

## The Jailbird

“Be careful of that man,” said Ming’s mother in hushed urgent tones, once she had safely locked the gate and shut the door, “don’t ever enter the lift alone with him, don’t go anywhere near him if you can. If he asks you to follow him anywhere or go into his house, don’t ever do so. In fact, just don’t talk to him at all. You hear me, Ming?”

Ming nodded.

The man in the lift was tall and dark-skinned, with broad shoulders, lean arms and a buzz cut, and a square grizzled jaw that looked like a stone wall. Ming had never seen him around before. When Ming and his mother had entered the lift and pressed the button for the tenth floor, the man had gazed at them intently for a moment. His eyes were dark and neutral, and made Ming think of tinted windows that reflected nothing but the sky. Upon his forehead was tattooed a single curious blue dot. The man pressed no other button. As the lift doors clanged close, he turned away, and looked out through the window slits on the lift door, hands stuffed in his jean pockets.

As the lift whirred up past glimpses of empty stairways and dusty shoe racks and potted plants, Ming’s mother stood as stiffly as a corpse at one corner of the lift, burying Ming between her and the wall. The man said nothing. He was wearing a black T-shirt that had upon it a startlingly vivid sketch of the head of a bald eagle, intricately detailed, with eyes that seemed to stare out side-ways at Ming. At the tenth floor the man held the lift door for them—through which Ming’s mother dashed out like an animal from a cage, ushering Ming ahead of her— and soon vanished, key rattling in lock, into a unit two doors away from Ming’s house.

“This is unacceptable,” declared Ming’s mother at the dinner table that night, “It is unacceptable that a robber and drug addict is living barely six metres away from my family. What is the Singapore government doing? How can they release such a dangerous man back out into the public after eight years in jail?”

“He’s served his sentence, dear,” Ming’s father replied absently, helping himself to a spoonful of *kailan* and mushrooms. “Where do you expect him to go?”

“Anywhere but here,” snaps Ming’s mother, stabbing a piece of roasted chicken with her fork. “A leopard never changes its spots. Mark my words, he will be back in prison within a month. Or if he’s lucky, on the run in Malaysia. Now, shouldn’t you be, I don’t know, a little more concerned about this whole situation? You know your son comes home from school alone. You know how late I get home from work some times. What if that man is waiting for us outside the lift one day—with a knife? Are you not worried at all about the safety of your precious wife and nine-year-old son?”

Ming’s father sighed, and ran his hand through his greying hair.

“So what do you want me to do?” he said, tiredly leafing through a copy of *The Business Times* that was lying on the table. “Shall I go over and ask that old woman to throw her son out onto the streets? Or write to our MP<sup>1</sup> and tell him that a free man in the eyes of the law should not have the right to be our neighbor? What do you want me to do?”

There was a sudden moment of silence, broken only by the clanking of spoons and forks against plates and bowls. As Ming chewed his rice, he gazed past his mother and out of the kitchen window.

It was getting dark outside now, and squares of light were beginning to flicker on in the flat opposite Ming’s. There were glimpses of wardrobes, beds, the glimmering lights of television sets, cluttered rooms; and silhouettes and shadows, passing from one window to another, or vanishing into some distant stage away from Ming’s eyes. For an instant, Ming wondered how he and his parents, huddled in a circle of florescent light at the dining table, looked like from the opposite flat. Then he wondered what the man with the curious blue dot between his eyes was doing now, he and the old woman who shuffled around the

---

<sup>1</sup> MP: Member of Parliament

neighborhood curled up like a dry leaf, and what could be seen through their windows from the other side.

\*

The next afternoon, Ming emerged from the lift to see the man sitting on the top steps of the stairway just before the lift landing. The man had his back towards the lift doors, and was staring out into space. He did not move when the doors beeped and whirred open behind him. Ming eyed him curiously for a moment. As Ming was about to turn down the corridor towards his unit though, the man leaned around and glanced at him.

“Hey boy,” said the man, his voice low and gruff. “What’s the time?”

Ming hesitated for a moment. His mother’s voice shrieked like an alarm through his head; but the man was waiting, and it seemed impolite not to reply. Besides, the question seemed like a perfectly innocuous one.

“1:50,” answered Ming, glancing at the scratched plastic watch upon his wrist.

