

“Sally Bong is an uplifting hero for these uncertain times.”

—NEIL HUMPHREYS, bestselling author of *Bloody Foreigners*

AND THE AWARD GOES TO

**SALLY
BONG!**



CO-WINNER



EPIGRAM
BOOKS
FICTION
PRIZE
2021

SEBASTIAN SIM

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *LET'S GIVE IT UP FOR GIMME LAO!*

“An acerbic wit. Sim’s prose zips along breezily.”

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“Hilarious and almost absurdist in its storytelling, *And the Award Goes to Sally Bong!* strings watershed events in Singapore’s short history with the life of a dauntless but heartfelt protagonist, homing in on what it means to lead our best and authentic lives.”

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“Sebastian Sim wryly shows Singapore how it really is, but Sally Bong shows us what we could be. An uplifting hero for these uncertain times.”

— **NEIL HUMPHREYS**, bestselling author
of Bloody Foreigners

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AND THE AWARD GOES TO

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SEBASTIAN SIM



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To Chee Hong

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ONE

SALLY BONG WAS ten when a rather unusual incident occurred. It was 1977. A stranger took some photos with her and her classmate, and had them published in various newspapers over the next three days. Neither child understood the magnitude of the incident until the adults explained it to them afterwards. This stranger posing in-between them was none other than the founding Prime Minister of Singapore, who was poised to shape the destiny of all who called this tiny island-country home.

The other child sharing Sally Bong's limelight was Anand Babu. That he should end up being Sally Bong's classmate was in itself rather peculiar, for he was the only Indian student in River Valley Chinese Primary School.

When the principal asked Anand Babu's father why he picked a Chinese-language school for his only child, the man explained it mathematically. It was one Indian to twelve Chinese on the island. As he had no intention to let Anand Babu take over his humble little mamak shop selling household paraphernalia in a rundown neighbourhood, the boy ought to pick up a language that allowed him to understand his future boss, who was likely to be Chinese.

Unfortunately for Anand Babu, his father's radical foresight and bold move were not buttressed by practical support. None of the adults in the family was able to coach him, and private tuition was beyond their financial means. The poor boy struggled horribly and barely managed to pass the exams the first three years. He did so badly the following year, the principal made him repeat the school year. That was how Anand Babu ended up in Sally Bong's class.

As it happened, their form teacher, Miss Cheow Chwee Ling,

implemented a buddy system, in which students strong in a particular subject coached those who were weak. Sally Bong was paired with Anand Babu based on three considerations. Firstly, and obviously, Sally Bong had an excellent command of the Chinese language. She was probably the only one in class to own a collection of Chinese comics and storybooks more suitable for students in higher primary levels. The reason was simple: both her grandfather and her mother were practising Chinese physicians, and themselves voracious readers. Secondly, the Chinese medical hall that Sally Bong's family owned was a mere two blocks away from the mamak shop that Anand Babu's father ran. The proximity made it easy for Sally Bong to drop in for a coaching session and be back in time to join her family for dinner. Lastly, Miss Cheow had observed Sally Bong to be a big-hearted and generous girl. If anyone could be persuaded to expend time and energy to coach Anand Babu, it would be Sally Bong.

The girl plunged into the coaching project earnestly. During the first week, she spent an hour every afternoon revising the day's Chinese lesson with Anand Babu on the stone table next to the mamak shop. The father was grateful and did what he could to make the sessions enjoyable. Not only did he supply the pair with packets of Milo and plates of Khong Guan biscuits, he kept two face towels folded in the ice cream chiller so the pair could wipe off against the enervating afternoon heat. At the end of the sessions, he would persuade Sally Bong to pick whatever she liked from the spread of candies and titbits at his stall. When Sally Bong politely declined, the father grabbed a couple of White Rabbit candies and stuffed them into her satchel. By the fourth afternoon, Sally Bong decided to pick a mango-flavoured lollipop instead; she didn't like the way the chewy White Rabbit candies stuck to her teeth.

At the start of the second week, Sally Bong was horrified to discover that Anand Babu had retained almost nothing of what she had taught the preceding week. It was as though the vocabulary and sentence structures she drilled into his head had somehow bled out of the cracks in his skull over the weekend. Sally Bong felt so disheartened she shook

her head morosely when the father offered her a pick from the candy spread. At his insistence, Sally Bong pocketed a couple of White Rabbit candies as a punishment for herself.

As it was too early to head upstairs for dinner, Sally Bong opted to seek out her grandfather at the Chinese medical hall. The black-and-gold-plated signage over the entrance read Ning Xia Yao Fang, or Summer of Serenity Medical Hall. She stepped across the threshold into the familiarity of the wispy herbal odour that lingered in the air, and the rhythmic pounding of pestle against mortar at the far end of the counter, where Uncle Tay, the medical hall assistant, was crushing and grinding raw herbs. The man was never very friendly. He glanced up, ascertained that it was not a customer and resumed the task at hand wordlessly. Sally Bong dug into her pocket and extracted two of the White Rabbit candies. She placed them next to the mortar as she passed through.

"For Mei Mei."

The designated recipient was Uncle Tay's granddaughter, who was three years younger than Sally Bong and whom she adored. Uncle Tay glanced at the offering and nodded in acknowledgement.

"Go to the pantry and check on the kettle. If the water has boiled, pour into your grandfather's mug and bring it to him. I have already added fresh tea leaves."

Her grandfather looked up from the book he was reading as Sally Bong entered the consultation room with measured, cautious steps and gingerly set the steaming mug of oolong tea on the table. He lifted it, took a sip and sighed with satisfaction. Sally Bong was pleased. Though no one ever explicitly explained it to her, she understood that verbalised gratitude as a form of good manners was applicable only to those on the lower rungs of age or hierarchy. Her grandfather's sigh of contentment, much like Uncle Tay's nod of acknowledgement, was the culturally appropriate indicator of appreciation. It would be unsettling if her mother thanked her every time she helped set the dinner table.

"And how is your little Indian pupil faring this week?" Her

grandfather had found Miss Cheow's buddy system intriguing, and was genuinely invested in keeping track of the pair's progress.

"Not good. I thought he understood the lessons last week. But today, he's forgotten everything."

"And what do you gather from this?" her grandfather probed with an arched eyebrow.

"What do you mean?"

"You are new to coaching. Could it be that you are not doing it right?"

"I guided him through the revisions step by step, the same way Miss Cheow did," Sally Bong protested.

"Did Anand enjoy the lessons?"

Sally Bong crinkled her nose. "I don't think so. He finds the Chinese language difficult."

"That may well be the problem," her grandfather said. "He is not going to learn if he doesn't enjoy the lessons."

"But these are lessons on vocabulary and sentence structures. What is there to enjoy?"

"Then I suggest you skip them."

Sally Bong stared at her grandfather with incomprehension.

"Remember the comic books I bought you on your birthdays when you were younger? Try starting with those."

The three sets of comic books Sally Bong received from her grandfather were prized possessions she kept on the highest rung of her bookshelf. He had explained that these were adapted from three of the four most esteemed novels of ancient China. They included the war epic *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, the rebel tale *Water Margin* and the fantasy adventure *Journey to the West*. Sally Bong was disappointed when her grandfather did not complete the set of four, but he was of the opinion that *Dream of the Red Chamber* was too soppy a romance for a pre-teen girl.

Sally Bong decided to take up her grandfather's advice. The next afternoon, when Anand Babu extracted his copy of *Chinese Reading*

and *Comprehension for Primary 4 Students*, she surprised him by setting down her copy of *Journey to the West* atop the textbook.

"What is this?" Anand Babu flipped through the pages and was instantly mesmerised by the intricate artwork depicting the Monkey King Sun Wu Kong leading his master's entourage through perilous lands where demons and demigods dwelt.

Sally Bong studied the glint of fascination in his eyes and realised her grandfather might be onto something.

"We are going to spend half an hour reading this before we start the lesson proper every afternoon. This is volume one out of twenty-two volumes. We can probably do one volume a week."

"What?" Anand Babu quickly flipped through to the last page. "I can easily finish this today. Why would we need one week?"

"We are not moving on to volume two until you can read every word in volume one." Sally Bong tapped the stone table to emphasise her rules. "And I want you to learn all the new words by heart too. I will give you a writing test at the end of the week."

Anand Babu groaned, but plunged into the new study regime with enthusiasm nonetheless. When he failed the writing test on Friday, he asked to keep the copy of *Journey to the West* over the weekend so that he could spend more time studying it. By the time they progressed to volume eight, Anand Babu had inculcated in himself the habit of keeping his Chinese dictionary handy so he could readily check the new words, and digest and memorise them. He began to apply the same habit to his Chinese lessons in school, proactively building his vocabulary and composition skills. By the end of the first semester, he was no longer failing the tests. Miss Cheow Chwee Ling was so pleased she penned two letters, one to Anand Babu's parents to compliment the boy on his excellent progress, and a second to Sally Bong's parents to bestow recognition on the girl's effective coaching.

After they completed *Journey to the West*, the pair moved on to *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Anand Babu took to the war epic immediately. Not only was he inspired by the fierce loyalty and courage

of warriors like Guan Yu and Zhang Fei, he was also awestruck by the wisdom and brilliance of war strategist Zhuge Liang. His favourite chapter was when Zhuge Liang found his own army in dire need of arrows, and so picked a misty night on the river to trick the enemy into shooting thousands of them into straw figures nailed on erected poles on his fleet of vessels.

“This is so clever!” Anand Babu exclaimed as he pored over the plot twists and admired the exquisite artwork. His head was bowed so low he did not notice an entourage passing by nor realise that he had caught their attention. Sally Bong, however, watched with slight alarm as the group approached the stone table. For some reason, she found it ominous that all of them wore identical clean, pressed white shirts, almost like the coordinated attire of a dignified, gentlemanly gang of thugs. Then she saw that two of them had sophisticated cameras hanging from their necks. Could they be reporters?

