

The Gift

I

As soon as I walked up to the second floor of the stairwell, I knew what Ma was preparing for dinner. Fried fish. She usually served this with Kikkoman soya sauce topped with lightly fried diced garlic. This was a family staple. I could also hear my parents arguing. Ma was nagging at Pa about renewing his business license, a matter she had been harping about for weeks. Last year, Pa missed the deadline and had to pay a \$100 fine. Pa muttered something in response, though I couldn't make out what he said exactly. But from the tone of his voice, it didn't seem nice. Ma went silent after that.

We lived on the third floor of Block 213 at Bedok North. Like most neighbours, the main door of our family flat was always left open, though the gate stayed padlocked. This arrangement helped with the limited ventilation in our tiny three-bedroom HDB flat. Neighbours walking along the narrow corridor were always peeping in, looking at us watch TV in our pajamas or having our dinner. I was guilty of doing that, too. Once, I saw Uncle Lim, the market egg stall vendor from three doors down in nothing but a pair of worn-out boxers. I was shocked to discover that huge tattoos of snakes and dragons camouflaged his entire torso and arms. He caught me looking in and nodded. I scurried away.

Ma seemed to like the open-door policy. She found in it a convenient way to chat with Aunty Peggy from next door without even leaving the sofa. In the evenings, the neighbour would be pruning her lime and chilli plants along the corridor that we shared outside our home and Ma would be on the sofa, peeling *chye sim* for dinner, or sorting out the invoices for our family's newspaper business. They would talk about anything from the day's winning 4D numbers and how they were so close to striking the top prize to gossiping about their Mahjong *kakis*.

As I unlocked the front gate, the wafting aromas and dead silence from the kitchen confirmed my initial guesses. In the kitchen, Pa, dressed in his usual white singlet and dark blue drawstring shorts, was listening to the news in Mandarin over the radio, while Ma was deep-frying two whole tilapia for dinner in her tie-dye pajamas. Pa's face was pink as usual and his eyes bloodshot. There were already two crushed cans of Tiger beer in the NTUC plastic bag that was pegged to the kitchen window grilles. It was his makeshift trash bag that he would bring down every morning to the old man who collected old tin cans and cardboard in our neighbourhood.

“Ma. Ah Pa.”

Without even turning around, Ma told me there was something for me on my desk.

I walked to my room half expecting to see back copies of Her World. These were magazines my parents were not able to sell at their stall and were too tattered to return to the publisher. On my desk, I found a brand new hand phone. I took it and held it delicately in my palms as I charged into the kitchen.

“Your Pa bought it for you. Your present for getting honours year.” Ma said without even glancing over at me. She was flipping the browned fish, which sizzled away in a pool of bubbling canola oil.

“Pa, why you spend so much?” Pa was always buying me stuff we couldn't afford. Two years ago, he bought me a personal computer that we placed in our living room next to the altar adorned with Chinese deities, so that I could do my assignments at home instead of staying

THE GIFT

late into the night at the university's lab. Then there was the Calvin Klein messenger bag that he got me for my 21st birthday. Pa and Ma got it at the Isetan Christmas sale, but it was still a heavy expense. I found the receipt that was left in the Isetan plastic bag a couple of months after my birthday, while looking for something to place my track shoes in. And now, the hand phone.

“Pa, why you spend so much?” I repeated.

Pa ignored me. Or he pretended not to hear what I had just said. He got up and walked to the cabinet drawers to take out three pairs of chopsticks and spoons to set the dinner table.

“Pa.” I called him again.

As he reached for the high cabinet over the sink to get our drinking glasses, Ma turned around and gave me a look.

“Go scoop the rice for dinner,” she said.

“Pa.”

He grunted his usual grunt.

“Thanks, Pa.”

II

The next day, the renovation work from the unit just below ours woke me up at around 10 in the morning. It was illegal, this renovation work. HDB residents weren't allowed to do any renovation work during the weekends. To get the neighbours all on her side and to keep hush about this, Mrs Tan from the downstairs unit gave her neighbours Bengawan Solo cakes every weekend. During the first week of renovations, we had *Pandan* cake. Then it was *ang ku kueh*, followed by *soon kueh*.

