, I was given licence to roam the park unsupervised. The only proviso was that I should be back at the milk bar before it closed at around 10 p.m.

I cannot now remember, apart from our common passion for ice cream, what activities my siblings went in for. They usually went off under the charge of an aunt. Their activities must have been more mundane and less exciting than my own. Mine centred on watching Chinese operatic performances and professional wrestling matches.

The operatic performances fascinated me because of their noise and bustle, their clash of cymbals and roll of drums, their bizarrely painted faces and elaborate costumes. The performances took place inside an unpretentious temporary structure made of bamboo and *attap* thatching. There was something

pleasantly earthy and plebeian about its atmosphere. People attended in ordinary clothes, sometimes wearing slippers or clogs, with none of that dressed-up stuffiness associated with Western opera.

Vendors worked the aisles selling soft drinks, sweets, peanuts and melon seeds. The audience chattered, cracked peanuts or chewed melon seeds, often indifferent to proceedings on stage until singing began to the accompaniment of strings. Adults would then stop eating and chatting. The singing, often in falsetto, seemed to be what they were there for. They appeared to know by heart the operatic scores and the stories being unfolded.

I did not take to the singing, mainly because I could not grasp what was being sung. It did not sound Cantonese. It might have been Foochow opera, which had been popular for some time in the Straits Settlements. I was mesmerised instead by the acrobatics and the mock battles. Gradually, as I picked up some of the operatic conventions and symbols, my interest broadened to the plot and the singing. I learnt that each painted face represented a different character trait. A white face or a white nose on an actor denoted craftiness or treachery. Someone wielding a tasselled stick meant he was on horseback, and so on.

Gaining admission to the performances required wit and cunning. Back in those days, children seldom had access to money. The main opportunity to lay hands on cash came during Lunar New Year, when married elders gave to children little red packets containing money known as *lai-sze* in Cantonese. But such largesse had a way of vanishing very quickly on firecrackers, sparklers, sweets, snacks, toys and comics. None could be spared for paying fees to watch operatic or other performances.

I soon perfected a scheme for getting in without paying. I would hang around outside the theatre until I saw a family group with tickets about to enter. Then I would quickly move up close and pretend I came with them. Such pretences enabled me to sneak in free about half the time. Should I be stopped, I

would put on a sad and helpless look, as if I were a waif down on his luck. It was amazing how such a subterfuge could often soften the heart of an attendant sufficiently to get waved through.

Employing a similar method, I also racked up a decent record of gaining free admission to wrestling matches. Wrestling provided a different kind of thrill. I did not know then it was mainly choreographed play-acting. Therefore I was often kept on tenterhooks, not knowing when I would see one of the wrestlers getting seriously injured or even killed.

Pitting my wits each week against adults manning the entrances at the opera and wrestling matches excited me. It proved I could out-smart them. It has to be said, however, that a couple of the ticket collectors were quite decent fellows. When they got to recognise me, they would simply let me through.

The result of facing such challenges and the chance to feast on a variety of ice creams soon caused visits to the amusement park to oust my grandfather's *dim sum* lunches as the highlight of the week.

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On one occasion, we were denied our Saturday outing because of our bad behaviour. It earned us corporal punishment as well.

It happened one Saturday morning. Helen, Francis and I had started a self-devised ball game in the courtyard. We formed ourselves into two teams, with Helen and Francis on one side and I on the other. We could dribble a large rubber ball with our feet, as in football, or bounce it off the ground with our hands, as in basketball. The legs of the weather-beaten table in the courtyard served as goalposts while a cardboard carton placed on top of it stood in for a hoop. The point of the game was to gain possession of the ball, declare a choice of play, and try to score. Caught up in our exuberance, the game soon spilled over into the family room and then into the reception room in which we had been

forbidden to play. The inevitable happened. We knocked over and broke a vase.

At the sound of breakage, *Ah Mah* rushed in with a darkened face.

“You’re not supposed to be playing in here,” she declared sternly. “Your father will deal with you when he gets up.”