One among them, a stately man with an exceptionally high forehead, stepped closer to get a better glimpse at Anand Babu’s reading material. That broke the boy’s trance and he looked up startled.

“This boy here is reading an ancient Chinese classic, in Chinese text,” the stately man announced with wonderment to his entourage before he turned to Anand Babu and asked, “Who taught you to read Chinese?”

Anand Babu pointed to Sally Bong. The man beamed and would have said something but for the interruption of Anand Babu’s father, who had scurried forth and urged the pair to stand up and greet the stranger. “This is Prime Minister Lee. Say good afternoon, both of you.”

The children did as they were told, even though they had no idea what a “prime minister” was.

“Tell me about the story you are reading,” the Prime Minister said.

It was a good thing Anand Babu could not see his father standing behind him, and was therefore not affected by the contortion of suppressed excitement on the latter’s countenance. He narrated how Zhuge Liang employed supreme trickery to defeat a mightier opponent and emerge victorious, and did it in an even tone, as though he was

telling the story to a classmate. The Prime Minister nodded at the end of it and turned to address his entourage.

“There is a lesson in there for us. Singapore is a small country with none of the natural resources that our bigger neighbours enjoy. We have to depend on our wits and our determination. This ancient parable of ‘Kong Ming jie jian’ is an apt illustration. It is not always the mighty who triumph. Yes, Singapore as a new nation is like a tiny vessel in hostile, choppy waters. The journey ahead is perilous. We must recognise that our people are our hope and our strength, and that we must groom our children for the future.”

“And luckily for us, we have Prime Minister Lee as our Zhuge Liang!” a bespectacled man quipped. Several in the entourage grinned and nodded enthusiastically.

The Prime Minister waved off the comment with a frown and instead turned to ask Anand Babu, “Why do you want to learn Chinese?”

All it took was a millisecond of hesitation on Anand Babu’s part for his father to jump in and explain his logic. Pragmatism dictated that they, as a minority race, should pick up the language of the dominant race. It would accord his child a huge advantage when the time came to compete in the job market.

The Prime Minister nodded approvingly and patted Anand Babu on his shoulder. “You have a very wise father. Once you master the Chinese language, you can cross the bridge to bigger and better opportunities within the Chinese diaspora. You will be way ahead of the competition.”

Anand Babu’s father could feel his chest come close to bursting with pride and joy. To think that the Prime Minister of Singapore had just issued a stamp of approval on his parenting foresight! He turned to point a finger at Sally Bong and said, “Did you hear what the Prime Minister said? You should pick up Tamil from Anand and become bilingual. You will be way ahead of the competition.”

The Prime Minister frowned at the divergent inference Anand Babu’s father arrived at. He looked at Sally Bong and addressed her thus, “Bilingualism is important for your generation. Do you read

English storybooks?”

Sally Bong shook her head. All the books her grandfather bought her were in Chinese.

The Prime Minister picked up a pencil on the stone table and scribbled a name on Anand Babu's textbook. Both children squinted to make out the words “Enid Blyton”.

“This is a very talented author of children's books. You will find a good collection at the library. Start with them.”

Sally Bong could not understand why the Prime Minister recommended English over Tamil, but felt too shy to ask. In any case, the Prime Minister disengaged himself from the children and turned to issue some instructions, whereupon the entourage burst into a flurry of activity. The bespectacled man stepped forward to position the two children for a photo shoot with the Prime Minister. After that, a dozen shots were taken of Sally Bong pretending to coach Anand Babu, of Anand Babu pretending to be engrossed reading *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and of his father pretending to gaze with affection at his son learning the language that would improve his chances at securing a job in the future.

The article appeared two days later in *The Straits Times* in English, and both *Nanyang Siang Pau* and *Sin Chew Jit Poh* in Chinese. The following day, *Tamil Murasu* and *Berita Harian* carried the article in Tamil and Malay, respectively. The photo of the Prime Minister with one hand placed on each child's shoulder appeared in all the editions. In addition, the English and Chinese newspapers printed the photo of Sally Bong coaching Anand Babu, though in a much smaller frame. To the delight of Anand Babu's father, the Tamil article featured himself gazing lovingly at his son. He wasted no time cutting it out, sealing it in plastic wrap and displaying it at the mamak shop.

The morning assembly at River Valley Chinese Primary School the day after the article first appeared was abuzz with excitement. It was widely known by then that two of the students had appeared in the dailies. The principal summoned Sally Bong and Anand Babu on

stage and made them stand next to him as he read the Chinese version aloud. In the article, the Prime Minister explained that one of the major challenges facing the young country was creating a national identity that could transcend the differences in languages and cultures among its citizens. He was heartened when he chanced upon a Chinese girl at the void deck of a public housing flat coaching her Indian classmate in her mother tongue. It was strategic public policy that made this bridging of language and culture possible. Singapore could not allow the various races to fence themselves into racial enclaves. Indian boys and Chinese girls must study in the same classrooms so that they did not become strangers to one another's presence. Young men, be they Malay, Indian or Chinese, must serve conscription in the same army camps so that they were trained to watch one another's backs in a crisis of war. Families of different races must live in the same public housing blocks so that they became familiar with the aroma emanating from one another's kitchens. Better yet, cook extra and share the family's signature dishes. Only then could Singapore progress from strength to strength and become one nation, one people, one Singapore.

After the reading, the principal went on to profess how proud he was that two of his students had caught the attention of the nation; in Sally Bong's case performing an act of selflessness, and in Anand Babu's case engaging in the industrious pursuit of self-improvement. The two were young role models all the students should do well to emulate. As a token of recognition and encouragement, the principal presented to each a Sheaffer fountain pen that, he added, he was happy to pay for out of his own pocket.

Once the round of applause came to an end, the principal indicated that Sally Bong and Anand Babu should exit the stage so he could proceed with the rest of the assembly announcements. He was slightly astonished when Sally Bong raised her hand and requested to use the microphone.

“I just want to say that it was our form teacher Miss Cheow Chwee Ling who arranged this coaching project. I think the assembly should

also give Miss Cheow a round of applause.”

Unbeknownst to the students, Miss Cheow Chwee Ling had been standing at the rear of the assembly hall, mentally rehearsing her speech while the principal read the article. She had gone into momentary shock when the principal ended the segment abruptly and looked ready to move on to the next item. Trembling a little, Miss Cheow took a deep breath and fought to suppress the colossal disappointment that threatened to engulf her. And then Sally Bong spoke. Miss Cheow now had to fight back tears of gratitude as she ascended the steps onto the stage to claim her rightful moment of glory.

The principal was a little embarrassed that Sally Bong made it look like he had forgotten to thank Miss Cheow Chwee Ling. He hadn't. The daily morning assembly required the singing of the national anthem and the recitation of the pledge. That left him with approximately eight minutes to dispense the announcements before dispatching the students back to their classrooms for their first lesson. He had already allocated a rather generous five minutes for the newspaper article and his accompanying message, and thought it made good sense, in terms of time management, to congratulate Miss Cheow on the side later. Now his plan was ruined.

As Miss Cheow explained in detail to her colleagues and the student body her signature buddy system that bore such surprising fruit, the principal began to mentally tick off which among the seven announcements on his notepad he could postpone till the following day. By the time Miss Cheow proceeded to trumpet her passion for teaching, he was down to three items, all of which carried an element of urgency that did not permit delayed communication. Which explained why his mood turned sour when Miss Cheow continued babbling in complete disregard for the time. Eventually, he had to exercise the discourtesy of stepping forward to call for an end to her ramblings.

There were muffled but audible groans among the students when the principal launched into yet more announcements. It was extremely uncomfortable to be seated cross-legged for any duration that exceeded

ten minutes, especially when one was trying to ignore a bursting bladder. Even the teachers were irritable; the principal ought to know better than to encroach on their lesson time. By the time the assembly came to an end, the exiting participants shared a generally foul mood, and the hype of Sally Bong and Anand Babu appearing in the dailies was quite lost on them.

Back at home, Sally Bong noticed that neither her grandfather nor her mother displayed the level of enthusiasm she would have expected from them. Her mother did cook her favourite dish of fried chicken wings with prawn paste, and her grandfather patted her on the head and said he was proud of her, but it was her father who pulled out all the stops to celebrate. The first thing he did was buy her an A3-size scrapbook into which he helped paste the cut-out articles from all five sets of newspapers. Next, he surprised her with a lime green pencil box, which had layered compartments that could be pulled out like those of a handyman's toolbox, to reveal secret little slots in which one could stash an eraser or some paper clips. To top it off, he proposed that the entire family venture overseas for the September school holidays. Possibly Thailand, or the Philippines. But before her father got carried away, her mother solemnly reminded him that he had only just commenced on a new sales career. It was surely not time yet to splurge on an overseas holiday.

“But how often does one get featured in a newspaper article?” Sally Bong's father protested. “And to have one's photo taken with the Prime Minister, no less!”

“Is the Prime Minister an important man?” Sally Bong asked.

“Yes, he is. The Prime Minister makes all kinds of decisions for the people, like the type of flats we live in, the jobs we hold, the school you go to, everything. He is very powerful.”

“Like a king?”

“Yes, like a king.”

Sally Bong’s mother frowned. “No, he is not like a king.”

“No?” Sally Bong queried. She liked it whenever her mother weighed in with her input. Unlike her father, who believed that he could treat her like a child and get away with simplistic answers, her mother was often thoughtful and serious with hers.

“A king rules over his people because he is born into the royal family. The people do not get to choose their king. But a prime minister is chosen by the people. He has to work for the people. That is why he is called a public servant.”

“A prime minister is a servant?” Sally Bong’s eyes were rounded with incredulity. She recalled the stately man with the exceptionally high forehead, and how the rest of his entourage scurried about at his command like servants. Perhaps the man was the head servant.