The man tipped his head slightly. Then he turned away and continued to gaze out as before, at the deserted corridors of the opposite flat or the sky above it.

Ming surveyed the back of the man a moment longer, but the man no longer paid any heed to him. Presently, Ming turned and made his way along the corridor towards his unit, past Mrs Chan’s silent door and windows. Mrs Chan lived with her husband in the unit between Ming and the man. They had no children. Occasionally, Ming and his mother would run into Mrs Chan along the corridor or at the lift lobby; the two women would exchange greetings and small talk about the weather and the economy and the government, all of which always seemed to be in a state of disaster whenever they spoke about it. Fishing his keys out of his school-bag, Ming let himself into his house.

The house was as empty and silent as usual. Only the drone of the cars on the expressway below could be heard, a rumbling drone that went on day and night, like the wheezing of a tar-stained lung. Ming took a shower and had a change of clothes. For the next couple of hours he sat at the little wooden desk in his room by the window, bent diligently over his worksheets and books, scribbling.

Before long the sun was slipping below the horizon, dyeing the walls of his room a reddish golden glow. Stretching a little, Ming trotted through the lengthening shadows in the living room, and into the kitchen. He scooped out a cup of rice, washed it, and set the rice cooker going. Then he chopped up a potato, some mushrooms and a few stalks of asparagus, and stir-fried them with some garlic and oyster sauce. Ming was somewhat proud that he could cook. He had picked up his skills in the kitchen from his Grandma, who had taken care of him since he was a baby and passed away in her sleep a year ago.

By the time Ming was done, night had fallen. As he surveyed the steaming plates of rice and vegetables, set out like display items under the cold florescent light of the dining table in the darkness of the house, Ming somehow no longer felt hungry. Nevertheless, he sat down and began to eat. Spooning neat bites of rice into his mouth, Ming's thoughts began to drift to that man, that strange dangerous man who sat on the steps and stared out into the sky and asked him for the time. Suddenly, he wondered what the man's name was. Whether he had been sitting on the stairway all day long, whether he was still sitting on the stairway now, watching time seep like watercolours through the sky.

\*

The man was there again the next day, perched like a hawk upon the stairway, gazing out at flat and sky. Today he was in a brown shirt the colour of wheat in summer, and rugged jeans. As Ming stepped out from the lift, the man once again turned around and asked for the time.

"2:12," said Ming, glancing at his scratched plastic watch.

The man dismissed Ming with a cursory nod. But Ming did not move away. Fingering the straps of his school-bag, he lingered, watching the broad back of the man as he stared out into the distance.

At last, the man leaned back and cocked his head at Ming.

“What you want, boy?”

Ming hesitated. He did not quite know what he wanted, or why he was hovering around a man his mother had warned him about; still he searched for something to say, and blurted out the first question that came to mind:

“Aren’t you bored sitting here all day long?”

The man regarded Ming for a moment. Meeting his eyes, Ming somehow felt like a rabbit staring into headlights. He began to blink and twitch uncomfortably; nevertheless, gritting his teeth, he forced himself to stand his ground and hold the man’s gaze. Just as the silence was growing too bright for Ming to bear, the ghost of a smile crept up at the edges of the man’s lips.

“Nah,” he said. “Haven’t seen much of the sky in years.”

As he spoke, the black silhouette of a bird hurtled past them in the blazing blue afternoon before the empty corridors. Ming did not know what to say. The man was still watching Ming. Slowly, a strange glimmer began to flicker up in the man’s eyes, like candlelight behind stained glass windows. The man rubbed the blue dot on his forehead, and crossed his arms.

“Go home, boy,” he said, with a dry humorless chuckle. “Go home. A boy like you shouldn’t be hanging around a guy like me. I’m a bad man, kid. A dangerous man.”

Ming did not budge. The man raised an eyebrow at him.

“I’ll see you tomorrow then,” said Ming at last.

With that, he swung around and scampered away, the water in the half-empty bottle strapped at the side of his school bag sloshing around noisily as he did. The man watched him go. Long after Ming had disappeared down the turn in the corridor, the man continued to sit at the stairway, his eyes reflecting the clouds billowing across the sky before him.

