

The painting was still taped in layers of newspaper and tucked in a gap behind the closet in my old room. As I pulled at it, a lizard shot out of the bloom of dust, making me jump. I was glad I had done a thorough job with the masking tape three years ago, running it round all the edges, even though I had wondered then whether it was worth the effort. At least I could be sure that there would not be a soft gray lizard nesting inside. Free of its covering, the painting which I had titled *Boy with Violin* still looked the same and I felt a brief stab of pain. It had been three years since I completed the painting but it had never travelled anywhere and I realized I still could not bear to throw it out. I decided I would remove the painting from its stretchers and roll it up and take it back to London with me. But first I would go to the bookshop to buy some large sheets of white art tissue to protect its surface. The stretchers I could reuse for a new piece from the canvas roll or give away. I set my painting against the wall.

It was disconcerting to be back in my father's flat, going through the possessions of my youth. One week ago my cousin, Si Ting, had Facebooked me to say that my father had finally decided to sell the flat. I needed to remove what I wanted to keep before he hired a lorry to cart the detritus away. At the time of her post, I had been in the Tate Gallery, probably squinting at John Singer Sargent's 'Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose' which I had gone back to, again and again, to study its light, so I did not see her post till the evening. The disconcerted feeling had hit me from the moment I saw the message, so I knew it wasn't just jetlag. 'Our lives are mostly a constant evasion of ourselves'. I won't pretend, as I might have in college, that I understood T S Eliot perfectly, but he must surely have known that it is never possible to escape completely.

When they separated, my parents were no longer talking to each other. The quarrelling had been loud and nasty before it gave in to exhaustion and resignation. I had made up my mind that their parting would be better than hearing my mother slamming drawers and doors and my father calling for me impatiently to convey his curt messages to her, when my form teacher instructed me to report to the school counsellor every Wednesday after school for forty-five minutes. No, she said, I did not have a choice.

The counsellor who had a large jolly face inquired in a friendly manner, "How are you feeling today?" I shrugged my shoulders so she asked the same question again. As it seemed that a verbal reply was necessary, I said, "Okay", but

she did not seem to think I was.

“How do you feel, that your father and your mother are not staying together anymore?”

“I don’t know.”

“Who looks after you when they’re working?”

“Myself.”

“How many sisters and brothers do you have?”

“Don’t have any.”

The forty-five minutes felt like two hours.

The next three Wednesdays, I left school as soon as the bell rang, falling in with a group of girls from the non-Gifted classes who led me on tours of the twinkling accessories shops at Far East Plaza. Ours was a loose association, because we didn’t really have that much in common, but I enjoyed their light-hearted company that distracted me from what was happening at home. They would always buy something, however small, like a hairclip or a pair of silver earrings. Once, a boyfriend of one of the girls joined us, showing up in his school uniform. I did not know if his drainpipe trousers and Elvis hair breached his school’s rules and regulations but I was sure the pack of cigarettes did. All the girls took a puff of one, passing it clumsily, afraid of getting burnt. I did not like the smell or taste.

After the third week, the counsellor must have contacted my father, because he told me to come home straight after school. I braced myself for a scolding from everyone but there was none, so I concluded that on the scale of student horrors, I must have weighed in as harmless. After all I didn’t have a tongue-piercing, I wasn’t caught making out in the school toilet with another girl, I did not shear my hair like a boy’s, I wasn’t pregnant. The counsellor’s schedule must also have been quite full.

Not long after my parents separated, Conor’s mother, who came from China and could not say much more than “hello” and “thank you” in English, was installed in our flat barely two months before she delivered him as proof of my father’s infidelity. I don’t know how he planned to tell me, or whether he even intended to prepare me for it, but Auntie Lim, my father’s elder sister who lived next door to us, forestalled him. I had just arrived home from school one day when she came over, her face flushed and sweaty, and bellowed, “I don’t know what you are thinking of, but please, take it that I’m begging you, please, let this be the last time you make such a huge mistake!” There were never any niceties exchanged when Auntie Lim talked to my father; they interacted in a mixture of Hokkien and Mandarin hyperbole that always seemed to lengthen an unending rope of argument, the origin of which I have never been

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entirely clear. Now, Aunty Lim said, she had heard alarming news from the man who sold drinks at the coffee shop, who sometimes sat down for a stout and a smoke with my father after his work ended. She warned my father that he *must* nominate me without delay as the beneficiary of his Central Provident Fund monies so that 'the woman' would not be able to get her hands on it if he died suddenly. She reminded him of a recent story reported by the Chinese evening tabloid, of the elderly man who gave practically all his life-savings to his guileful foreign wife thirty years his junior, only to wake up one day to find that she had absconded, 'not even a shadow did she leave behind'. She hoped my father would not be as foolish, and she hoped 'the woman' wasn't plotting to scam him, although in her opinion all men were the same (brainless), and all foreign women were the same (cunning).