I got out of bed, wondering what kind of cake Mrs Tan dropped off that morning. As I opened my room door, I saw Pa squatting by the computer desk, near the power point that I had used to charge my new hand phone overnight. It must have been the loud drilling from downstairs that made him unaware of my presence. I stayed behind my door and kept it slightly ajar so that I could still see what Pa was doing.

With the charger's cord still connected to the hand phone, Pa held up the phone to his ear. He wasn't calling anyone, but he kept it there for a good couple of seconds. Then he looked at the keypad, using the long fingernail on his right thumb to dial a certain number, as if he was indeed calling someone. Just then, a trail of laughter from the corridor outside startled him. It was Ma and Aunty Peggy laughing and talking loudly. They were on their way back from the market. Pa scrambled to return the hand phone back to the very spot I had originally placed it the night before. Then he sat on his favourite armchair in the living room. Leaning back onto the soft black cushion, he shut his eyes as if he were taking a nap, as he normally would after his early morning rounds of delivering the newspaper door-to-door in our housing estate.

As Ma started to unlock the padlock, I shut my room door completely. I returned to my bed, which was just beside the window. The view from my room was Block 215. The block was close enough so that I could see into the flat just directly across if I wanted to. That morning, I could see the three young kids in that flat all seated on small, red plastic stools, eating their breakfast at the coffee table while watching TV. Their mother was in the kitchen hanging their clothes out to dry on bamboo poles as tall as herself. Bras, panties, boys' briefs, T-Shirts, shorts and socks were all pegged to the slim poles raised out of the kitchen windows every morning, retrieved only in the evenings just before dinner. I never liked looking out of my window. And right then, I didn't feel like going out to the living room, too. So I stayed in bed with my eyes shut. And pretended to be asleep for a little while more, amidst the drifting clanging noise that could only come from removing stubborn, old floor tiles set in their ways decades ago.

III

The gift went mostly untouched. Over the next couple of days, I brought it to school but it stayed in my backpack. Honestly, I really didn't know what to do with it. I had no one in particular that I needed to call. Only Ma called me on it. It was usually to ask if I was coming home for dinner. Whenever I unzipped the front pocket of my backpack to get my wallet, I would see the gift and feel a knotted, weighty feeling in my stomach. I couldn't forget what I saw that morning. Pa should be the one using the hand phone, not me. I didn't need it. I didn't even ask for it. The gift never felt like it belonged in my backpack and I felt like I was lugging around a ton of weight.

"Eh what's that you have over there? Oh-my-god. You have a hand phone?" Hui Yi, a history tutorial classmate, asked one day when we were out at lunch at the Arts canteen. I was

holding a Styrofoam cup of coffee in one hand, while trying to get my wallet to pay the coffee uncle. In my hurried attempt to zip up the front pocket of my backpack, I spilled some coffee onto the uncle's shoes. "No la, nothing, nothing," I retorted quickly and apologized to the uncle for making a mess. He didn't mind the coffee spill as much I did. I ignored Hui Yi's comment and insisted that the coffee uncle took my tissue paper to wipe his shoes. Then I abruptly left my friend standing at the coffee stall to join the line next door to buy a plate of vegetarian *bee hoon* as I knew that it was something Hui Yi did not like to eat.

By the very next week, I stopped bringing the hand phone out with me.

IV

Pa, a familiar face in the neighbourhood, had always been known as the newspaper uncle. He had a name, of course. Ma called him *Seeeng*, while his close friends called him Ah Seng. I simply called him Pa. His full name was Tan Seng Hock. He smoked Camel cigarettes and loved his Tiger in a mug filled with ice-cubes. I always thought of Pa as a funny and jovial man, who never failed to make my friends and I laugh with his pranks and tricks. Once he had me and Ah Ling, my childhood friend who lived in the same block, completely enthralled when he took a 10-cent coin and placed it in his ear, claiming to be able to hear an entire football match whenever he did that. Ah Ling and I spent hours that evening trying to put a 10-cent coin in our ears. At 4, even a 10-cent coin seemed too large to fit into our ears. We gave up after Ah Ling's mother caught us trying to stuff our ears. "Are you crazy? Why you put things into ears? You want to be deaf ah?"

