

Yesterday I went back to Leith Road. I had intended only to drive through the neighbourhood and wait outside Lin's school gates until the students were dismissed, but I found I had half an hour to spare. So, on a whim, I parked the car at the top of the road and walked down the gentle slope, taking in the sedate, whitewashed terrace and semi-detached units. The houses seemed to have sprouted second, even third storeys in the long years since I'd lived nearby. Only one or two low-roofed originals were as I remembered. They seemed out of place and embarrassed now, sandwiched between giants and skulking a generation or two behind.

I spotted the old gap between numbers 11 and 13 without too much trouble, but only because I knew where to look. It was easily missed, even in the old days. Now, with the shadows lengthening in the late afternoon sun, the entrance just about vanished between the two houses that towered on either side, bursting at their seams. Stepping off the pavement, I found myself in a neat concrete passage barely two metres across. I moved almost unconsciously, driven by memory. The houses melted and the path seemed to un-form, un-smoothing itself and un-filling, so that soon my nimble feet were straddling a damp old drain and trying not to slip on pockmarked, algae-blackened concrete.

The shortcut emerged on the fringe of unkempt, open land. Familiar organic odours of grass and manure hit me, making me stop to catch my breath. I was standing in a sandy swathe cut in the lallang by foot traffic. The path led to chicken coops and some vegetable plots clustered near a handful of attap houses and dwarf coconut trees in the distance.

"Lame dog!" I heard a shout, followed by raucous laughter, coming from the houses.

"Shut up!" I retaliated, quickening my pace in case the speaker was armed with his catapult. My school satchel thudded against my thigh.

"Been studying hard again?" Siong slouched into view from behind the nearest attap hut. We were only a few months apart in age, but he had always been taller and broader. I noticed the cigarette as he put it back into his mouth.

"No," I said defensively. "It's not primary school any more, you know. Potato Tan was asking why you were absent the whole week. Pre-lims coming up some more." He ran a hand through his hair and ignored me. "They told you to cut it last week," I recalled. "Why you suddenly want to grow long hair? You scared she'll see your ear?"

He bristled, then gave me a withering stare. "She *likes* the ear, okay," he said proudly, "and guess what, *she* has a name."

Suddenly I was fed up with him, the show-off. With his floppy fringe and the silly tail growing down the nape of his neck, and a *cigarette* for heaven's sake. I suspected he'd started weights training, too. I'd seen protein supplements in huge white plastic canisters in his house. I'd waited eagerly for him to share the secret, but he hadn't said a word—no doubt deliberately, and so pride forbade my asking.

I was dying to know her name but forced myself to say instead, as nonchalantly as I could, “Where’s your grandpa?”

Siong jerked his head in the direction of the nearest attap hut. “Ah Kong!” he yelled.

“Ah Kong,” I echoed loudly, going through the doorway. Inside, the small dark space held a bamboo-framed settee and a wooden dining table with some stools. Against the furthest wall an altar glowered, smoke curling wistfully from the joss sticks placed behind a small bowl of oranges. A familiar sense of unease crept over me. Even as a child I had been grateful when the niceties were done and my parents let Siong and me play outside. Ah Kong’s health was now rapidly deteriorating, and I felt more oppressed than ever by the hut, which seemed to shrink even as my eyes grew accustomed to the dim interior. It was crammed with assorted valueless bric-a-brac, from old newspapers to kitschy ornaments to faded clothes. It was a *karung guni*’s¹ paradise but I, spoiled by a different lifestyle, felt only crowded by meagreness in this place.

Pieces of light cotton fabric in a faded print were suspended from a clothesline running overhead, cordoning off the ‘bedrooms’. Loud coughing, followed by retching and the sound of sputum being expelled, came from the larger room. Siong’s grandfather then drew the curtain aside from within, revealing a wooden dais, the traditional Chinese bed on which he slept. As a child, on my very first visit with my parents, I had never seen anything like it, although much later, as an adult, I observed more ornate antique varieties in museums. Ah Kong’s was not elaborate by the standards of old. I imagined coolies carting it off a Chinese junk. It would have been a wedding present, what, sixty or seventy years back, from his family in China. Slightly raised from the ground on four curved legs, it resembled more a low platform stage than a modern bed. It was closed on three sides, carved with simple friezes and in-laid with mother-of-pearl. There was, incredibly, no mattress. Ah Kong sat down on the bed, gave me a toothless grin of acknowledgement, motioned for me to help myself to the tidbits on the dining table and returned to his coughing.