She then ordered one of the aunts to clean up the mess.

We waited with bated breath. Our father was still in bed because of his night duties. It was afternoon before he came down for breakfast.

Afterwards, he sat himself on one of the ebony couches in the family room and arraigned the three of us before him. He summarised the facts in a quasi-judicial fashion and asked if we agreed with them. We assented. He then dealt with each of us individually. I was the first. He asked if I accepted that breaking the taboo against playing in the reception room deserved punishment.

I agreed.

“Since you are the oldest, you should have known better,” he said.

“Should you therefore be punished more severely than the others?”

Again I agreed.

He then went through the same interrogation with Helen and Francis. After we had all accepted our guilt and our need for punishment, he told me to fetch a rattan cane that had been hanging ominously for years behind the door leading from the family room into the kitchen. It had not hitherto been used on any of us.

On presenting my father with the cane, he asked me to stretch out my right hand. He whacked me twice on the palm, but without putting any real strength behind his strokes. Helen and Francis got one stroke each. Francis was only around five at that time and Helen, eight.

My two strokes stung a little but were nowhere bad enough to make me cry. Helen and Francis did cry, however. That evening we were denied our outing to the Great World.

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The occasion of our collective punishment came up with Francis several decades later, during one of the discussions I used to have with him in Hong Kong or Singapore or Kuala Lumpur. We used to argue over philosophy, politics, economics or whatever came into our heads, usually accompanied by emptying a whole bottle of Hennessy XO between us. The caning by our father cropped up during a discussion about corporal punishment for children. I was then a colonial civil servant in Hong Kong while Francis was a journalist in either Singapore or Malaysia. We both agreed that some form of corporal punishment was essential in bringing up children but disagreed on the method of delivery.

Francis held the view parental love demanded that punishments be dished out only in anger, at the moment of an offence, and not long afterwards, in a cold and quasi-judicial manner. I, on the other hand, had no problem with our father's approach. It had been fair and measured, I said, because we all had a chance to mount our defence and to admit guilt before being caned. To inflict pain in hot blood risked the penalty getting out of hand, becoming excessive or disproportionate.

We ended agreeing to disagree.

Our punishments stayed with Helen also, for she recalled them more than 70 years later. Her recollections, however, were slightly different from mine. In her version, I was decidedly the mischief-maker, the only one responsible for the breakage. She had done nothing wrong, she claimed. But in punishing me, our father decided for some perverse reason to give her and Francis a whack each as well!

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The evening outings to the Great World came to an abrupt end when Anna stopped working for Nestlé and joined the Singapore civil service. I am not sure why she changed jobs. She was given a civilian post in the police department. Her efficiency, linguistic abilities and general reliability must have quickly impressed her superiors because, after due security vetting, she was transferred to the Special Branch.

The Special Branch, as a distinct organisation within the London Metropolitan Police, had been in existence since 1883. It had been set up to deal with Irish republicanism. It developed later into an intelligence-gathering agency, targeting anarchists, subversives, foreign spies and others with extreme political agendas.

Similar units were routinely established in British colonies around the globe. The one in Singapore was established in 1916.

Anna's tact, loyalty and disinclination to gossip must have accounted for her being assigned to the Safe Care Registry, where top secret files on local subversives, foreign spies and British double agents were kept. That was where she was working when war with Japan broke out in December of 1941.

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With Anna working during office hours, my father's bedroom stood empty most afternoons. I took the opportunity, albeit belatedly, to explore the room and its contents. Besides the large bed with the brass bedstead, the room held a dressing table accompanied by a stool, three or four steamer trunks and a tall, narrow cupboard with two sections. The steamer trunks had my grandfather's name stencilled on them but they were locked. I learnt later that they contained mothballed winter clothing belonging to my grandparents and my father.