THE GIFT

Over the years, even as Pa remained the same, I began to see him through different eyes. I began to see how many avoided him in public. In his old ragged T-Shirts and shorts, and long, uncombed hair, he looked very different from my friends' fathers, who always seemed to be in their well-ironed shirts and trousers whenever they went to work in the mornings. Their nails were well trimmed and hair neatly gel-ed back. Also, the neighbours seemed scared off by Pa whenever he would shout out, unprovoked, words like *Score!* and *Goal!* or something unsavoury in Hokkien that my mom would always remind me never to repeat. When I was younger, I never thought anything unusual of the random shouting. I always credited it to the 10-cent coin in his right ear. It was only when I entered primary school that I slowly began to realize that Pa was the neighbourhood eccentric, even though I didn't even know of that word then.

V

Two weeks later, as I was heading out to do the night shift, my mom asked that I brought the hand phone down with me. Just in case she needed to reach me, she said. I nodded and said "OK" as I unlocked the padlock to leave home. I started doing independent shifts at my parents' newspaper stall since I was in Primary Three. On some days, I'd even take on the late night shifts at our stall by the coffee shop at the ground floor of our HDB block. In the mornings my parents usually woke up at 4 am to sort out the newspapers that needed to be delivered. By 9 am, they would have had delivered all the newspapers door to door, covering at least five blocks in our neighbourhood. In the evenings after dinner, Pa would open up a foldable, Formica-laminated table at the coffee shop and spread out the night edition Chinese newspapers and various magazines on the table.

THE GIFT

Whenever I did the night shift, I used the time at the table to catch up on my school work. That evening I was reading a couple of pages from Voltaire's *Candide* for a History of Ideas tutorial the next day. At a little past 10 pm, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I looked up to see Pa looking at me. From the look of his face and the smell of his breath, he had probably gone through half a dozen cans of Tiger. Not an unusual feat for him.

"What you reading? Read until like that. Ma tried calling you on your hand phone, you never hear is it?"

"Voltaire, Pa."

He looked at me puzzled.

"*Voltaaaaaaaaaaaaaire.*" I repeated, louder.

I was being obnoxious, of course. I looked at that 10-cent coin his ear, and for the first time I realized I was annoyed with it. My father wasn't deaf, he heard me all right the first time. He just had no idea who Voltaire was.

"He *ang moh* is it? Must be very smart *la*," Pa offered.

At that very instant, it dawned on me: I had nothing in common with my father. I changed our conversation topic. Small talk.

"The other day – I saw a new model at the shop, Pa. Why don't you get one too?"

Expectedly, Pa scoffed at the idea of owning one. Then with his hands, he shooed me away from the table, signaling me to go home. He had not come to discuss Voltaire with me. Neither was he interested in hand phones. He had merely come to take over the night shift. As I walked away from the table, I looked back and saw Pa, slouching over the table. For a moment, he looked like a total stranger.

VI

Growing up, I never thought we were very poor at all. Before he became a newspaper uncle I remembered Pa doing odd jobs here and there: packing eggs into cartons that were sold to supermarkets; being a security guard at a nearby condo; and – just before he borrowed some money from his younger brother to start the newspaper delivery business – he was a road sweeper. That last job was very short-lived. I remembered my parents having a huge row at home after Pa answered truthfully when I asked him what he did for a living. It was a topic discussed during my Primary One English class. “She doesn’t have to know these things, *Seeeng*,” Ma pleaded. Pa was fuming mad. “What’s wrong? Nothing wrong what! Why you like that? Scared lose face is it?” I was supposed to have been asleep but I heard them argue the night away. In HDB flats the walls tell all. Nothing remained a secret for long. That evening as my parents’ quarrel raged on in the adjoining room, I hid under my blanket and wondered if the neighbours, too, could hear them. They must had - just as I, too, had heard their many secrets that’d leaked through the fault lines of the walls that separate us. Within hours, the rage dissipated and soon I heard Pa snoring away. To Ma, the loud snoring was something she’d always complained about to my aunts and uncles. To me, it was comforting and almost soothing. Soon, I, too, drifted to sleep.