After Aunty Lim left, my father said to me, "Children don't have to ask so much. What grown-ups do, children should just accept." He might have expected me to remonstrate with him, but I was the same dumb child I was when my mother moved out and anyway Aunty Lim had said all that could be said. A few days later, 'the woman' showed up with a big belly and a suitcase half as tall as me. She spoke Mandarin with a strong guttural accent. My father said, "Call her Aunty," but it was some time before I eased into the word.

I was as polite with her as I was with teachers, that is to say, I shared little personal information and spoke guardedly, but she was less cautious with me. I let her talk. Although it was not easy to understand her strong accent and unfamiliar expressions, over time, I found out that she was working in a Chinatown spa, the reason for her keeping unusual hours. She had left China in search of a better life (why would anyone look for a worse?). When she first arrived she knew no one except the agent who had brought her in. She had washed dishes in a hawker centre. She had been employed by a cleaning company as a domestic help, a maid for hire. I had many questions I did not ask. What made you think you would have a better life in Singapore? Do you really have a better life now? Why do you want to be with my father? Didn't you feel bad breaking up my parents? If she did not deem them impertinent, the questions might have allowed our lives, mine, hers, Conor's, to morph from a simple jigsaw into a seamless picture of happy domesticity, but that was not what I wanted at all. She admired my academic prowess and I took advantage of it, letting her cook the meals, wash up, do my laundry and clean my room without any guilt.

I was fourteen when Conor was born. He cried with eerie mewling sounds, like a kitten lost in a drain. He was pale and pigeon-toed and even when he was seven, he threw a ball flaccidly like a toddler. My father gave up trying to teach him to swim; he refused to go into the water at all and shivered and screamed at the edge of the pool. His upper teeth grew in a protruding arc that left his mouth always slightly agape. Maybe if I see him again, that's how I'll

recognize him, by the shape of his mouth and the three hair whorls at the back of his head.

Many of the children who were my primary schoolmates lived within a kilometre of the school in our HDB estate and I was no exception. Even though I had moved on to a different secondary school from most of them, much further away, it was impossible not to run into someone I knew at the market or any of the shops. Scandals oil a friendship; when a juicy piece of gossip is shared a nodding acquaintance may easily segue into friendship. No doubt my family's situation lubricated the relationships of our neighbours; so I refused to accompany Conor, not even on a quick run to buy snacks from the provision shop at the void deck of our block. I took care not to be seen with him and clung on with the faith of a drowning man when my teacher declared, 'The world is your oyster.'

My father couldn't have foreseen that Conor would be so bulliable, but he should have listened to Aunty Lim. She was known to have said, "When you pick a name for a child, be careful you don't tempt fate," Her own daughters' names were heard across almost all levels at my school; one year, there were even two *Si Tings* in the same class. My cousins, from what I know, have never done anything outrageous to be worthy of a hushed discussion or feature in a cautionary tale. Unfortunately, in Conor's naming, fate seemed to have been tempted all right. Conor was hardly the kind of person who would according to Wikipedia, '*love hounds, a hound nobleman*'. After some months of starting in primary one, even older kids were chanting, 'Conor, Conor, stand in the corner!' in the school canteen. His own classmates pilfered his stationery during recess, used their pens to mark his thighs and pinched him slyly. There were blue-blacks on his skinny back. The boy who sat next to him in class dug a black pit in his arm with a mechanical pencil. Conor mewled throughout the tetanus shot and the perpetrator was caned by the principal, though it seemed to do little to diminish the bullying. My father made unscheduled visits to the school, which he called 'keeping an eye' on Conor, and followed them up with appointments to see Ms Su many times. Only a few of the appointments actually materialized.