“Ma is out,” Siong said, turning around and going out.

“No need, Ah Kong, I’m just leaving,” I said, somewhat relieved, and followed Siong back out into the afternoon. “Your Ma knows you skipped school?” I asked him.

“No,” he sneered, and then added, just to annoy me, “Yours?”

Our mothers were friends of sorts. Siong’s mother hand-washed our clothes (those were days before washing machines became commonplace). My mother, unaccustomed to domestic help, always treated her kindly, less as an employee than as someone doing her a favour. My father, too, was good to their family. Ah Kong got bananas and rambutans from our trees, and we got fresh eggs in return.

Siong had been born when I was six months old, inheriting my hand-me-downs until he’d started growing bigger than me, and faster. An old photograph shows us together as babies. Turned towards the camera is his

¹ Rag-and-bone man. Literally, “gunny sack” in Malay. These men or women were named for the gunny sacks they carried with which to collect old newspapers and other recyclable items.

right ear, and I appear to be staring directly at it. Against his bald baby head and captured in stark black and white, the ear looks even more unusual than it really was. The ridge in its upper half is raised and flattened, forming an unnatural space resembling a finger-mark. My parents often discussed this curious anomaly. Siong's mother, they said, had a favourite punishment. If her husband omitted a chore or misbehaved by drinking or gambling, she would grasp his upper ear between her thumb and index finger and give it a sharp twist. During her pregnancy, my parents concluded, this frequent action had imprinted itself on her unborn baby. Siong's left ear was perfectly formed, but his right bore a strange indentation, exactly as if someone had turned the upper part inside out. The ear passed into neighbourhood legend, filed in the old wives' tales under "pregnancy dos and don'ts". The conversation always ended with one of my parents saying something about the sins of fathers visited on sons.

Not that anyone knew much about Siong's father. He had performed odd jobs around the neighbourhood and, if he did nurse a fondness for drink, mahjong and the occasional hand of blackjack, the word was that he goodnaturedly put up with his wife's nagging and ear twisting until his sudden death when Siong was just three.

Nor was Siong blighted in any real way. He quickly learned to flaunt his unusual ear and claim it as an asset. It was true that he cut a unique figure. We could spot him without waiting for him to turn around. He invented a history that involved being touched on the ear by a deity. He became faster, smarter and stronger than the other kids, so that when he boasted he had superhuman hearing, half of us believed him. The neighbourhood kids soon lost interest in teasing him, especially when the menagerie of local freaks expanded with the appearance of a girl with a cleft palate scar and a boy with glasses so thick that they resembled jam jars cupped over his eyes.

Added to his resourcefulness, Siong possessed an easy charm. As a child he was open and affable whereas I was cautious and quiet. Although his features were not especially handsome—he had small, single-lidded eyes and his mother's broad nose and mouth—his was a trustworthy face. It worked magic on the provision shopkeepers, for whenever we raided their shops we enjoyed a ready supply of sweets and snacks. I shared all my toys with him, and he taught me how to make catapults, catch tadpoles from the ponds and throw sticks up into the trees to harvest ripe mangoes.

When we were older he walked from the squatter settlement, up Leith Road to the top of the slope, I walked down Glasgow Road from our house, and we went to school together, beating the roadside grass and trees with sticks hand cut from branches. When one of us was late, the other waited faithfully. We whispered about first crushes on schoolteachers, we ambushed unsuspecting lower-primary boys, we punctured the principal's car tyre and lied to protect each other. We went to catechism—I begged his mother to let him come—and confessed our lapses to each other. When Siong said he was renouncing his newfound Catholic faith because Ah Kong objected to it, I tore my clothes and beat my breast. I made him take it all back and covered his folly with a thousand Hail Marys. We knew all each other's secrets.