\*

As Ming stepped out onto the lift landing the next afternoon, he stopped short. The man was in a dark green singlet the colour of grass of twilight that day; stretched out across his shoulder blades were the inky black wings of a bird, every feather etched out in exquisite detail like a city map seen from the sky. Ming stared at the wings in fascination. He had never seen this tattoo before, for it had always been hidden within the sleeves of the shirts that the man wore. The head and the body of the bird remained buried beneath the man's singlet, and Ming could not tell what sort of bird it was.

Today, time did not seem to matter to the man. He was hunched intently over something his hands were shaping, like a basket-weaver, and did not turn around to ask even as the lift doors beeped and whirred behind him. Gingerly, Ming trotted over and sat down on the steps beside the man. The man did not look at him. In the man's hands was a torn scrap from a glossy advertisement flyer, which he was deftly shaping into some paper being.

"What are you doing?" Ming asked.

The man did not reply. His fingers continued to dance over the scrap of paper. Ming watched on curiously. In time, an odd pentagonal-shaped creature with four stubby triangular legs emerged upon the man's palm. Gently, the man set the creature on the ground and prodded it on its back. As though zapped by lightning, the creature shot through the air, and landed a short way from where it had begun.

"That's amazing," said Ming, wide-eyed with wonder. "How did you do that?"

Still, the man said nothing. On the step beside his feet lay a small stack of colourful glossy squares, torn out from advertisement flyers. Picking up one of these squares, the man again began folding. Ming too grabbed one of the squares and began copying the man's actions. This time, the man folded each crease with deliberate slowness.

Presently two more paper creatures emerged, one with more crooked legs than the other. Ming placed his on the ground and poked it on its back. The creature stayed on the ground, leaning limply on one leg.

"Practice," said the man shortly. "Gotta practice. Not bad for a first try."

Ming picked up another square and began to retrace the steps that he had taken. At last, another paper frog emerged from his fingers. Setting this on the ground, Ming gave it a jab. It made a weak hop—not as light-footedly as the one the man had made, but surely a little more nimbly than its elder brother. Ming was pleased.

Abruptly, the man stood up, dusting the back of his jeans. Ming looked up at him in surprise.

"Gotta run," said the man. "Got a job to do."

"Job?" said Ming, furrowing his brows. "What sort of job?"

The man did not reply. Instead, he reached down and gave Ming's hair a rough touse. Ming was startled. But before he could react the man had already stepped over the paper frogs and was at the lift, hitting the button. The lift doors beeped and whirred open. Raising a hand in farewell, the man got in.

Ming hesitated for a sliver of a second. Then, he made up his mind.

"Wait!" he yelled, bounding over the paper frogs and hurrying to the lift.

The man held it. Ming braked to a halt in front of the lift doors, panting a little. Face flushed, he opened his mouth to speak, and then closed it again. The man waited.

Ming took a deep breath.

“Will you,” he stuttered at last, “would you, uh, would you, like to...come over for dinner later?”

As the question left his mouth, the voice of his mother began screaming like a vengeful wraith through his head. Ming squeezed his eyes to block her out; then he opened them again.

The man was gazing at him with a queer expression on his face. Returning the gaze, Ming had the curious feeling that he was peering into a river, a river glass-like on the surface but riven with strong undercurrents, a river that caught and splintered sunlight into fragments of colours. Ming did not quite understand what he was looking at.

“You shouldn’t do that, you know,” said the man at last. His voice was calm. “You shouldn’t let strangers into your house so easily. Especially men like me. Didn’t your mom tell you that?”

Ming hung his head low. His face began to burn.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled, without knowing why he felt the need to apologize. “I’m sorry. Guess I’ll just have to eat dinner alone again. As usual.”

Hurriedly he turned away, and pattered back to the stairwell. Kneeling down, he unzipped his school-bag, and carefully scooped all of the frogs into it.

“Hey kid,” the man stuck his head out of the lift. Ming turned back. “Tell you what. You come over to my house later. 7 p.m. My mother’s cooking curry tonight, and we’ll need help finishing it.”

Ming’s eyes lit up in delight. Bouncing to his feet, he flashed a wide, toothy grin at the man.



“I’ll be there,” he said. Cradling the school-bag in front of him, he ran off down the corridor, casting constant glances into his bag as though he was carrying a bowl of live frogs.