At home my father complained that Conor would be the death of him. As soon as my father left the house, he turned on the TV. My father bought for him countless Math and English assessment books which were piled on the dining room table, but the exercises were always badly done. From inside my room, I heard my father threaten Conor with the cane while my stepmother wailed and Conor mewled. Aunty Lim contributed to the ructions with her sharp and angry raps on the wall between our flats, but that was still better than the neighbours downstairs coming up to knock on our door, or the police. I plugged my ears with balls of tissue and turned up the volume of U2's *Beautiful Day*, a

song that both tore me apart and affirmed my will to survive. My stepmother asked me to tutor Conor, but I always said I was too busy until finally she stopped asking.

I maintained my distance because I could. I was 21, home on my first summer break and I had big dreams that kept me occupied. It turned out to be the last summer break I spent in Singapore.

I could not avoid it however when my father insisted on taking me along to see Conor's form teacher, Ms Su. "Just this time," he said, "It might make a difference for them to know you're his sister." I had graduated second in the school in the PSLE but that was nine years ago. I didn't think that anyone in the school would still care or even remember. My father said, "We have to try all ways to help him." I hoped my father would not make a fool out of me. When my father drove up to the school, it was déjà vu to see the congratulatory banner from the school's Parents' Support Group slung high along the fence by the main gate. In keeping with tradition, the National Average versus the School Average of the latest PSLE scores, rendered in multi-coloured pie charts and box graphs, were printed on the banner made of good tough plastic to weather a year.

"I know Conor is slower compared to other children, but you know, if you're patient, give him some time, he'll be okay. After all, you see Yi Ling here, she did so well in the PSLE. See, she's now studying architecture in university in London, third year already". Ms Su smiled at me perfunctorily. She had never taught me. "Some children lag behind, you know, they develop slower. Conor needs time to develop". My father made it clear to Ms Su that a Special School was not the place for Conor, when she weakly suggested that he visit one to find out more about their curriculum, their teaching methods. He had succeeded in convincing himself and he only needed to convince others that Conor just needed Time. Ms Su nodded and lowered her eyes to her desk, which I felt was a cue that she had already surrendered, but my father did not stop pushing to her variants of what he had already said. He got the hint only when she ceased making noises – um hmm, I see, of course, don't worry - shuffled some papers on her desk and stood up.

He ranted as we drove out of the school. What a lousy form teacher, Conor won't get much help from her. I can tell she wasn't really listening. She doesn't care. I bet she's just waiting for retirement. I'm going to get the principal to put him in another class. I'll transfer him to another school. I felt a little sorry for Ms Su who was still only a Senior Teacher and not a Head of Department. Thirty-five children in the class, who can blame her? She had asthma too. I found out years ago when I was carrying some books to the staffroom, and she suffered an attack right before my

eyes. My father was probably correct that she was just biding her time in the school until either her Key Performance Indicators or her age told her to go. Conor sat very quietly in the backseat, not saying anything. I was thinking how hard it was to know what went on in Conor's brain, when my father suddenly said harshly into the rearview mirror, "Why are you so stupid? If you weren't so stupid, I wouldn't have all this trouble. Do you know how troublesome you are? You f***head!" The car veered slightly and my father jerked too violently on the wheel. I was sure that if he could reach Conor, my father would have smacked Conor on the head.

I hated it when my father said 'f***head'. Even when I was too young to know what it meant, I heard the ugliness of the word in the way he spat it out, and when he used it on me, I felt dirty. In my primary school, some of the kids swore Hokkien vulgarities, female allusions that aren't any better than 'f***head', and despite being caned so many times until the teachers were tired of reporting them to the principal, they still grinned and still swore. The grins might all have been bravado, but I have never been so thick-skinned. My father always said he would kill me if any teacher called him up to complain about me. Up until my mother left, my father was still chasing me around the furniture to pull my ears whenever he was angry. It was never about school results. I stood up for my mother and talked back to him, which he did not like. Those were the times I had raged inwardly, "F***head! F***head! F***head!" He deserved to be called by his own hateful word. My heart felt like it would explode like a bomb out of my chest and if it did, the shrapnel would have killed him instantly. I cannot imagine how the teachers in my all-girls' secondary school would have reacted if they had known. Once, in an uncharacteristic show of anger, I told a classmate to go and die, and the teacher's look was enough to tell me that she did not expect such language from her Gifted Education pupils even if they had come from a lowly neighbourhood primary school. Luckily, I only received a warning and the incident did not leave a black mark in my report book, as a detention might have.