“See, you are confusing her,” Sally Bong’s father remarked.

“Not if you take the time to explain. Otherwise, she will go away with half-baked ideas,” her mother said patiently. She turned to Sally Bong and elaborated, “Singapore does not have a king. Every few years we come together and cast our votes to elect people who we believe can run the country well. These people are called public servants because they serve us. But because they are given the authority and power to make important decisions, many people look up to them and treat them like kings. Which is wrong. They are elected to do a job. If they do a bad job, we can vote them out in the next election. So they are not quite as powerful as kings.”

Sally Bong chewed on a stick of kailan drenched in oyster sauce as she ruminated over her mother’s explanation. Unlike her principal and her father, who seemed to think that it was an honour to have one’s photo taken with the Prime Minister, her mother was blasé about the whole affair. The Prime Minister was, in her opinion, simply someone picked to do a job, like a servant. She could effectively fire him if he did a bad job.

Sally Bong liked her mother’s stance. Nonetheless, she decided to

take up the Prime Minister’s reading recommendation. The following evening, she caught a bus to Queenstown Public Library and checked out three titles from the children’s section: *The Naughtiest Girl in the School*, *The Naughtiest Girl Again* and *The Naughtiest Girl is a Monitor*.

By the end of the first night, Sally Bong fell hopelessly under the spell of Enid Blyton. Over the next few nights, she dodged her mother’s lights-off-at-ten-thirty regimen by smuggling the library book to the toilet after the family retired to bed, and reading it seated on a pair of shower sandals. During recess at school, she hid out in the back garden and caught up on her reading under the rain tree. It almost slipped her mind that she had to study for a mathematics test the following Tuesday. She came to the horrifying realisation only the night before, but did not dare share her predicament with her mother. Instead, she tried to cram in a desperate hour of revision in the toilet, only to discover it was near impossible to balance an exercise book on her knees while working out mathematical formulas with a pencil. It was the first time Sally Bong came close to failing a test. When her mother grilled her on her poor performance, she claimed that she had a toothache and could not focus on the test paper. Sally Bong seldom told lies, but she felt she had to protect her secret liaisons with Enid Blyton. She would be devastated if her mother found out about her transgressions and banned her from reading after lights off.

Sally Bong was mesmerised by the strange new world of Elizabeth Allen, the protagonist of *The Naughtiest Girl* series. The boarding school that Elizabeth attended was as alien as it was familiar. The students were about the same age as herself, but what exciting lives they led! There was the authoritative pair of head boy and head girl, who led a jury team of twelve monitors and conducted weekly meetings where penalties were meted out to misbehaving students and praises awarded to the well-behaved ones. The same team of jurists was also entrusted with the authority to review and approve or reject any student’s request to withdraw money from the common fund. To top it off, students with specific talents and expertise could elect to take up responsibilities.

Imagine the likes of John Terry, who was really only two years older than Sally Bong, being entrusted with growing flowers and vegetables as the head of the school garden. And best of all, the students were allowed to keep pets!

By the time she finished the last book in the series, Sally Bong was bursting with ideas. In Elizabeth Allen's fictional boarding school, all the students had to surrender their pocket money at the beginning of the term. From this common pool, each student would receive two shillings a week as spending money. That way, students from poorer families would not be penalised. Sally Bong thought it was a brilliant idea.

"I am going to kickstart a new initiative in school," Sally Bong announced to Anand Babu. "I am calling it Project Pocket Marks."

"What is that?"

"What grades do you usually get for your Chinese term tests?"

"I usually score between 50 to 60 marks." Anand Babu shrugged. "Grade E."

"I get an A all the time. What if I could transfer some points to you, so that I downgrade to a B and you improve to a D?"

"Why would you do that?"

"It is not fair to expect you to get an A in Chinese like me. I get help from my grandfather and my mother, while you get no help from your family at all. So I'll give you some of my marks. It's like me giving you some of my pocket money because my family gives me more. That is why it is called Project Pocket Marks."

Anand Babu scratched the back of his head while he mulled over Sally Bong's explanation.

"My weakest subject is arts and crafts. I can barely score a D," Sally Bong continued to elaborate. "Kuan Yen Nee gets an A all the time. It is not as if she is more hardworking than me. She is just talented that way. So I will ask her to give me some pocket marks so that I can make it to a C at least."

Anand Babu made a sucking sound with his lips. His intuition told him Sally Bong's Project Pocket Marks would not be well received. And

he was right.

Miss Cheow Chwee Ling was the first to discourage Sally Bong. "It is really sweet that you want to help the weaker students, but this is not the way to do it. If they are weak, they have to work harder. Like Anand does. And he is improving, thanks to your help."

"I just think it is unfair that he has to work harder than me and gets no help from his family," Sally Bong argued, but Miss Cheow smiled benignly, patted her on her head and moved to the front of the classroom to continue with the lesson.

During recess, Sally Bong caught hold of the principal and floated her idea with him. The principal frowned and asked Sally Bong where she got the idea from. The mention of Enid Blyton failed to ring a bell.

"I want you to write down the name of the author and title of the book on a piece of paper and pass it to your form teacher. I will get Miss Cheow to check it," the principal instructed. "I don't want you reading some dangerous book on socialism or communism by mistake."

Sally Bong did not understand the terms socialism and communism, but she could detect the principal's tone of distrust. Once again, she decided there was a need to protect Enid Blyton, and so deliberately ignored the principal's instructions.

She waited two more weeks before submitting her second proposal.

"I would like permission to kickstart a weekly group discussion for students. We can do it during recess on Fridays. Each class from Primary 4 to 6 will nominate a representative. So there will be fifteen of us."

"And what will you be discussing?" Miss Cheow asked, amused.

"We will pick from the principal's announcements. Just one or two items. We'll pool our ideas and suggestions. Then another representative and I will present our ideas to the principal."

There was a note of alarm when Miss Cheow next spoke. "What ideas?"

"For example, the principal announced last week that only students who are selected to participate in the inter-school table tennis tournaments will attend the practice sessions on Mondays and Thursdays. All the other table tennis players will skip practice for the

next two months.”

“Yes, he did announce that,” Miss Cheow acknowledged.

“But I enjoy the table tennis sessions. I don’t see why I should miss out on practice for two months.”

“That’s only because you were not selected for competition.”

“But that is not fair. And if the other class representatives feel the same way, we will give feedback to the principal. Maybe he will allow us to practise on Mondays and let the competition players practise on Thursdays.”

The same afternoon, Sally Bong was summoned to the principal’s office. He wanted to know who planted in her the idea of a student discussion group. The interrogatory tone he adopted alerted her to the need to protect her source of inspiration. She claimed that the idea was all her own.

“You are a good student who consistently gets good grades. That is what you should focus on. These strange ideas that you have, I don’t know where you got them from, but they can get you into trouble. Leave the running of things to the adults in charge. They know what they are doing.”

As Sally Bong stepped out of the principal’s office, she wondered if there was indeed a boarding school in England similar to Elizabeth Allen’s. She would love to ask for a transfer. She had so many new ideas, but if the principal would not even let her try them, how would she ever find out if they worked?

Sally Bong continued reading books by Enid Blyton. She delighted in the adventures of the Famous Five and Secret Seven, and wished her neighbourhood had dark and dangerous secrets she could uncover too. When she read about how little Jimmy trained his dog Lucky to perform in Mr Galliano’s circus, she felt she had found her calling. But her mother’s answer to her plea for a pet was a definitive “no”.

“But why?”

“I don’t like dogs.”

“But I do.”

“When you are old enough, and you earn your own money and buy your own house, you can choose to do whatever you want. But while you are living in my house, you follow my rules. No dogs.”

For the first time, Sally Bong looked forward to becoming an adult. The idea that all the current restrictions would be instantaneously lifted was supremely liberating. She could join the circus, adopt a dog and train it to perform, and maybe solve a mystery or two. While she was caught up in the anticipatory thrill, the mystery of why none of the adults around her chose to do exciting things like these did not cross her mind. And by the time she herself grew up, Sally Bong forgot that she once wanted badly to join the circus.

The more Sally Bong read, the faster new ideas germinated like wild mushrooms from her fertile imagination. She could galvanise fellow students to join various clubs. The Anti-Bullying Club could confront the bullies from class 6B and stop them from hoarding the new batch of table tennis paddles. The Friends of Pets Club could lobby the principal to allow them to keep rabbits, chicks or white mice as class pets. The Reading Club could meet weekly and do book reviews. It finally came to a point where Sally Bong realised she needed a journal to properly document her ideas before they disappeared into the abyss of lost memories.

Sally Bong convinced her father to take her to the Popular bookshop to purchase her own birthday gift in advance. She picked a hefty orange journal that had 224 pages in all. That same night, Sally Bong uncapped her Sheaffer fountain pen and wrote her first entry in English. At the end of the page, she signed in her best cursive her name: Bong Cheng Cheng.

And that was the moment it struck her. She needed an English name.

Sally Bong wrote down the names of her favourite characters in Enid Blyton’s books. There was, of course, Elizabeth Allen the Naughtiest Girl. There was Georgina from the Famous Five who hated her name and wanted the others to call her George. And there was spunky Lotta from Mr Galliano’s circus. As she studied the three names, it occurred to her that these three girls were not that different from one another. They all had ideas of their own, and were stubborn when told by the

adults that their ideas would not work. Sally Bong could relate to that. Her principal and Miss Cheow Chew Ling were never very encouraging when she proposed her ideas to them. The instant camaraderie that Sally Bong felt with these girls cemented her desire to give herself an English name. None of the female characters in her entire collection of Chinese comics and storybooks came close to inspiring her in this manner.

