

SINGAPORE **E** CLASSICS

RICKY STAR
LIM THEAN SOO



LIM THEAN SOO was a civil servant most of his life and was Director General of Customs in Singapore. He has published novels, books of short stories and a volume of poems. He describes his first novel *Southward Lies the Fortress* (1971) as a 'history in novel form' about the Japanese siege and eventual conquest of Singapore. The poems are collected in *The Liberation of Lily and Other Poems*. Of his many short stories, *The Expatriate* is published in *ONE the Anthology* (2012), edited by Robert Yeo.

RICKY STAR

OTHER BOOKS IN THE SINGAPORE CLASSICS SERIES

Green is the Colour by Lloyd Fernando

Scorpion Orchid by Lloyd Fernando

The Immolation by Goh Poh Seng

Glass Cathedral by Andrew Koh

The Scholar and the Dragon by Stella Kon

Spider Boys by Ming Cher

Three Sisters of Sze by Tan Kok Seng

The Adventures of Holden Heng by Robert Yeo

LIM THEAN SOO



EPIGRAM BOOKS / SINGAPORE

To aspiring young writers of Singapore

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Introduction

THE YEAR IN which Lim Thean Soo's *Ricky Star* was published, 1978, was a time of transition. Singapore had survived its break from Malaysia in 1965 better than most observers had predicted, the economic impact of the subsequent withdrawal of British forces in 1971 more than mitigated by economic growth centred on industries such as oil refining. In the period after 1965, the built environment had changed rapidly through the growth of Housing & Development Board (HDB) estates, and indeed whole New Towns such as Toa Payoh. Politics had entered a deep freeze from which it would not emerge until the 1980s: all parliamentary seats were held by the People's Action Party (PAP), the ideological movement to the right of which was illustrated by its departure from the Socialist International in 1976. While English-language literature poets such as Arthur Yap and Edwin Thumboo continued to engage with the linguistic and cultural complexities of contemporary Singapore, the interests of novelists had largely shifted elsewhere. Goh Poh Seng's pioneering Singapore-focused *If We Dream Too Long* (1968) was followed by *The Immolation* (1977), a novel set in an unnamed country remarkably like Vietnam, while

Lim's first two novels, *Southwards Lies the Fortress* (1971) and *Destination Singapore* (1976), were historical novels set during World War Two. Lloyd Fernando's influential *Scorpion Orchid* (1976) returned to student politics in the 1950s. *Ricky Star* was thus unique in dealing with near-contemporary post-independence Singapore and the beginning of its economic transformation in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Reflecting its time of publication, *Ricky Star* is a novel of transition. Lim's narrative, like Goh's *If We Dream Too Long* before it, features an alienated protagonist. Times, however, have changed: Ricky Tay is a much darker character than Goh's hapless Kwang Meng. Bewildered by the transition to independence, Kwang Meng is alienated from a nation-building project identified with political quietism and economic growth. Ricky's alienation from society, in contrast, comes through a wholesale embrace of the capitalism that serves as a motor for national development. The novel follows Ricky's rapid ascent of a series of corporate ladders, his marriage to and abuse of his middle-class wife, Amy, the birth of his daughter, Jive, and then his inevitable decline when he overreaches himself. Yet it is also represented as the culmination of a more traditional intergenerational story of the rise and fall of a Chinese family through a curse laid on Ricky's grandfather. Ricky's father, Ah Kwang, a freelance produce broker, loses money and dies, neglected, in a nursing home; his uncle Chin Aik goes mad and murders a woman, while his half-brother Sonny commits

suicide. Figures who succeed in the novel, in contrast, are those who show a commitment to a larger social world and to self-improvement: Ricky's younger sister, Debbie, who pursues further studies in Australia, or the social worker Reggie Sim.

In exploring Singapore's economic and social transformation, Lim frequently focuses on the landscapes encountered by his characters. The narrative proper begins with a panoramic description of the Singapore River crowded with boats, "the lifeline of commerce with the Eastern countries for more than a hundred years", but not also without a hint of transience. From the high-rise buildings on Shenton Way, representing Singapore's burgeoning economy, the lighters and other craft appear shrunken, "like conglomerations of brownish sea creatures huddled together"; a year before *Ricky Star* was published, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew had announced a project to clean up the river. A decade later, it would be emptied of its craft, the populations of Lim's "floating habitation" resettled in Housing & Development flats, and its commercial activity displaced to the wharves of Pasir Panjang. Singapore's development invades other spaces: on a trip to St John's island, visions of an "expanse of blue, speckled with wave crests of white" are replaced with the "onward movement of flotsam, a jamboree of broken planks, logs, seaweed, bottles and little oil slicks". The kampung, whose "cohesive community" at first appears to offer refuge from social change outside its boundaries, is also, on closer

inspection, a site of transformation—lovers behave with less inhibition than before, young men wear bell bottoms, and the concrete buildings on its margins creep ever closer.