The man got back into the lift and pressed the button. As the doors whirred closed and the lift began to hum down, the man leant against the wall, shoved his hands into his pockets, and gazed up at the ceiling. Then, wistfully, he smiled and shook his head.

\*

At 6.18 p.m., Ming finished the last of his homework for the day. Meticulously, he cleared his desk, sweeping the eraser dust into his palm and then into a little wastepaper basket on the table. The paper frogs stood in a neat row beside the basket.

Ming made his way to the kitchen. He retrieved a frying pan from the kitchen cupboard, and six eggs from the fridge. He chopped up some button mushrooms. Then he cracked the eggs into a large bowl, beat it up till it was light and frothy, and whipped up a large mushroom omelette. This he carefully folded into half, and packed into a lunchbox.

Taking the lunchbox, Ming left the house. As he closed the door, he glanced surreptitiously to his right. Mrs Chan’s door and gate were locked, and her frosted windows were still and dark. Treading lightly past her unit, Ming stopped at the door of the man and the old woman. His heart was pounding. Taking a deep breath, he reached up and pressed the bell. A soft chime echoed in the house.

Just then, Mrs Chan emerged from the lift lobby, her heels click-clacking briskly around the corner. She was in a pretty cream dress today, and a string of pearls clung around her neck. At the sight of Ming, her powdered face broke out into a smile; then, all at once, it froze and melted away. Her black-lined eyes widened in shock and consternation.

“What are you doing there, Ming?” she cried out in a loud whisper.

“Erm,” said Ming, throwing a desperate glance at the door in front of him. “I’m going for dinner.”

“Do you know who lives there?” Mrs Chan’s voice was rising. She was bearing down the corridor now, one arm stretched out like a rake to sweep him away.

Just as Mrs Chan reached Ming, the scratched old door in front of them creaked open. There before them stood the little old woman, her walnut-brown face peeping out from a light green tudung. Quizzically, she looked from Ming to Mrs Chan.

A smile reinstated itself at once on Mrs Chan’s face, like a decorative bulb switched on with a click. Casually, she dropped her arm to her side.

“Hello, auntie!” she chirped cheerfully. Then, with the smile still plastered upon her face, she turned to Ming and said sweetly, in Mandarin: “If anything happens, shout. I’ll send my husband over.”

With that, she backed away and vanished into her house, her front gate clanging after her.

The old woman looked at Ming. Slowly, her gnarled face crinkled up into a shy smile. Hobbling aside, she beckoned Ming in, mumbling something in Malay that Ming did not understand.

Ming entered the house. It was small and dark and cluttered within, for stacks of newspapers and flattened cardboard formed a haphazard city of towers in the living room. The curtains were tightly drawn, and the air was musty with the smell of wood and old paper. Time flowed audibly here—for hanging upon the walls, like the heads of animals, were clocks of all sizes and shapes and colours, some dead and some still alive; those alive beating a constant asynchronous stream of seconds, such that they sounded like the rush of wind through crystalline leaves, or the flutter of a bird’s wings.

Along a wall near the kitchen, in a little circle of warm yellow lamp-light, stood a single wooden dining table with chairs. A small pot of curry chicken and a plate of stir-fried kangkong with chilli lay on the table. The food looked delicious. Opening up his lunchbox, Ming turned to the old woman and offered it to her. Nodding and breaking out into a wide toothless grin, the old woman accepted the lunchbox and shuffled into the kitchen. She emerged with the omelette laid out on a plate.

Shortly after, the man followed with three plates of steaming white rice. Giving a brief nod at Ming, he set the rice out on the table.

“Let’s eat,” he said.

Dinner was a simple and quiet affair. But the old woman seemed happy. She kept smiling and nodding at Ming, and plying both his and the man’s plates with chicken and kangkong and omelette. Noticing that the old woman hardly took any food for herself, Ming too began heaping dishes upon the old woman’s plate. Each time he did so, the old woman’s face would light up in an eye-crinkling smile, and she would utter a string of Malay words that flew past Ming. The man did not speak at all. Occasionally, he would strip the leaf of a kangkong from its stalk and place the leafy portion upon his mother’s plate, keeping the stalk for himself.