After giving the three prospective names some thought, Sally Bong decided that the names Elizabeth and Georgina were too much of a mouthful. The dual syllabic Lotta was just right, except that it sounded too harsh and jagged for her liking. She made a trip to Queenstown Public Library, picked out a book titled *1001 Names for Babies*, sprawled out on her bed to browse through it and finally found one she liked.

Sally.

Short and spunky, but with a soft edge to it.

Neither her grandfather nor her mother warmed up to her new name when she introduced it at the dinner table.

“Chong yang mei wai,” her grandfather muttered.

“What did Grandpa say?” Sally Bong asked her mother while chewing on stir-fried bean sprouts.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” her mother said, correcting her behaviour before dispensing the explanation. “‘Chong yang mei wai’ describes some Chinese who blindly adore Western culture. To them, everything that is foreign is superior to their own culture.”

Sally Bong turned to her grandfather after she swallowed the mouthful of bean sprouts and asked, “So you think Chinese culture is superior to the West’s?”

“There are five thousand years worth of Chinese history and culture, uninterrupted. Western civilisation is less than three thousand years old. What do you think?”

Recognising that she herself did not know enough to comment, Sally Bong turned to ask her father for his opinion. He made a show of looking around the dining room while he finished chewing on a chunk of stewed pork. After he was done swallowing the last morsel, he

pointed to a few appliances in view and said, “I don’t know about that. We have, in our house, a Philips TV, a National Panasonic transistor radio, and an Electrolux refrigerator in the kitchen. None of which is made in China. So maybe it is true our family is guilty of the despicable behaviour of chong yang mei wai.”

Sally Bong’s mother could not help but chortle. Her grandfather gave her father a dismissive glare while gallantly admitting defeat through his silence. In later years, Sally Bong would look back and wonder in amazement how the family was able to maintain their civility while defending their differences in opinion over dinner discussions. Both her mother and her grandfather were learned and deeply entrenched in Chinese culture. Her father, on the other hand, was enamoured of new and untested ideas, and often embraced them too readily. But what the trio had in common was an amenable sense of humour. In retrospect, that probably lubricated the exchanges and mitigated the differences, the same way raw licorice was often baked with honey to neutralise its bitter taste as a tonic herb.

“So I can keep my English name?” Sally Bong pursued.

“Definitely.” Her father beamed. “In fact, why don’t you pick one for me too?”

“Really? I have a book of English names! I can do it now!”

“After dinner,” her mother commanded before turning to her father. “You don’t even speak English.”

“I can learn.” Her father shrugged. “In fact, my sales manager strongly encouraged me. She says it will help me reach out to new clientele.”

Sally Bong forwent the hour of television viewing that her mother permitted every evening and spent it poring over the lists in *1001 Names for Babies*. By ten o’clock her father Bong Wee In acquired the brand-new English name of Willy.

“From Sally, I replaced the first two letters with your initials from Wee In,” Sally Bong explained. “Willy.”

“Great! I shall use this name for my next batch of name cards.” Willy Bong grinned, much to his daughter’s delight.

Back in school, Sally Bong disclosed her newly minted English name to her two closest buddies. They were seated in the canteen, sharing a bowl of ice kacang. Both girls twirled the new name on the tips of their tongues and agreed that it was delectable, much like the syrupy, rainbow-hued shaved ice dessert they were having.

"It's actually quite close to the one I had in mind for myself," one of the girls gleefully admitted.

"Which is?" Sally Bong prompted.

"No, wait!" the other girl screeched. "Let's write our picks on our palms and reveal them together. It will be fun!"

Apparently, both girls had secretly yearned for an English name. Sally Bong was the only one who had her precious Sheaffer fountain pen clipped to her uniform, so they had to take turns scribbling their entries onto their palms. As Sally Bong counted down amid bouts of giggling, fingers unfurled simultaneously and three heads squeezed in for a closer look. A collective shriek followed.

It was the same name: Jaclyn.

"Oh no, do you both have to go for the same angel?"

Sally Bong didn't even have to guess. Like most teenagers on the island, the three of them were fans of *Charlie's Angels*, an American crime series on TV. They were in awe of the three female leads, a crime-fighting trio who were not only gorgeous and fashionable, but also set themselves apart from the traditional female stereotypes by engaging villains in unarmed combat and subduing them without breaking a nail. Among the three actresses, Jaclyn Smith was the undisputed beauty.

"And you know what? You can't both be Jaclyn Tan. You will confuse everybody."

The two Tans looked at each other in dismay. That would be disastrous indeed.

"To be fair, both of you should give up the name Jaclyn," Sally Bong decided. She pointed to the taller girl and said, "Kate Jackson is tall and smart. You be Kate, since you have the height and the bearing. Farrah Fawcett is bold and sexy. Let her be Farrah Tan. As it is, she already has

bigger boobs than any of us."

The girls burst into riotous cackles as the bosomy Farrah Tan pretended to slap at them, unsure if she ought to be embarrassed or proud of her early blossoming.

Over the next few days, the girls cemented one another's new names by scribbling nonsensical little notes, scrunching them up and tossing them at one another when the teacher was not looking. "Breast milk stains on Farrah Tan's blouse, yikes!" and "Kate Tan's legs are so long they reach under the toilet cubicle door!" The horseplay continued until one morning, Sally Bong successfully ducked a missile from Kate Tan and the wad of paper landed near the front of the class. Miss Cheow Chwee Ling picked it up and read it aloud.

"Farrah Tan will never fall flat on her face, and we know why!"

Sally Bong owned up without being asked and explained the mischief. Upon further probing by Miss Cheow, the other two girls admitted that they had named themselves after Charlie's Angels.

"Why? As a Chinese person, you ought to be proud of your Chinese name," Miss Cheow lamented.

Sally Bong shrugged, not comprehending Miss Cheow's line of accusation. "I just want to pick a name for myself."

"Cheng Cheng refers to the blue of the sky. Your parents picked a beautiful name for you. Can you imagine how hurt they will feel knowing that you would rather have a Western name? They would feel like you are betraying their love."

"No, they did not." Sally Bong began to resent Miss Cheow's attempt to guilt-trip her. "I told them and they were fine with it. In fact, my father asked me to pick an English name for him as well."

Miss Cheow bit her lip. This was not the first time the arduous task of education was complicated by parents who sabotaged her efforts.

"Besides," Sally Bong added, "the Prime Minister told me that bilingualism is important for our generation. So if I learn English, I ought to pick an English name as well."

Miss Cheow felt a punch land on her stomach and almost knock the

air out of her. Not only had one of her star students blatantly challenged her, but she did so with the backing of the Prime Minister! It was proof yet again that decadent Western culture was insidiously corrupting the minds of the young. TV shows like *Charlie's Angels* instilled in them a false sense of arrogance, such that they felt it was hip to challenge authority. Given time, precious Asian values such as filial piety and respect for authority would be washed down the drain. Although Miss Cheow chose not to voice it, she did, at that very moment, experience a deep sadness for this lost generation.

Before the year was over, Sally Bong and Anand Babu received another invitation to step into the limelight. The Ministry of National Development decided to pick the pair as poster children when they launched the inaugural Racial Harmony Campaign. A Malay girl and a Eurasian boy were added to the mix to properly reflect Singapore's multiculturalism. Banners of the mixed-race quartet hung from the many lamp posts along Orchard Road, and posters depicting the four ambassadors grinning from ear to ear were pinned up on neighbourhood noticeboards. All public schools were issued half a dozen of these posters to put on display. The principal of River Valley Chinese Primary School asked for an additional banner measuring one metre by four metres, which he proceeded to display with pride on the school fence near the entrance.

Although Sally Bong would not admit it, she secretly basked in the ensuing fame. Kids from her block pointed her out to their parents when they shared a lift. The vegetable sellers at the wet market gleefully told her mother they recognised Sally Bong from the neighbourhood posters. Her heart went aflutter when she overheard a request from the prawn mee stall hawker for a photo of her endorsing his product. But her mother turned down the request. She was quietly adamant that Sally Bong should not let the undeserved attention or unearned adoration get to her head.

Sally Bong's mother need not have worried. Six months had barely

gone by when the Racial Harmony Campaign had to make way for the Courtesy Campaign. At school, posters of Singa the Courtesy Lion reminding everyone to say "please" and "thank you" were plastered all along the corridors. For the first week following the campaign launch, the principal played a tape recording of the National Courtesy song titled "Make Courtesy Our Way of Life" right after the student body recited the pledge. This practice was scaled down to twice a week the following month, then once a week for one more month before it was dropped entirely from the daily assembly. It was a welcome move, for the student body was sick and tired of the song by then.

After the Primary School Leaving Examinations, Sally Bong and her classmates were streamed to a dozen secondary schools all over the island. Every few years, someone would clamour for a reunion, and whoever could make it would meet for a meal and reminisce about the primary school days. Sally Bong and Anand Babu's moment in the limelight was brought up again and again but with less frequency, until it was dropped in favour of updates about one another's family or career development. Even Sally Bong stopped thinking about it.

Until Farrah Tan mentioned it again. In July of 2003.

Sally Bong had not been in touch with Farrah Tan for over a decade when the email came. The latter had written from her office, which was how Sally Bong came to learn that Farrah Tan was now working as a researcher at the National Library Board. The conspicuously fuller and rounder face staring out from the photo that accompanied the email header forewarned Sally Bong, such that she was able to compose herself and not look too startled at how much weight Farrah Tan had put on when the two met for tea the following weekend.

"I wanted to meet you because of work," Farrah Tan confessed after the initial courtesy of updating each other was dispensed with. "I've been put in charge of an event called Campaign City. It is an exhibition showcasing all the national campaigns over the last four decades. Remember the Racial Harmony Campaign poster that featured you and Anand? We are including that."

“Oh dear! That was from, what, 1977? I have almost forgotten about it!”