But things were changing. I like to think it began with the girl, but really, it's more like she simply stepped into the outline we both created, the space he had started to keep from me and that I, resentful and proud, vacated. The truth was, as much as I hoped she might catalyse the sort of catastrophic confrontation and resolution I saw in the movies and read in books, she was nothing mysterious—a lanky neighbourhood schoolgirl always in long skirts, pigtails and glasses, on the pretty side of plain, hardly a femme fatale. I hoped for some explanation for his erratic behaviour towards me, that the cigarettes might hint of darker leanings, but again I was thwarted. There was no taking up with gangsters or being caught with drugs, no detention classes or drunken bad behaviour. No, the girl was not the problem.

"Forget school," Siong said calmly, kicking the sand near the chicken coop. Ah Kong's coughs reached us from within the attap hut. "In less than a year we'll be moving. Who knows which school I'll be going to then."

"What do you mean moving? 'O' levels is end of the year. Where you going?"

"Why don't you ask your dad?" He threw up his hands in annoyance. "You blind and deaf, ah? The surveyors were here again last week. The first time was after the eviction letters came, some months ago. This time they came with a bunch of contractors. One of them was your dad. Don't tell me at home he never say anything. They spent the whole day measuring up the land, dividing here and there, talking to Ah Kong and all the neighbours, Fatty Loh, Ah Gek, the pig farmer, Old Man Seetoh, everybody."

"What eviction letters?"

He stared at me, then spat his cigarette butt into the sand and crushed it with his shoe. When he spoke again, he formed the words deliberately, as if speaking to a child. "This land you see here, these houses," motioning towards the attap huts, "unlike for your dad and you, this land doesn't belong to us."

"Who owns it, then?"

"The government. My family and our neighbours, we've been here a long time, but we don't have title deeds. Last year it seems a big developer bought the land. They got the papers and all. Going to build private housing. Terrace houses and semi-detached houses, bigger, newer than yours."

"You knew since last year?"

"Don't tell me your father never say." He sounded scornful.

The truth was, my father rarely talked about his work when he got home. He was only a small-time contractor. Most of his jobs had been raising single units on single plots. Being awarded the Leith Park project would change all that in less than a couple of years, and we would move to a much wealthier district before the houses were even completed. But I had little understanding of all this back then. Siong's news hit me with an awful reality. I wanted to run home and persuade my father to change the plans. But then something in me hardened, reared up in defence.

"It's not my father's fault, what."

For a moment Siong seemed about to argue. Then he shrugged and turned away. I couldn't see his expression. From the attap hut came another fit of coughing and retching. "Siong ah! Siong, I need your help!" Ah Kong was calling in Hokkien.

"Forget it," Siong said to me. "I got to go. Don't come inside."

Things must have become busy at school after that because it was the last real conversation with him that I can remember. I went with my mother to visit Ah Kong once or twice more, but each time Siong was not at home. His mother mentioned he had found a job and was working hard. My mother didn't ask doing what. Several times I saw him from a distance but had time only to wave. Some afternoons I followed the girl inconspicuously for a while, but I heard that they had quarrelled; I no longer saw them together. Soon after that, Siong had his hair razored brutally close to his scalp. It gave him a mean, hungry look.

The second half of that year, my parents helped Siong's family move their belongings to their new flat in Ang Mo Kio. Ah Kong was the last of the squatters to leave. By then his gait had slowed to a shuffle and he coughed almost non-stop. The old wooden bed, impossible to dismantle, was too unwieldy to move. Siong's mother had packed her kitchen utensils, pots, pans and crockery into boxes and sold all the newspaper, old clothing and useless ornaments to the *karung guni*. One by one over the weeks, the chickens had been slaughtered for dinner. A couple of chicks left behind grew up as strays. My father driving, Siong and I bundled Ah Kong into our station wagon. Bereft of his clutter, he seemed confused and uncertain. Only the altar, demystified and powerless without its joss sticks, and an old Chinese trunk containing his clothes went with him. The car pulled into an empty lot facing a pristine 22-storey block of flats. Siong and I carried the trunk into the lift, alighted on the seventh floor and walked in silence down an interminable length of corridor, past flat upon identical flat, to their new home.

The bamboo-framed settee and a coffee table now stood on the ceramic-tiled floor of the square-shaped living room. The windows, shuttered and fastened with grilles, gazed blindly out onto the corridor. Ah Kong, shrunken and bewildered, peered into his bedroom and asked for his old wooden bed and his chickens.