Before we went home, my father, who had never been a religious man before Conor came along, stopped at the Chinese temple and procured a charm bracelet that looked like a braided friendship band, and tied it on Conor's wrist. Conor was already wearing an amulet on a necklace. For added protection, my father said. He thought that Conor's condition might be an attack by spiritual forces. My father did not believe in God as such, but, he acknowledged, there was definitely a Supreme Being whom he was calling upon, 'there's no harm in doing so'. My strange half-brother pranced around me, holding out his arm with the bracelet close to my face, waving it up and down. I swatted his arm away and he tried to wrestle me. We locked palms and it did not take much force from me to press his hand backwards before he yelped and quickly pulled away. What an idiot, I thought, to be so gleeful about a piece of string. I knew I was superior, a third-year 'archi' student on an overseas scholarship in London that paid for

everything and even came with a decent living allowance.

In my first year in London I had found art. At first I was paid to sit as a clothed model in life-drawing classes but when they asked me to pose in the nude I decided I should be on the other side of the easel. After all my scholarship allowance was more than enough to live on, I didn't really need the modelling fee. To my great joy, I found painting classes were sheer play. My canvases, my fat, yielding tubes of rich paint with poetic names like burnt sienna, raw umber, terre verte, crimson alizarin, naples yellow, my squat glass bottles of thickened linseed oil, stand oil, turpentine, and my hog's hair brushes, all promised to co-operate in the making of whatever I desired to make out of them. I looked out for art supplies stores on every trip I made in and out of London, I wandered their aisles, full of cravings and rejoicing in my hunger.

I had returned to Singapore with great excitement. Months before that summer break, I had made plans to use the break to create a painting and enter it in a local art competition. The model for my painting was a young violinist with an intent look on his face as he touched his bow to the strings of his instrument. I did not know him; he was just a photograph in a magazine I bought in London, but I was fascinated by the beautiful contours in the image. Boy with Violin would be my first masterpiece. For weeks before the deadline, I lived and breathed it; before I was fully awake and while my eyes were still closed, I could see my painting in its unfinished state and it was the last thing I gazed at before I went to bed. I painted late into the night until I was exhausted. It was hard to resist adding touches here and there, but one day I was finally done. There would be enough time for it to dry before I sent it in.

"Finish or not?" Conor asked. "Yes, don't you dare touch it! It's not dry yet!" He withdrew his finger. "Very ugly, so stupid," he said, scowling. I told him he did not know anything, no one asked his opinion and he should just shut up.

My father offered to help me move the painting to the competition venue. The painting would fit in his car if he flattened the rear backrest and laid the painting horizontally so that part of it was in the car boot and part on the back seat. I was lifting the painting when I saw it. Where the light split the soft curved planes on the cheek of the Boy, an effect I had strived so hard for, scraping and repainting until I was satisfied, was a long gash, about two inches, obviously made with a sharp instrument like a paper cutter.

They had rowed before, but this time was the worst yet. No one had told me that my stepmother had obtained a personal protection order from the court to keep my father away from his son. I saw my father crack the cane over

Conor who was squatting on the floor, shielding his head with his arms. My father jerked up the cane and my stepmother tried to grab it but she missed and the cane came down on her arm with so much force that it drew blood. My father dropped the cane and was punching Conor on his head when Auntie Lim and two policemen burst in.

My stepmother returned to China with Conor when my father was briefly jailed for breaching the personal protection order. "He'll have a better life there, not so stressful as in Singapore," she said. "I'll write to let your father know where we're staying."

"He knows you're leaving?"

"I told him it was likely we're going back when I visited him."

"Are you coming back?"

My stepmother drew a breath before replying. "I can't really say for sure."

"You really should go and get Conor tested, see what's wrong with him, and then get some professional help." It was probably the first time I said this to her. She frowned, pursing her lips into a thin line. "I know how to look after him." I have to admit that she tried. She called Conor over and insisted that he apologise. "Look at Jie Jie," she commanded him, forcing up his chin with her hand. "Say you're sorry. You're a bad boy to do that to Jie Jie. Jie Jie spent so much time on the painting. How could you make her so sad? Mother is very disappointed with you for making trouble all the time..." Her voice started to tremble. I took Conor's mumble for an apology and excused myself quickly because I was at a loss for what to say. I did think I should have apologized too, but I didn't know how, or where to begin. Conor only had to say sorry for doing what he did, but I knew no way to apologize for being who I am.

After I've bought the art tissue and packed up the painting and a few other things, I will visit my father. According to Auntie Lim, he's been staying with an old friend ever since he was released. If he asks, I will have to tell him I can't really say for sure when I will be coming back.