“I haven’t.” Farrah Tan laughed. “And I intend to make it the centrepiece of the exhibition.”

“What do you mean?” Sally Bong asked. The stirring of excitement, as always, induced her to reach for her wedding ring and start sliding it up and down her finger.

“I am going to film a reunion of the four of you and use it as a teaser for Campaign City.”

“The others have agreed?” Sally Bong asked. She had to admit that she liked the idea.

“You are the first one I approached. I am pretty sure William Fernandez will agree too.”

“You have tracked down the Eurasian boy?”

“You don’t know William Fernandez?” Farrah Tan was incredulous. “Public Service Commission scholar. Chief Editor of *The Straits Times*. Rumoured to be groomed for political office. He could be the poster boy for the Singapore success story!”

Sally Bong blushed. She imagined the four of them taking turns to introduce themselves on video. Her career path working as a nurse in a public hospital for eleven years before settling down to help her mother run the Chinese medical hall would pale in comparison to that of the Eurasian high achiever’s.

“I am still trying to track down the other two,” Farrah Tan continued. “Have you any idea what happened to Anand Babu?”

Sally Bong shook her head. The two had lost touch. Then she added, “But I did re-encounter Siti Hajar. Her boy was a patient in my ward, possibly ten years ago. I also met her brother. I don’t remember his name but I remember that he works as a prison officer. You might want to ask around.”

“That is actually helpful! I will keep you informed once I have news.”

The update came one week later. Farrah Tan managed to track down Siti Hajar. The latter was widowed and living in a government-subsidised rental flat with her three children. As she was unable to hold

down a full-time job, she and her family were dependent on long-term financial assistance. It came as no surprise that she was not keen to appear in a video interview that would be telecast nationwide.

“I am still trying to talk her into it. There is no shame in having a hard life. No one is going to judge her,” Farrah Tan claimed.

Sally Bong was not entirely sure she agreed. She was almost certain viewers would in fact judge someone like William Fernandez to be worthy of his success. They would ascribe to him the lauded attributes of ambition, focus and determination. In contrast, they would likely look at Siti Hajar’s rundown rental flat and her three fatherless children, and secretly conclude that the woman had made some bad life choices. As much as Sally Bong was keen to appear on the video, she too worried that viewers might judge her unfavourably. After all, many of her peers had ridden the fully charged economic engine of the robust Singapore economy back in the eighties and nineties and done well in life. She had not.

Another week passed before Farrah Tan called to inform her that the reunion-on-video idea had been shelved.

“Is it because you were not able to locate Anand?”

“No, I did. I tracked him down through Muhammed Khairuddin.”

“Who’s Muhammed Khairuddin?” Sally Bong asked, bewildered.

“Siti Hajar’s brother. It appears that Anand is serving a twelve-year sentence at Tanah Merah Prison.”

For a moment, Sally Bong could find no words. The shock was akin to learning about the unexpected death of an old friend one had lost touch with.

“A shocker, right?” Farrah Tan continued. “Even if the Prison Service allows us to stage a reunion behind prison walls, the unfortunate racial profiling will open up a whole can of worms. I mean, the Indian kid ends up behind bars, and the Malay girl on welfare. We simply can’t have that.”

Sally Bong could not sleep that night. After an hour of tossing about and rearranging her head on her pillow, she woke her husband up and

told him about Anand Babu.

“So the chap picked a life of crime and ended up in prison. Justice is served. Why is that bothering you?”

“Why are you so quick to judge? You don’t know him.”

“Not true. The court judged him to be guilty of a crime. That makes him a convicted criminal. That’s all I need to know about him.”

Sally Bong realised it would be futile to continue the discussion. She had sat next to Anand Babu in class for three years. She coached him and witnessed how he went from failing the Chinese exams to a grade D in the PSLE. Her husband might see Anand Babu as one among tens of thousands of indistinguishable criminals serving time behind bars, but not her. She once knew him.

The next afternoon, while it was quiet at the Chinese medical hall, she extracted a pink sheet of paper used to wrap herbs and began drafting a letter to Anand Babu. It took her three afternoons to complete it, and two more days of hesitation before she mailed it out. When no reply came after a fortnight, Sally Bong realised that she had been silly to expect one. Why would Anand Babu wish to reconnect with her?

When a letter arrived three months later, Sally Bong had almost forgotten about the matter. It was the Prison Service logo stamped on the top left of the envelope that jolted her memory. Anand Babu apologised for the extremely tiny handwriting he employed. He was allowed only a single sheet of writing paper, and he had so much to write. The delay, he explained, was due to the regimented routine in prison. Writing paper was issued only once a month. As nobody ever wrote to him, Anand Babu had always passed his sheet to his cellmate in exchange for five chocolate wafer bars. When Sally Bong’s letter arrived, Anand Babu was eager to respond and thus told his cellmate he could not let him have his upcoming standard issue. But his cellmate needed Anand Babu’s sheet because he was writing concurrent love letters to two sweethearts. He claimed that it was against their sworn code of brotherhood of the 369 secret society to go back on a promise. The dispute soon escalated into a fist fight, and both of them were thrown

into the dark cell. As part of the punishment, neither of them received the allotment of writing paper the following month. Which explained why Anand Babu’s reply came three months late.

As Anand Babu had run out of space by the time he fully explained the delay, Sally Bong had to patiently wait for the next letter to find out more. She bought a book of motivational quotes and mailed it to Tanah Merah Prison. In the letter that arrived the following month, Anand Babu thanked her profusely for the book. He had graciously let his cellmate copy quotes from the book when the latter composed his love letters, so their brotherhood had been properly restored. The problem of the dual sweethearts requiring two letters per month was resolved when Anand Babu helped to convince another inmate to give up his sheet of writing paper in exchange for seven chocolate wafer bars; Anand Babu had to sacrifice two of his own to make up the difference.

It took Anand Babu six letters over as many months to tell his story. His journey into the gangland of secret societies began while he was serving conscription as an infantry rifleman. Both his buddies, with whom he trained closely as a three-man team operating the general-purpose machine gun, so happened to be a pair of prized fighters belonging to the 369 secret society. It wasn’t long before he was recruited and inducted into their world. After the two-year conscription was over, Anand Babu was deployed to the 369 division that oversaw prostitution and drug operations in the segment of Geylang that stretched from Lorong 17 to 23. His ability to read and write Chinese, and speak Mandarin fluently was a curious anomaly that caught the attention of the Headman. When a vice squad cracked down on them and arrested a busload of Vietnamese prostitutes under their charge, Anand Babu spotted an opportunity. He stepped forward and volunteered to take the heat off the Headman. As a novice criminal with no previous record, he could and did get away with minimal sentencing. That became his first incarceration at the age of twenty-three.

After his release, Anand Babu was promoted in rank and took on more responsibility. Very quickly, he hit it off with a Vietnamese girl

under his charge, and the two became an item. His father was horrified when Anand Babu replaced his single bed with a queen-size model and invited his Vietnamese girl to move in. On his part, Anand Babu was annoyed that his father stubbornly ignored his girl's attempts to please him. The man constantly griped that the soups she boiled were either too salty or spicy for his taste, and that her incessant smoking was choking his lungs and killing him. Anand Babu finally lost his temper one day when he spotted his father yanking his girl's lacy red bra from the laundry pile and throwing it out the kitchen window. So he had been wrong to doubt his girl when she complained that her lingerie had mysteriously been going missing. After the shouting match was over, Anand Babu decided that it was time to move out.

The hunt for a rental room proved to be arduous. Although the prospective landlords did not clarify as such, Anand Babu was certain that his being Indian was the reason many of them turned him down. He himself had to turn down an offer because the landlord prohibited smoking. It was not until he surrendered to the reality check and accepted that it was necessary to rent an entire flat that he secured a deal. But the rental fees blew his budget to shreds. Anand Babu approached his Headman and asked to be a drug mule. He needed the money.

Two days after Anand Babu turned twenty-seven, he was apprehended and sentenced to six years of imprisonment for drug possession. He was barely two months in when his girl wrote him a tear-stained letter to break off the relationship; she was done with Singapore and would return to Vietnam. She vowed to stay away from the vice trade and hoped to marry a good, simple man. Although she would love to name her first child after him, she suspected her prospective husband would not understand nor accept an Indian name for the baby. A cat perhaps. That would be it. She would gently stroke Anand's furry back in the night and allow it to lick milk off her bare nipples the way he once did.

The one-third remission granted to inmates with a consistent record of good behaviour led to Anand Babu's early release at the age of thirty-one. He moved back in with his father. There was no more animosity,

only deeply felt gratitude; his father had helped to clear his debts while he was in prison. It was a huge sacrifice, for Anand Babu's father had been saving up in the hope that he could, when he reached sixty, retire comfortably in his village in Tamil Nadu, India. It looked like he would now have to stay in Singapore and work well into his seventies.

For two years Anand Babu kept his promise to his father and stayed away from the 369 secret society. He found a job flipping roti prata at a hawker centre, and worked a gruelling ten hours a day, six days a week. The spate of clean living at Tanah Merah Prison meant that Anand Babu was no longer addicted to alcohol, cigarettes or drugs. He was now living the unimpeachable life of a law-abiding citizen. It was a safe and healthy lifestyle. It was also extremely boring.

When Anand Babu found out that the mother of his old army buddy had passed away, he decided he had to drop in at the funeral vigil to pay his respects. In retrospect, it was a bad idea. Half the guests attending the vigil were old friends of his from the 369. Not only was the reunion rowdy and joyous, it led to follow-up invitations to drinking sessions and karaoke get-togethers. Anand Babu was quickly reminded of how exciting life was when one had money and friends.

Within three months, Anand Babu broke his promise to his father. He pretended that he was still working at the prata stall when he had, in fact, reverted to working for the 369 Headman. He told himself that he needed to earn quick cash and save up money so that his father could retire at sixty. It was imperative that he stepped up and be the son his father could count on. What he did not count on was the speed with which the law enforcement agency caught up with him. Within a year, he was back in Tanah Merah Prison, this time serving a twelve-year sentence.