Older landscapes under siege contrast with new social spaces that reflect new gender roles. The factory in which Ricky initially works is “spacious, well-lit and air-conditioned”; female workers, in immaculate uniforms, work with precise efficiency, watched over by a manager concerned only with “the maximisation of income in the shortest possible time”. Such efficiency also penetrates into leisure time. Air-conditioned coffeehouses now lure customers, transmitting “hypnotic waves beckoning people to patronise them. Everything was done by the early owners to attract the customers—modern décor, dimmed lighting, soft music, pretty waitresses in close-fit mini-skirted uniform and stress on quality service.”

Yet *Ricky Star* is not a young man’s book. Lim was well into his fifties when he published it, and in many ways the novel expresses bafflement at, rather than empathy with, Singapore’s incipient modernity. His portrait of the feminist “libber” Daisy, who views men as “abominable beings”, now seems quaintly stereotypical. The opposition between Asian tradition and the “[d]riftling teenagers and... drop-outs” who try “to copy the lifestyles of their counterparts, in the West” seems anomalous today, in an era in which popular culture in Singapore is increasingly influenced by East Asian models. Yet to its author’s credit, Lim’s novel does not simply indulge in a

nostalgia for a vanished organic past: its uneasiness accurately reflects the lifeworld of his contemporaries in Singapore in the 1970s, when the ideals of nationalism of their youth had faded, to be replaced with the hard realities of global capital and the marketplace. Capital is magical in *Ricky Star*, Ricky and his friends quickly climbing the corporate ladder. Its good proliferate: air-conditioned offices, expensive lunches at top restaurants, chauffeur driven Mercedes and Jaguar cars. And yet, as the narrative trajectory of the novel shows, they can vanish as quickly as they materialise: capital is mobile, and it can flow out of an individual’s life as rapidly as it flowed in.

A further uneasiness in the novel relates to language. A contemporary reader finds certain expressions—particularly elements of dialogue—jarring, as Lim struggles to find an appropriate register in formal written English for events that occur in a disparate social and linguistic realms. “By Jove”, for instance, seems an implausible exclamation from a young man of his generation in 1970s Singapore. Lim’s manuscript for the novel, preserved in the National University of Singapore library, illustrates the trouble he took to search for an appropriately Singaporean idiom in English. At times this search produces solutions that acknowledge Singapore’s linguistic diversity—in the manuscript a servant refers to Debbie using the Mandarin version of her Chinese name, “Lian”—in revision this becomes, more plausibly, the Hokkien “Bie”. Yet the process of revision, illustrated by corrections in red ink on the school

notebooks Lim used to write the novel, often seems to result in an increased, rather than reduced, formality and a stiffness of expression. Ricky's realisation that "he was not beholden to a capricious, money-minded proprietor" for instance, is an interpolation in a passage originally written in a plainer style, as is the gloss that a police inspector's "equanimity had returned" after his location of a suspect for the murder that is the centre of one of the novel's sub-plots.

Many of the apparent defects of Lim's novel, however, represent real historical challenges for an author living in a rapidly changing society: questions of the use of different types of English and the way in which to represent a multilingual lived reality in English-language fiction would persist into the twenty-first century. In *Ricky Star*, at crucial moments, characters turn away from a world saturated by capitalism to the comfort of literary texts. At one point Debbie asks her future husband Graham why he reads translations of Chinese classic novels such as *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, and the discussion moves on to early accounts of Singapore such as *Hikayat Abdullah* as well as American writers such as John Dos Passos. Such books, Graham notes, "act as a sort of anchor for me in this fast-changing world". Lim perhaps attempts a similar strategy in his novel itself, beginning his Prologue and his Epilogue with quotations from the Tang dynasty poets Li Bai and Du Fu. For contemporary readers in Singapore, Lim's novel anchors us—perhaps for the first time—in a particular

historical period that is growing ever more remote. Like all anchors, it causes us to pause, snagging on obstinate histories and memories, and make us look again, more deeply, at a period and a way of life that we might otherwise pass with only a brief backward glance.

Philip Holden, August 2012

Philip Holden is Professor of English Language and Literature at the National University of Singapore, and has published widely on Southeast Asia literatures in English, with a particular focus on Singapore. He is co-author of *The Routledge Concise History of Southeast Asian Writing in English*, and co-editor of *Writing Singapore: An Historical Anthology of Singapore Literature*.

RICKY STAR

Prologue

Since yesterday had to abandon me and flee,
Today has hurt my heart to a greater degree.

—*Li Bai ("A Farewell to Secretary Shu-yun")*

IT WAS ONE of those monsoon evenings when the setting sun seemed to cast longer shadows than usual. The rain clouds had raced to the south, leaving behind a characteristic earthy smell on the misty land. Small tracks of laterite mud stained the edge of the grass. Red puddles were scattered here and there. The dense leaves of the huge trees remained moist. The buildings and houses looked wet at the corners and the caves. The city seemed overwhelmed with tears.

In his apartment, Ricky Tay stared hard at the reproduction of a Matisse hanging from the orange-coloured wall of the ornate drawing-room. He recalled with considerable pride that more than three years back he had picked it up from a small art gallery in Montparnasse. That was during the heyday of his fortune when he travelled extensively at company expense. How wildly he enjoyed those trips abroad! As he gazed at the picture on the wall, it seemed to look back mockingly at him.