The tall cupboard contained a miscellany of odds and ends that did

not particularly attract my interest. The only exceptions were two wooden boxes in the upper section filled with used postage stamps. There were Chinese imperial stamps, some overprinted with the names of Chinese treaty ports, triangular Cape of Good Hope issues and numerous stamps bearing the head of Queen Victoria from different parts of the globe. The last reinforced the impression that the empire she headed was indeed vast and far-flung.

I knew precious little about philately or the value of used stamps. I held the simplistic view that stamps, once franked, no longer had any value. I was aware, however, that many boys at school collected them, together with all manner of apparently worthless objects like match boxes, metal tops of soft drinks, cigarette packages, picture postcards, old comics, sea shells, bone buttons, coloured pebbles and so forth. Certainly, there was a lively trade in used postage stamps. When I noted the many duplicates, it occurred to me I could exchange a few for comics.

The vintage of the stamps I found suggested they must have been collected a long time ago. Since they were in my father's room, I assumed they belonged to him, possibly given to him by *Ah Yeh* for souvenir purposes. I had no wish to ask my father for permission to take duplicates. I figured he would not miss them.

So I spent two or three afternoons sitting on my heels on the floor of my father's bedroom, carefully sorting out the contents of the two boxes, placing stamps from different countries neatly into small piles on the floor.

One day, Aunt Kwei caught me doing the sorting. "What are you doing with those stamps?" she demanded. "They belong to your grandfather. You're not supposed to play with them."

At that revelation, I should have thought about approaching my grandfather for permission. But since a larcenous intent had already taken root, I played the injured innocent.

"I'm just taking a look," I said.

Aunt Kwei hesitated undecidedly over my response. In the end she did not object to my continuing with my sorting.

I duly spirited away a few of the duplicates and attempted to trade them at school. But I had no luck. Those who wanted the stamps had no comics to exchange; those who had comics did not care for stamps.

Fortuitously, one of my cousins, Kan Fook-Chuen, solved the problem. Fook-Chuen was one of the sons of my grandfather's oldest adopted daughter and was three or four years older than I was. He was apparently a stamp collector. When he saw me with the stamps he wanted to know where I had got them from.

I feared telling him the truth, lest he lay some sort of claim to them. After all, he was also a grandson. Or, worse still, he might report what I had done to our grandfather. So I told him I got them through a barter deal at school.

"I'll give you twenty cents for them," Fook-Chuen said.

I could tell from the alacrity in his voice that the stamps must be worth a lot more. But twenty cents constituted a considerable fortune. With such a sum I would be able to buy some comics I wanted. A deal was quickly struck. Thus I made my first venture into multilateral trading and -- as I was to realise later -- into dealing in stolen property!

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My tenth birthday rolled around and passed almost unnoticed. I got no present from anyone, not a card or greeting from my mother. That birthday might have marked the first time I felt a real pang of loneliness. The story books and the comics I had been reading seemed filled with happy people, engaging in chivalrous acts and derring-do, living lives of high drama and rescuing damsels in distress. I, in contrast, seemed abandoned and drifting wherever the winds of chance might blow. I tried to lose myself -- or perhaps to find myself -- in the

adventures of others. Many of the books in the house were beyond me but Sherlock Holmes and some books by Jack London offered me consolation.

I was intrigued and confounded by the strange names of authors found on some books. They posed a challenge in pronunciation. Schopenhauer was one such. I could have gone to my grandfather or my father to get the correct pronunciation but I resisted that solution. I did not want either of them to tell me I was unready for this or that author.

I eventually devised a way of solving the problem with *The World as Will and Idea*. I took it to school and placed it on my desk, on top of my ordinary books. I knew that when the class teacher walked between the aisles he was bound to be lured by it.

“What’s that book doing there?” he asked, unable to resist.

“I’m trying to read it, Sir,” I replied meekly.

“What! You? Schopenhauer?”

“I’m only trying, Sir.”

In that way I discovered the correct pronunciation. But that ploy did not always work. Sometimes a name would stump teachers as well, as in the case of Guillaume Apollinaire. Then a teacher would just pick up the book, flip through it and replace it with a humph, shaking his head. He probably walked away puzzling over my intellectual precociousness, not realising it to be only a facade.