In the months that followed, it seems I was always late and running to school in the morning, so I told myself I was in too great a hurry to wait for Siong at the junction of Leith and Glasgow any more. Potato Tan, marking the daily attendance, stopped questioning his absenteeism. Siong's metal desk and chair at the back of the classroom remained unoccupied for the rest of the year. On the morning of the first 'O' level paper, and every morning for a week after that, the stack of examination questions on his assigned desk in the school hall remained facedown, untouched, collected blank by the invigilator. On the last day of the exams, I noticed that the name label on the top right-hand corner of the desk had been cut into and ripped out. I thought I recognised the pen-knife marks etched into the otherwise pristine desktop.

The day the earth-moving machines arrived, it was as if aliens had invaded Earth. Overnight they appeared, diggers with huge scoops, plodding their slow and ancient ways across the landscape. By the next

week they had multiplied and evolved into diverse forms—cranes with long arms, bulldozers and levellers, an assortment of lorries. All day they worked towards some unseen design, creating and removing debris, their latticework of tracks remaking and writing over the space. Untenanted and vulnerable, the attap huts offered no resistance.

On the pretext of going for a walk one night, I visited the construction site. It was officially off limits to the public, fenced in by gigantic wooden boards, but economy had found a way to overcome this obstacle. The old shortcut was not easily given up, and someone had pried one of the smaller boards loose so that it could be pushed open and shut, like a secret door. When dusk settled here, the noise and dust of the day retreated and the great machines stood dormant, outlined by the beam of a single floodlight that left most of the expanse still dark. I climbed into the seat of one of the diggers in the shadows and slouched low comfortably. Whether minutes or hours passed I had no idea, until my reverie was broken by a series of earsplitting sounds. Motionless, I stared in their direction.

A figure stood nearby, repeatedly swinging something high above his head and bringing it down with great force. The cracks were the sound of wood being broken. In a flash I realised I was close to the hut that had been Siong's grandfather's. All that I could make out of it in the darkness were two pillars that remained erect but leaning. Between them, like a man possessed, the figure was attacking something. I don't know why I remained silent, concealed in the digger. Perhaps I felt, not for the first time, like an intruder on the scene. Only cricket-song and an occasional muffled sob accompanied the terrible rhythm of the axe thudding down on Ah Kong's bed. In horror I realised that the bed's three tall sides were already gone, either destroyed by construction workers or by this same figure on previous visits. Now the person was hacking apart the base. Only partially lit, his silhouette was visible and not his face, but even bathed in half-light his ear was unmistakable in profile. I lingered in the darkness long after he left, until the first rays of the morning revealed the disfigured bed, horribly gaping and splintered. Then, as if guilty, I fled before the machines awoke.

And so, word of Ah Kong's passing did not in the least surprise me when it reached us. My parents, however, were upset that the wake, funeral and cremation were all long over by the time they found out. "I don't understand why she didn't tell us. Could have phoned," was my mother's response. I had said nothing about the hacking up of the bed. If anyone noticed it at all, they put the act down to vandals.

My father's business drew investors and we soon moved to a handsome property close to my new school. By some bizarre rule of protocol, my parents never contacted Siong or his mother again. Borne along by the tide of junior college and the worlds that soon opened up to me, I had little curiosity for my father's projects, and little time to dwell on the past.

Now, the ringing of a distant bell jolted me back to the present. I was standing in a little cul-de-sac with the shortcut, clean and paved, behind me. A well-maintained road looped around a small grassy circus in front of me. On either side of the road, stretching into the distance, massive terrace and semi-detached houses lined up like

silent sentinels. So this was Leith Park. Here, too, the original houses had acquired extra levels and lofts over the years, straining ever upwards while the remains of an extinct settlement receded deeper beneath the surface.

By the time I hurried back along the shortcut and up the slope, Lin was waiting for me by the car, her backpack slung over her shoulder. "Where did you go, Dad?" she asked impatiently.

"Just down the road to look at some houses."

"Why? Are we moving here?"

Slowly I started the engine. "No," I said finally, turning the car around and pulling into the main road that led home. "There's no place for us here now."

(3,513 words)