VII

A month later, on a Friday night, my Uni friend, Ted, insisted on walking me home to my block after watching a late night movie. It was *American Beauty*. We had an hour-long discussion about the flick at the playground near my block. My favourite part of the movie was that scene of a red plastic bag floating around delicately like a feather. "It was so beautifully shot, Ted," I repeated for what seemed to be the tenth time that evening as we walked towards Block 213.

As we neared the coffee shop, I could hear Pa.

Goal! Score!

I hesitated and thought of going the other way, to the back of the block to get home. But it was too late.

"Hey, do you know that newspaper uncle at that coffee shop? He's waving at you." I saw Pa. He was waving at us all right. His face was flushed as usual. He was also totally unaware that his raised hand was exposing a huge hole in the underside of his right sleeve. I looked down and felt a rush of pinkness rising through the flesh of my face.

"*Dunno* who is he." I blurted out and I quickly walked to the lift lobby.

I knew Pa saw me see him waving at me that night. I got home and went straight to my room. The neighbours upstairs were quarreling again. And Auntie Peggy from next door was playing Mahjong. I didn't even bother changing out from my jeans. I dove straight into bed, lying on the same mattress I had since I was thirteen. And I cried myself to sleep. I've been

fighting it. Like Ma, I was ashamed of who he was too. For once, I was thankful for the neighbours' Mahjong tiles clacking against each other through the night. Still, I held it all inside, afraid of the walls that tell all.

VIII

For the next couple of days I ignored Pa. I couldn't bear face him. Finally, it was Ma who pinned me down. She ran out of the flat to chase after me one morning when I tried to slip out. "Girl, come home and eat dinner tonight. Don't always eat out. Come home and eat."

That night, I went home. Everything seemed normal.

Pa, dressed in his usual white singlet and dark blue drawstring shorts, was listening to the news over the radio, while Ma was deep-frying some fish for dinner in her tie-dye pajamas.

At dinner, we sat down and ate our meal in silence. There was only a brief moment of conversation about changing the morning newspaper delivery route. Then Madam Neo, the elderly neighbour from the corner unit, walked past our gate. "Aunty, *hor bo? Jia ba liao bueh,*" Ma asked the old lady with the walking cane in Hokkien how she was and if she had her dinner. Madam Neo nodded her head and walked on by, leaving us in total silence again.

As soon as Pa was done, he got up and went into his room. My eyes followed him. I looked at Ma, but she remained silent. I stared into the darkness outlined by the green wooden doorframe of my parents' dimly-lit bedroom, waiting for Pa. Soon enough, he emerged. He was holding a new Ericsson phone. It was that newer model I had told him about the other night.

“I got the new phone. You take it. I’ll use your old one.” He placed the gift on the table, right next to my glass of water.

“*Pa*...I don’t need a new one.”

“Just take it. He decided already,” Ma said. “He doesn’t want to use a brand new phone. Wait people ask how come newspaper uncle carry such a nice one.”

Pa got up abruptly. The legs of his chair clawed the floor. Dinner was over. Pa started to clear the table. With his hands carrying our unfinished bowls of rice and our chopsticks, he looked at me for a good couple of seconds. It was as if he wanted to say something. I searched his face. And in that fleeting moment, I saw me in him. My eyes turned red and swelled up. Pa and Ma didn’t flinch. I knew then that the gift was important to him.

“*Pa*... thanks, *Pa*,” I acquiesced and took the gift from the table with both my hands. And then he walked away.

(word count: 3423)