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At some point during this period of my life, a bright memory of a roadside meal with my father stood out like a lodestar in the infinite darkness of night. The precise time and circumstances have escaped me but it was a meal in the vicinity of Blair Road, with the two of us squatting on little wooden stools at the stall of a Malay hawker selling satay. The hawker barbecued sticks of

chicken and beef satay on a small stove. While we were dipping the sticks in the standard sweet and spicy peanut sauce, a lorry went by and belched a cloud of smelly exhaust. I recoiled and put on a disgusted face.

“Don’t worry about a bit of dirt or a few germs,” my father said.

“Both will help you build up a resistance to disease.”

That was the only occasion I remember of ever sharing an intimate moment with my father, before being evacuated to Australia. Sometimes I am not certain if the meal had actually taken place. Perchance I had only imagined it, out of an unquiet longing to be accepted.

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Meanwhile, the demand for space at No. 10 continued to grow, with Pauline old enough to claim her own territory. Anna also became pregnant again. In early October of 1939 she gave birth to another son, Tzi-Seng, meaning Successful Son. His Western name was Herbert. Because Anna was keen to return to work, the care of the infant was given over to a wet nurse by the name of Ah Yee, a name that merely meant Number Two.

Ah Yee was a robust village woman in her early thirties, nut-brown from the sun. She must have been fairly short-sighted for she frequently squinted. Tzi-Seng had a cot in our father’s room and there Ah Yee tended his needs.

One afternoon, passing the room, I saw Ah Yee sitting on the floor with her blouse undone, suckling the infant. I went in to watch, squatting on the floor nearby. The baby looked so contented, with his eyes closed and his little fists clenched, sucking steadily away.

After the child had his fill, Ah Yee burped him and set him down on the cot beside her. The infant was already half asleep. The wet nurse was about to button up her blouse again when some instinct drove me to say: “Can I have

some milk too?”

Ah Yee gave a throaty guffaw and said: “Go on, then.”

I sidled up to her on my knees and lifted the large teat my brother had been feeding on. It felt weighty and alive, with its dark brown nipple staring back at me like an appraising eye. I hurriedly put my mouth to it and began to suck. The milk tasted bland, almost tasteless, but drawing it out gave me a strange and pleasurable sensation. The firm texture of the breast excited me in a way I could not describe. After a few moments, I reached a hand beneath her blouse -- without any conscious reason -- to squeeze her other breast. A few drops of milk squirted out.

When that happened, Ah Yee pushed me away. “That’s enough,” she said, and began to do up her blouse.

We stared at each other in a slightly stultified fashion for a microsecond, covered with embarrassment and confusion. I then hurriedly left the room, sensing I had done something I should not have.

In the days that followed, I nevertheless made a point of going past the doorway of my father’s room, at around feeding time, hoping to catch Ah Yee suckling the baby again. Whether I could then muster the courage to ask again for some milk must have been a question swirling unresolved at the back of my mind.

Over several successive days, however, I found during each feeding time either *Ah Mah* or one of my aunts in the room as well. I had no choice except to refrain from intruding. That frustration of my desire and the remembered pleasure of sucking on a firm brown teat spawned a restlessness that attacked me like an unappeasable itch.

About a week later, Aunt Soo-Leung took me aside and said very quietly: “You must not disturb Ah Yee when she is looking after your brother. Do you understand?”

I immediately realised that Ah Yee must have reported what had

transpired to my aunt. Waves of shame and alarm crashed over my consciousness. How far had news of my misdeeds circulated? My guilt-swollen heart pounded as if it were about to explode. I nodded to acknowledge my aunt's advice, and then slunk away in disgrace, never to venture near Ah Yee at suckling time again.