They finished all the food. At the end of dinner the man stood up without ceremony, stacked up all the empty plates and cutlery, and headed to the kitchen. Ming hurried after him. So did the old woman—but the kitchen was too small to accommodate all of them, and the old woman was left hovering like a sparrow at the doorway, chattering in Malay. The man ignored both her and Ming. Turning on the tap at the sink, he began washing the dishes.

“Why are there so many clocks in your living room?” Ming asked. He picked up a dish towel, and began drying a plate that the man propped on a rack beside the kitchen window.

“My father was a watch-maker,” said the man after a moment. “He collected those clocks. Mother can’t bear to throw them out.”

“Your father?” Ming asked cautiously. For as long as he could remember, the old woman had been living alone.

The man said nothing. He propped another wet plate on the rack. Ming dried the rest of the plates in silence.

When it was time to go, the old woman clasped Ming’s little hand in both of hers. Her hands were dry and calloused. Gazing at him with a smile that lit up her clouded eyes like the glow of fireflies, she said something to him in Malay. As the words of that foreign yet familiar language flitted past him, Ming wondered what the little old woman did all day long. What her life was like, what her life had been like; and why he knew almost nothing about her, even though she had been living barely six metres away from him since the beginning of his time.

\*

“I heard from Mrs Chan that you were at the old woman’s house on Wednesday night,” said Ming’s mother neutrally. She buttered a piece of toast and placed it on Ming’s plate.

Ming’s blood ran cold. Nervously, he stole a glance at his father who was sitting across the table from him. His father looked up warily from his newspapers at Ming for a moment. Then, dropping his eyes back to his newspapers, he gave a cough, and took a sip of coffee from the mug in front of him.

As there seemed to be no way of escaping his mother’s question, Ming confessed softly at last: “Yes. I was.”

“And what were you doing there, Ming?” Holding a plate of scrambled eggs in one hand and a cup of tea in another, Ming’s mother sat herself at the table next to him. Removing her glasses, she began to massage her temples.

Ming squirmed. “I was having dinner with them,” he mumbled, keeping his eyes trained on the bread on his plate.

Abruptly, his mother reached out and gave him a sharp slap. Ming’s father looked up in surprise. Ming’s eyes began to tear from the force of his mother’s hand. Quietly, he reached up and touched a cold palm to his cheek.

“What did I tell you, Ming?” his mother’s voice was rising fast. “What did I tell you? Don’t go near him, don’t talk to him, don’t enter his house. And what did you just do? What did you have to go and do? Why must you have dinner in his house?”

“He isn’t such a bad person,” Ming whispered.

“Isn’t such a bad person?” His mother was shrieking now, her words tumbling over one another like an avalanche of rocks. “Do you know what that man has done? Who he is? He is a drug addict and a robber. That’s who he is. That’s who he will ever be. What if he had done something to you while you were in that house?” As the threads of that thought settled and clung about her mind like a web, her eyes widened in horror. “Did he? Did he touch you in any way? Did he try to inject anything into you?”

She seized his arms and pulled them towards her, scanning the crooks of his elbows. Her grave-cold fingers dug hard into his flesh. Whimpering, Ming pulled back violently.

“He didn’t, ok?” cried Ming, tears streaming down his cheeks. “He didn’t do anything to me. We just had dinner. Me, him and the old woman. That’s all. That’s all we did, ok? Why must you be so mean?”

His mother's hand flew up in the air again. Ming flinched; but at that moment his father grabbed her hand, and pulled it down. He shook his head at her. Then, letting out a heavy sigh, he massaged the flesh between his brows.

"Ming," he said tiredly. "Look. Maybe you're right. Maybe he isn't such a bad person. But your mother has every right to worry too, son. You are still young. You don't know what sorts of people there are out there in this world, how human beings can be like, what men are capable of doing to other men. Your mother is just trying to protect you, Ming. So was Mrs Chan."

There was a long moment of silence. *Tick, tick, tick*, went the black-rimmed clock that clung like a massive moth on the kitchen wall, *tick, tick, tick*. Abruptly, Ming's mother stood up. Crossing her arms, she walked to the kitchen window and rested her head against the dusty metal grilles. Ming gazed silently at her dark silhouette in the white morning light. From somewhere in the distance, the caws of a crow echoed through the sky.

(4466 words)