It broke Sally Bong's heart to learn that Anand Babu's father had not once visited him in prison over the past three years. In his letters, Anand Babu professed that he was terribly sorry for the hurt he caused, and could understand why his father would give up on him. But how he wished for forgiveness!

That was the moment the spark of inspiration hit Sally Bong. She could make it happen! She knew where Anand Babu's father lived. She could go knock on his door, reintroduce herself and convince him to give his son another chance.

And Sally Bong did just that. The father, looking horrendously more gaunt and frail from the way she remembered him, took a while to recall the little girl he once gave free White Rabbit candies to. When Sally Bong produced the scrapbook and showed him the newspaper articles featuring all three of them, the father broke out into a sad grin. He had thrown away his tattered copy years ago. And then Sally Bong extracted the letters. She read aloud the portions that she had highlighted, where Anand Babu wrote that he was sorry, that he was grateful and that he missed his father terribly. The old man was in tears by the time she was done.

Sally Bong held his trembling hands and voiced her closing statement. "It is time to forgive and start over again."

The following day, Sally Bong wrote to Tanah Merah Prison. She had convinced Anand Babu's father to visit the son, and would like to make it a surprise. Would the Prison Service be kind enough to arrange for a date that she could bring the old man and allow her to witness the visit?

It took the Prison Service five working days to respond. The email began with the polite salutation of "Dear Ms Sally Bong", expressed in rather stiff language the gratitude and appreciation of her concern for said inmate, indicated that the Prison Service was agreeable to her proposed visit, suggested she call an office number on a preferred date and time to discuss details, and signed off with a familiar name: Muhammed Khairuddin.

Sally Bong was delighted. She remembered the man as an affable character from their encounter many years ago, despite the fact that the official email template effectively stripped away any trace of his personality. When she called on the appointed date and time, the man picked up after the first ring. It almost sounded like he had his palm placed on the receiver for the last ten minutes awaiting her call. Muhammed Khairuddin's jovial personality was apparent as they tied

down details of the impending visit. Although Sally Bong did find it a little strange that the man seemed hesitant to share updates about Siti Hajar when she asked, she did not make much of it. She was simply excited about the reunion she was engineering.

On the day of the scheduled visit, Sally Bong made her husband take a taxi to work and claimed the family car for her own use. She picked up Anand Babu's father, ascertained that the old man had had breakfast and sped down the Pan Island Expressway towards Changi. As she drove into the visitors' car park of Tanah Merah Prison, she noticed the tiny contingent of prison officers in blue uniforms waiting in the shade. A tall and imposing Malay officer wearing the epaulette of assistant superintendent and a wide grin stepped forward to greet the two of them. Sally Bong recognised Muhammed Khairuddin immediately.

The welcome party facilitated the security clearance before leading Sally Bong and Anand Babu's father past the rumbling automated gate, through a long and convoluted passageway, before depositing them in an interview room. The first thing Sally Bong noticed was the filming equipment set up in a corner of the room.

"The visit will be filmed and recorded for training and educational purposes. It was stated in the terms and conditions of the visitation form you signed earlier," Muhammed Khairuddin explained.

Sally Bong thought it was a rather odd clause to include in a standard visitation form. Before she could seek clarification, Muhammed Khairuddin continued, "My colleague is bringing Anand Babu in from Housing Unit D. It is deep in the compound, so it may take a while. In the meantime, I'll just have a little chat with the two of you."

The purported chat turned out to be a structured interview.

Muhammed Khairuddin adopted a soft and respectful tone as he asked Anand Babu's father about his relationship with his son. He allowed the old man ample time to search for words, and gently spurred him on with leading questions whenever he was stuck. After that, Muhammed Khairuddin turned to Sally Bong and delved into her side of the story. He encouraged her to elaborate on their friendship in childhood, and

to narrate in detail how she came to be motivated to go out of her way to facilitate the reunion between father and son. The interview must have lasted thirty minutes or more. At no point did the man display any concern that the session was taking too much time. Sally Bong secretly concluded that prison officers must not have long task lists, and therefore tended to drag out each item unnecessarily. Either that, or Anand Babu was held in multiple wrist and ankle restraints behind a series of heavily bolted gates that required time to unlock, such that Muhammed Khairuddin had to buy time for his arrival.

When Anand Babu did finally appear, Sally Bong was momentarily taken aback. Journeying with him through his letters over many months, Sally Bong had imagined that her childhood friend must look the part of a tired, jaded man close to giving up on life. That image could not be further from the spectacle standing in front of her. The standard-issue, thin white T-shirt strained itself against his broad, iron-plated chest and bulging biceps. His jawline had that sharp, angular distinction common among fitness models with minimal body fat, and his thick, bushy eyebrows lent him a heightened aura of masculinity. If Sally Bong hadn't known better, she would have thought the Prison Service ran a body-sculpting clinic for paying clients. But the inmate identification number printed on the wrist tag and the T-shirt was a sobering reminder that this was a man serving time behind bars.

Anand Babu broke down the instant he recognised his father. He rushed forward, fell on his knees and wrapped his sinewy arms around the raw-boned waist of the old man. Within seconds, father and son were sobbing horribly as they held and leaned into each other. Sally Bong could feel her own tears well up. As she extracted her handkerchief to dry her eyes, she spotted Muhammed Khairuddin gesticulating to who brought Anand Babu to the room to shift the tripod for a better angle. She brushed aside the pinch of disdain she felt, and told herself that the man was just doing his job. He had been instrumental in making the reunion possible, and she ought to be grateful.

The ensuing exchange in Tamil between father and son was

unintelligible to Sally Bong, but their affection and remorse were palpable. Muhammed Khairuddin permitted the pair an unsullied twenty minutes of supervised privacy before calling an end to the session. As Anand Babu was led away, he turned to Sally Bong and said, with the utmost sincerity, "You are an angel. I thank you for this."

Sally Bong was still emotional when she related the experience to her husband over dinner, but the sight of the latter playing with his new Nokia 1100 cellphone and paying her peripheral attention stopped her cold.

"Are you listening to me at all?"

"Yes, of course," the husband muttered. "He called you an angel."

Sally Bong could not tell if the element of sarcasm was intended, but she decided to shift gears to cold-shouldering anyway. It took her husband a full five minutes before he perceived the deep freeze of an icy silence.

"Look, that man has been in and out of prison several times. He is not the innocent boy you once knew. I am not saying that you have not done a good deed. You have. But you also have to take into account the possibility that he is playing with your sympathy. Don't get carried away and believe that it is now your responsibility to save him."

Sally Bong responded with a monumental, crazy-eyed glare to fully convey her horror. For the rest of the evening, she went about washing the dishes, feeding the aquarium fish and watering the potted plants on the patio as per her nightly routine, but she completely ignored her husband and behaved as if he existed in a parallel dimension that did not connect with hers. By bedtime, her husband came to a full and unconditional surrender. He was wrong to insinuate that Anand Babu could have been manipulative. His apathy towards a man determined to turn over a new leaf was symptomatic of an uncaring society. He was the reason ex-inmates continued to be discriminated against even after they had served their time in prison. What could he do to make it up to her?

Sally Bong broke her silence. "I do miss the Indonesian buffet at The Rice Table. We haven't been there in ages."

“Done. I’ll make a reservation for Saturday night.”

“Let’s make it Friday.”

“But I play badminton on Fridays!” her husband protested. Several seconds of renewed silence on the part of Sally Bong was what it took to remind him that this was meant to be a punishment. “All right. Friday it is then.”

“Let’s invite my parents too. I can’t remember the last time we took them out for dinner.”

Her husband was caught off guard by the heavy sentencing, but there was no way out of it, not when he had pleaded guilty to the crime.

Three months would pass before Sally Bong heard from Muhammed Khairuddin again. He reached out to her in his official capacity and invited her to attend a Prison Service event. It was an outreach programme to educate the public about giving inmates a second chance in life after their release. More importantly, Sally Bong’s effort to help reconcile Anand Babu and his father would be featured as part of the narrative. The official launch of the campaign video would be amiss without the presence of Sally Bong.

Once again, Sally Bong usurped the use of the family car on the day of the event. She fetched Anand Babu’s father and made her way down to Suntec City. She was a little curious about the choice of venue near the downtown business district; hall rental at Suntec City did not come cheap. Stationed at the registration counter as part of the welcome team, Muhammed Khairuddin spotted the pair immediately. He stepped forward to welcome them and ushered them to their seats three rows from the stage.

“Is there a mistake? Are you sure we should be sitting here?” Sally Bong was a little nervous. These were practically VIP seats.

“I am part of the planning committee. And we don’t permit mistakes.” Muhammed Khairuddin winked, smiling. “Unless, of course, you insist on sitting in the front row with our guest of honour.”

“And who is that?”

“The Prime Minister of Singapore.”

Sally Bong was rendered speechless. She had not anticipated that the event would draw such a prominent guest of honour. Prime Minister Goh had declared that he would step down as the second prime minister of Singapore after the National Day celebrations the following week, which meant this would be one of his last public appearances. Sally Bong had never seen the man in person. When the Prime Minister arrived, his entourage was so thick the event participants would not have been able to spot him had he not been exceptionally tall. Sally Bong was lucky in that she was seated a mere two rows behind him, and had an unobstructed view of the thinning hair at the back of his head.