My aunt's subtle remarks nonetheless stayed with me for many days afterwards. Regardless of whether I had been born good or bad, I reflected, I must have a shamefully bad streak in me. It was not just the impropriety involving Ah Yee but the whole litany of other deeds -- the scheming to get rid of Tutor Tam, the débâcle with Lucy, the stealing of my grandfather's stamps, the casual disseminating of untruths to all and sundry. I must assuredly be heading for damnation with such a record. My very soul grew cold with fear.

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Once freed from the constraints of Tutor Tam's afternoon lessons, I threw myself into two endeavours -- to gain possession of my grandfather's silver watch and to build up my unbecoming physique.

In respect of the former, I came third in the class in the final exams and duly claimed the watch. But my grandmother allowed me to keep it for only one day. By evening, she said: "This is an expensive watch. You can easily lose it or damage it running around with it. Don't you think it better for me to keep it safe for you, until you're old enough to wear it like your grandfather?"

I accepted the suggestion. My grandmother duly locked the watch in a drawer that held the rest of my grandfather's silver watches. That proved to be the last time I would ever see my prize. Some years were to pass before I got any inkling of what had happened to it. But what was important for me was that I had proved I could do well with school grades, if I set my mind to it. Good grades were not something I cared very much about, although they appeared to

matter with adults. Another curiosity.

In the field of sports, I participated with enthusiasm in football and boxing. I was still so thin as to be a physical disgrace. Though I was tried out in various positions on the football field, I could not impress the coach in any of them. One or two school friends tried to help me improve but it was a losing battle. I was so puny that any hefty opponent could almost literally walk through me.

I fared slightly better at boxing, because opponents were limited by weight. So I joined a class run by the Reverend Adams, but disaster was not far behind. A well-aimed blow by an opponent snapped off one of my front teeth, leaving the root embedded in the gum. My grandmother had to take me to a dentist in Chinatown, probably selected because he also happened to be a fellow Christian attending St. Matthew's. To the horror of both myself and my grandmother, the dentist revealed that my teeth were in a deplorable state. He found not only many cavities but he also indicated that a lateral incisor and two molars had decayed so badly they had to be extracted.

My grandmother was aghast. "How can that be!" she exclaimed. "Haven't you been brushing your teeth?"

I made a non-committal reply, implying I was as surprised as she. Indeed I was, for I had not been troubled by any discomfort. The truth behind their poor condition was rather bizarre. For years I had been neglecting the brushing of my teeth before going to bed because of an addiction to liquorice. I first acquired a taste for the root when Ah Sei gave me a slice to chew on to take away the horrible taste of castor oil and the other foul Eastern purgative.

Ah Sei had been using liquorice as a culinary spice in the belief that it produced a "harmonising" effect on other herbs used in cooking. The old servant got her supplies from a herbalist shop in Kampong Bahru Road and kept the slices in a jar in the kitchen.

After first tasting it, I kept asking Ah Sei for a piece from time to

time. Subsequently, I would simply sneak a slice when she was otherwise engaged. When she finally cottoned on to what I was doing, she indulged me. So I helped myself to a slice before bed each evening. I would chew it into a pulp before swallowing it, leaving its delicious aftertaste in my mouth while falling asleep. I did not want to lose that agreeable flavour, so I never brushed my teeth. That, and a great fondness for chocolates and other sweets, condemned my teeth to slow decay.

After the verdict by the dentist, I could not possibly reveal the truth to *Ah Mah* for fear of getting Ah Sei into hot water.

Getting my teeth fixed was a prolonged and excruciating experience, not only because of the extractions but also because of the many drillings to mend cavities. There was no local anaesthesia in those days, except for laughing gas. But that was only offered in extreme cases. The dental drill of that era was powered only by the dentist, using a foot pedal. Each drilling session seemed to last forever. I simply had to bear the pain, as retribution for failing to observe oral hygiene.

After the dental visits, my self-worth tumbled further because my missing front teeth became apparent whenever I spoke or smiled. If I had considered myself ugly previously, I now felt even more so. I fell more readily into the same taciturn habit already evident in my father and grandfather.

Another result of the dental fiasco was that *Ah Mah* ruled out further participation in boxing.