The Prison Service director took to the podium and welcomed all the guests. He claimed that though he was not a talented storyteller, he would nevertheless begin with a little story. Once upon a time, there was a prisoner who was on a long bus ride home after his release. The other passengers noticed that he appeared to be rather nervous and asked him why. The man explained that he had written to his wife before his release with a proposal. If she wanted him back in her life, she ought to tie a yellow handkerchief on a tree that stood outside their town. If he did not see the handkerchief, he would remain on the bus and travel to another town to begin life anew. As the story went, the entire bus cheered when they spotted the tree with not one but dozens and dozens of yellow handkerchiefs. So it was a story with a happy ending.

The director then explained that many prisoners in Singapore stepped into a second prison after their release. In this second prison, they continued to suffer discrimination and distrust from society at large. Job application forms often required them to declare any criminal records they might have. If they chose to be honest, chances were slim that they could secure the job. The inability to gain employment more often than not would push them back into the criminal world of illegal dealings. It was a vicious cycle that needed to be broken. With this in mind, the Singapore Prison Service was launching a nationwide campaign called the Yellow Ribbon Project.

For a moment, Sally Bong thought she misheard. But as the director

elaborated on the vision and mission statement, he continued to use the term “Yellow Ribbon Project”. Unable to contain her curiosity, she turned to the gentleman seated beside her and asked whether it ought not be “Yellow Handkerchief Project” instead. Saying nothing, the gentleman extracted his cellphone, keyed the term “yellow ribbon story” into a search engine, selected one of the links churned out and passed his phone to Sally Bong.

The director was apparently being honest when he claimed not to be a talented storyteller. The version he shared was a short story written by Pete Hamill, a newspaper columnist who was inspired by the nineteenth-century practice of women wearing yellow ribbons in their hair to show their devotion to their sweethearts serving in the US Cavalry. Pete Hamill’s story in turn inspired songwriters Irwin Levine and L. Russell Brown to pen “Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree”. There was even an intriguing write-up of Pete Hamill suing the songwriters for copyright infringement.

Sally Bong was deeply engrossed in the article when she heard the gentleman next to her give an abrupt cough.

“Can I have my phone back?”

“I’m sorry. It’s just that the article is so interesting.” Sally Bong grinned as she passed him the phone. “Why did you have this article in your phone?”

“Google.”

“Sorry, what?”

“Learn to google.”

Sally Bong had no idea what the word meant, but she felt too embarrassed to ask. It had been four years since she left the healthcare industry to help her mother run Ning Xia Yao Fang. Her daily routine included the ordering, receiving, unpacking, sorting, sunning, grinding, storing, labelling and sale of Chinese herbs and tonics. She did what the medical hall assistant Uncle Tay had been doing for two decades before he decided to retire. It looked like she might continue with the same routine for the next twenty years. She was kept busy, and found comfort

in the familiarity of the daily tasks. She had also acquired a certain degree of expertise pertaining to traditional Chinese medicine. If a regular customer chose not to wait while her mother was tied up with a patient, she could confidently prescribe basic herbal remedies based on the symptoms she observed. Take coughs for instance. If symptoms included slight breathlessness, small amounts of thin white phlegm and a runny nose, Sally Bong would surmise that it was a wind-cold cough. But if the cough was loud and harsh, with thick yellow phlegm and yellow nasal discharge, Sally Bong would put her money on a wind-heat cough. Unless, of course, she observed chapping on the lips, nose or skin, and there was a complaint of chest pain during coughing fits, then it would likely be a wind-dry cough. Depending on which diagnosis it was, Sally Bong would recommend herbal remedies ranging from white mulberry leaf and chrysanthemum flower to codonopsis root and cordyceps. She was not trained to be a Chinese physician, but her decade-long experience working as a registered nurse helped. The earnestness with which the residents in her neighbourhood came to her for advice was effectively a liquid booster that piped in through cannulas to build her self-confidence. But this confidence did not extend beyond the Chinese medical hall. Seated beside this gentleman who looked to be her age but who appeared so worldly and knowledgeable, Sally Bong felt like what she imagined Anand Babu once did during Miss Cheow Chwee Ling’s Chinese class—possibly the stupidest person in the room.

“Is that you up there?”

Sally Bong reined in her meandering thoughts and looked up. At some point during the presentation, the director had stopped talking and the Yellow Ribbon promotional video was playing. The screen showed Sally Bong relating her moment of shock when she learnt that an old and dear friend had been incarcerated. This was a childhood buddy who had the tenacity to overcome a handicap and master an alien language against immense odds. She had helped him once before, and she was not ready to give up on him now.

It was a surreal experience viewing an image of herself blown up

many times on the huge drop-down screen and hearing her own voice professing her motive and intention aloud to a hall full of people. The embarrassment that engulfed her was tinged with a mix of thrill and fear. Would the audience believe her, or would they question her sincerity? She was mollified and appreciative when the gentleman next to her leaned in and whispered, "Well done. I am impressed."

There was no doubt that the viewers were moved when they watched the hulk of Anand Babu's back quivering as the penitent man wrapped himself around his father sobbing uncontrollably. Sally Bong spotted a few in the front row raising their hands to stifle a sniff or to wipe away a tear. When the lights came back on after the video ended, thunderous applause ensued. Sally Bong felt a surge of exhilaration. How she wished her husband and her parents were at hand to witness this!

The director spoke into the microphone and shared that he himself was moved to tears when he first watched the clip. The compassion and humanity that prompted this angel of a lady to step forth to repair the trust lost and rekindle the love forgotten between father and son were precious qualities in short supply today. She believed, she took action and she made a difference. And he was proud to introduce her to the nation this morning. The lady who epitomised the spirit of the Yellow Ribbon Project, Ms Sally Bong.

In a daze, Sally Bong felt a tap on her shoulder. It was Muhammed Khairuddin urging her to stand up to receive the round of applause coming from people craning their necks to see her. She did so and turned to urge Anand Babu's father to stand up as well. But the old man shook his hand frantically and slouched further down in his chair in an attempt to remain out of sight. Sally Bong bowed in various directions. Her heart was filled to the brim with a feeling that was hard to pin down. It was not quite pride, nor honour; she was not seeking either of these. But it was a good feeling, and she gave herself permission to embrace it. Only when she came full circle and found herself face to face with the beaming Muhammed Khairuddin did she feel a stab of guilt. She remembered judging him unfavourably when she spotted

him manipulating the camera to attain a better angle of the emotional reunion. She now realised that had it not been for his predatory act of manipulation, the Yellow Ribbon video would not have been as efficacious. Humbled, Sally Bong came to accept that a little creative crafting was sometimes necessary to achieve maximum impact for a worthy social cause.

The Prime Minister was next invited onstage to unveil the Yellow Ribbon logo. Once the make-believe buzzer contraption was brought forth, the Prime Minister made a show of pressing down hard on it with both palms, at which point Muhammed Khairuddin communicated over his mobile phone with the technician and instructed the latter to click to the next slide on the drop-down screen. The entire hall clapped diligently, even though many of them secretly thought the colour scheme of yellow and grey to be rather uninspiring. The tagline, "Help Unlock the Second Prison", was on point, albeit unimaginative. There was a general feeling of being let down after the emotionally riveting campaign video they had watched. Sally Bong did not share the feeling. She was still stunned from the unexpected accolades.

The Prime Minister gave a short motivational speech that was expected of him. He tried to inject a dose of humour by mentioning that his granddaughter was in a fit of envy when she learnt that the Mediacorp TV heartthrob she madly adored was making an appearance as the Yellow Ribbon ambassador, and that her grandfather, who had never watched any of his work on screen, would be taking a photo with him.

There was a peculiar shade of embarrassment on the director's countenance when he took over the microphone. He emitted a dry cough and explained that there had been a change of plans: the appointed Yellow Ribbon ambassador had dropped out of the project due to unforeseen circumstances. The shade of embarrassment deepened into an alarming crimson when the Prime Minister chose to ask for the reason. The entire hall felt the director's pain when he had to explain that three nights ago, the Mediacorp TV heartthrob failed a breathalyser test at a roadblock, and would be charged in court. There was a high

chance that he would come under their supervision soon, as an inmate.

The Prime Minister appeared to regret pursuing the topic. He gave a forced laugh and remarked that it was probably a good thing the incident happened before the launch of the Yellow Ribbon Project. “Less harm done this way,” he added. “The Prison Service can always look for a replacement ambassador. I am certain there are many suitable candidates who are up to the challenge.”

The director later wished that the Prime Minister could have stopped right there and stepped off the stage. But for some reason, the man pointed at Sally Bong seated in the third row and remarked, as though he was struck by a flash of inspiration, that such a compassionate agent of change would in fact make an outstanding Yellow Ribbon ambassador. Encouraged by the outburst of applause, the Prime Minister beckoned Sally Bong to come onstage. He would be honoured to take a photo with her.

No one in the hall could tell, but the director was nearing a nervous breakdown. Over the last three days, his panic-stricken team had to scramble to nail down emergency funds because all the publicity material bearing the image or name of the Mediacorp TV heartthrob had to be reprinted at an exorbitant surcharge applicable to time-sensitive projects. The decision was to go without an ambassador for the inaugural year. But now that the Prime Minister had randomly picked a new candidate in the presence of the press and invited guests, they would be obligated to acknowledge his pick. The realisation that he would have to dig even deeper for funds he did not have to print yet another batch of publicity material was enough to send his head spinning, and he held on to the podium for support.

The other person who felt her head spinning was Sally Bong. In a prolonged daze, she watched as a team of press photographers took pictures of the Prime Minister beaming next to her. Over the next few weeks, she was engulfed in a whirlwind of coordinated activities to have her image printed onto posters and banners, and to give coached and supervised interviews to the media. Her husband treated her and her

parents to a lavish dinner at the Jumbo Seafood Restaurant in celebration of her recurring moment in the national spotlight. For once, her mother admitted that she was proud of her. What happened twenty-seven years ago was a happy coincidence. This time round, Sally Bong deserved every ounce of attention that came her way.

“You know what I am going to do?” Sally Bong’s husband chirped as he applied the crab cracker on a claw before dipping the meat in black pepper sauce. “I am going to frame the two photos of Sally with the two Prime Ministers on the wall behind the sofa. One on the left, one in the centre.”

“Why not on the right?” Sally Bong’s father asked.

“I will keep that spot empty,” Sally Bong’s husband said as he leaned over to place the crab claw on her plate. “We have a new Prime Minister about to be sworn in, and I hereby predict that my wife will have her photo taken with him too.”

Sally Bong rolled her eyes. Her man was being really, really silly.

TWO

“IS HE COMING? He’d better be coming. You promised us.”

Sally Bong glanced at the only two nurses who showed up for the session and sighed. Things were not turning out the way she had hoped. The trigger point for her current and rather unenviable situation could be traced back to the hospital’s workplan seminar back in January. Her hand was up in the air the moment the floor was opened to questions and suggestions.

“I am Sally Bong, from the cancer ward.” The mic amplified her rotund voice and projected her confidence across the seminar room. “I feel that we nurses are not being empowered. There is so much more we have to offer. You are not tapping us enough.”

There was a freeze among the participants. All the nurses glared at her.

“The thing is, we are the ones running the wards, we know what is happening on the ground, and yet all the instructions are top-down,” Sally Bong continued. “I mean, this is 1992, not 1962. We need to do things differently. A bottom-up approach to collate feedback and suggestions would be a good start.”

The moderator on the panel glanced to his left, saw that none of the panellists appeared eager to take on the point raised and so decided to have his pick. “Dr Alvin?”

The targeted panellist cleared his throat and spoke. “There is a daily briefing before every shift begins. You can always bring up your suggestions to the head nurse.”

“I can name a few reasons why that is absolutely the worst platform to be bringing up suggestions,” Sally Bong said. “Number one, everyone is on their feet and crowded around the admin counter, ready to shift

and make way whenever a trolley or wheelchair needs to pass through. Physically uncondusive. Number two, the head nurse is dispensing information and updates, so everyone is switched on to information-retention mode. No one is mentally prepared to discuss ideas. Number three, the outgoing team is waiting for us to take over, so no one wants the briefing to last longer than it needs to. How can we possibly discuss any topic in depth under these circumstances?”

Everyone in the seminar room could feel the subtle tension in the air. This young nurse had come prepared, and appeared unfazed by the body of authoritative figures on the panel.

“We have in place a suggestion box for our customers. Perhaps we can open it up to internal staff too?” Dr Alvin shrugged, pivoting on his chair to glance at the other panellists for support. None came.

“That is not going to work,” Sally Bong stated unequivocally. “The reason we have a suggestion box is to shield us from disgruntled customers, so that we don’t have to deal with them in the heat of the moment. The official getting-back-to-you-within-five-working-days line allows for a cooling-off period, in the hope that the customer will not be holding on as strongly to the grudge. We all know that. In that same manner, this system will discourage the enthusiasm of staff with good ideas.”

Everyone was listening intently now. There were muffled queries as to who this firecracker of a nurse was. What did she say her name was again?

“What do you have in mind then?” Dr Alvin asked, keeping his fingers crossed that this Q&A session would not spiral out of control and go beyond the allotted thirty minutes. He had tickets to the Singapore Symphony Orchestra and a pre-concert dinner to get ready for.

“I suggest we designate a special room. We will call it the Brains Are Equal Room. The moment we enter, all our ranks, titles and credentials are set aside. We meet brain to brain.” Sally Bong executed a finger-swishing motion between herself and Dr Alvin seated on the elevated stage. “I may be a nurse, but in this room, my brain is equal to yours.”

One of the participants did a shrill wolf whistle, and almost everyone started to laugh. A few began clapping, and within seconds, the others joined in the applause jubilantly.

“This is how it works. Let’s say I have an idea, the implementation of which would involve Human Resources, Logistics and Kitchen Operations. I will invite one representative from each team to the Brains Are Equal Room, where I bring up my idea and we brainstorm. If we find the idea viable, I will draw up an action plan and submit it to the management. This way, anybody working in Alexandra Hospital will be guaranteed a hearing. Down to the very last cleaner auntie, who may have some strong words about how we should conduct ourselves in the hospital toilets.”

The participants erupted into laughter. A handful secretly lamented the fact that there was no cleaning crew present at the workplan seminar; they would have felt vindicated.

“That is an interesting idea,” Dr Alvin said, right off the bat. “We will definitely look into it.”

“I am glad to hear that.” Sally Bong beamed and proceeded to address the entire body of participants. “Is there anybody here in charge of the quarterly staff magazine? Show of hands, please.”

It took a little cajoling from her before a hand meekly sprouted up.

“Good. Leave me a page in the next issue, will you? I am very eager to roll this out. And thank you, Dr Alvin.”

And that was how Sally Bong secured the implementation of what came to be known as the Brains Are Equal programme. Unsurprisingly, Sally Bong was put in charge. She decided that to make a statement about the inclusivity of ideas regardless of where they originated within the organisational hierarchy, the first session ought to be devoted to the very group that was often disregarded—the cleaning crew.

Sally Bong was, however, caught by surprise at how difficult it was to recruit participants from the cleaning crew. They were generally apprehensive and wanted to know if it required a written test or involved some form of assessment. When told that the operations manager would

be invited, a handful vehemently declined, believing this to be some sly ploy by the management to sniff out the dissidents among them. One Chinese cleaner auntie in particular wanted to know if another Malay cleaner auntie, who was her arch nemesis, would be invited. If the latter was, she demanded to be included, for it would be unfair for her not to be present to defend herself when her arch nemesis made accusations against her to the management.

After much arduous persuasion and copious reassurances, Sally Bong finally gathered enough participants to kickstart the inaugural session. Keeping in mind the need for representation, Sally Bong invited a Chinese uncle in his seventies, a Chinese auntie and an Indian auntie in their sixties, a PRC man in his thirties, and a Malay woman in her twenties.

Trouble started the instant the Chinese auntie stepped into the room. She made the observation that she was one of only two not wearing the cleaning crew uniform.

“Why are they in uniform? Are they working now?” she asked in Mandarin, pointing at the Indian auntie.

“Yes, but the management very kindly made an exception and allowed them to participate,” Sally Bong explained.

“But this is not fair. I have to come here on my rest day. I am not getting paid now, you know?”

Sally Bong bit her lip. She knew this Chinese auntie had a reputation for being belligerent, but chose to disregard it because she wanted the programme to be inclusive. Now she was paying the price.

“It is very difficult to arrange for everyone to participate during their working hours. Some of us will have to sacrifice a bit. I hope to seek your understanding.”

“Never mind lah.” The Chinese uncle was a genial fellow and made an attempt to defuse the tension. “There are coffee and biscuits. Just take it as a party lah.”

“What are you talking about? They are also eating the biscuits and drinking the coffee mah,” the Chinese auntie continued, stabbing her finger in the direction of the Indian auntie. Alarmed, the Indian auntie



PHOTO BY VANCE HO

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

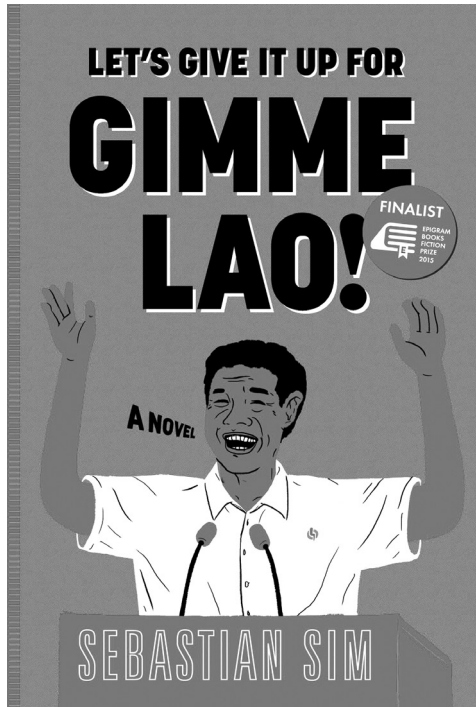
Sebastian Sim grew up in a two-room HDB flat with parents who were part of the pioneer generation of independent Singapore. Not one to shy away from the road less taken, he has tried his hand in diverse industries: bartender at Boat Quay, assistant outlet manager at McDonald's, insurance salesman, officer in a maximum security prison, and croupier in a casino. He published three Chinese wuxia novels between 2004 and 2012. *And the Award Goes to Sally Bong!* is his third English-language novel; *Let's Give It Up for Gimme Lao!* was a finalist for the 2015 Epigram Books Fiction Prize, and *The Riot Act* won the prize in 2017.



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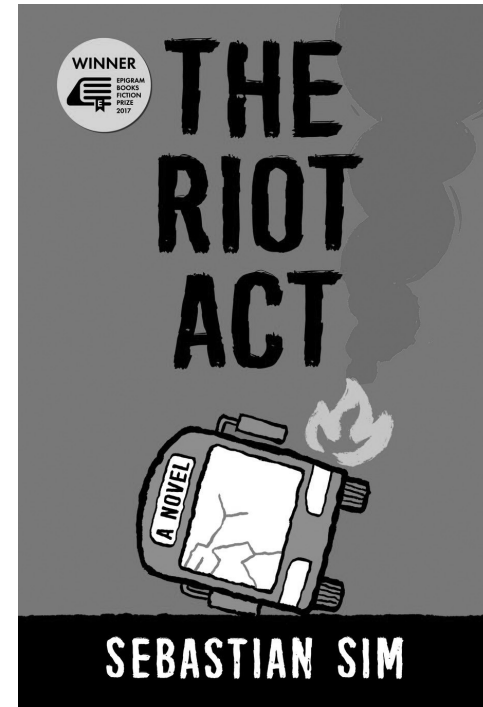


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