It made him bitter and angry, as he had for days been in a black mood. His dreary eyes caught the other two paintings, a batik scene by Seah Kim Joo and a bold abstract by Thomas Yeo.

They had a placating effect on him. He had purchased them on the occasion when, for the first time, he obtained his hard-earned commission of a few thousand dollars. Prior to that, his immediate office superior had jibed at his lack of taste in art. So he bought the two paintings and exhibited them. In time, he grew to be fond of them. Those local art pieces reminded him how he had progressed from his lowly position of a hobnobbing junior sales executive to the high status of managing-director of his own firm. On hindsight, he intuitively felt that he had been much happier in the position of a hobbledehoy where he started. That was just before the time when he met and fell in love with Amy, his wife. Next, his eye fell on the Chinese scroll handed to him by his father when he had left primary school and long before his old man had retired from society. It subdued the furious mood that he was still in, for the scroll was a gift from the old man to remind him of his father's life of ups and downs. Mr. Tay wanted his son to remain at the top and to hold on to that position for good. But as the boy grew up, his attachment to his father weakened. Their relationship was to reach a point which could be called estrangement.

The reason for Ricky's dejection was that, a week ago, he had lost a defamation lawsuit lodged against him by the general manager of a leading firm in which he had formerly

worked. The compensation that he paid the plaintiff, the cost of court proceedings and his counsel's fees had drained Ricky's bank reserves drastically. He had made a quick assessment of the balance of his worldly assets. They comprised the major share in a tourist agency about to be liquidated, one lot of ten thousand shares under par value, a two-year-old Jaguar bought at his company's expense and a collection of curios of doubtful value. His apartment fortunately was not under mortgage. Of course, he had not excluded the jewellery that he had bought for his wife and their only daughter, already coming to four years of age. He did not know where she kept them. He never felt endearingly towards his wife, as some husbands did, and had always measured his wife in material terms. Amy earned just below the thousand-dollar mark and she was a poor social mixer. He had unjustly concluded that she was, all in all, a marginal liability, disregarding her winsome looks and tolerable efficiency in after-office housekeeping. He stuck to his marriage so long as she could provide him with nocturnal solace and a steady income. After the old, domestic servant left them, they had hired a maid, but the teenager was made to resign when Ricky grew tired of her after a series of affairs with her while his wife was out visiting her parents. So Amy had to do the housework aided by a part-time worker.

Their daughter, Jive, was the only bond just strong enough to hold them together. He had given her the name Jive because that was what he was doing exactly when Amy contracted her

initial labour pain. He hated conventional names. Jive sounded lively, rhythmic and full of fun. He had wanted a boy badly. So he did not shower all his fatherly affection on her. All the same, he loved her. But he did not allow his father-in-law and mother-in-law to dote on her. As for his father, the old man only saw the child once when Amy clandestinely took her to see him in his seclusion at the home for the aged.

Ricky stretched his hand for the glass of unfinished martini. After taking a sip, he put it back on the side table. He had been moping for some time and wanted to shake off his depression. He had never felt it so acutely before. He had reached the stage when he was contemplating the unthinkable—a man in a rage could put away for good the person whom he imagined or believed was the cause of his downfall. He took the drink and finished it, as if to steady himself. He went to the balcony and looked towards the tall, opulent skyscrapers in the distance. The lights of a few nearby blocks had come on. In the past, the scene pleased him immensely. The fact was that the development of the real estate among the lush greenery exemplified his life and his royal road to success. Right then, the sight irked him. As he stood wearing his bathrobe, he ejected an expletive. He did not feel completely at home in that Western garb that he started to wear when he became affluent. At first, he felt somewhat uneasy in it. He had even thought it indecent to have clothing that loosely covered his private parts. Pyjamas were more comfortable but they were

not the correct wear until sleeping time. His superiors and fellow executives laughed when they saw him in them on a Saturday afternoon. From that time, he began to accumulate a small collection of fancy towels, expensive robes, coloured underwear, mod beach coats and the other articles of clothing worn by the peer company with whom he had to move. It was ironical that his first job was with a garment factory producing apparel of conservative fashion. His old man was not happy about his lavish spending on trendy clothes but prudently decided not to interfere in what he regarded as youthful folly. That was before the old man failed badly in business. During his time the old man wore dark blue trousers of coarse material just down to his knees and a Chinese coat of the same colour. He had only one pair until the old lady, his wife, told him to make another. He searched for the cheapest tailor in town and had it made. For office wear, he had a few tailored shirts and baggy long pants.

Ricky gaped at the tall buildings afar, lost in revengeful thoughts. He clenched his hands. From the kitchen he heard Amy shouting, "Ricky, dinner's about ready. Get dressed, dear!" He felt annoyed with her for interrupting his thoughts. He simply wanted to be left alone to pick up the threads of the events that had led to his adversity and to find a quick solution to his predicament. He wanted to yell back, "Damn you, bitch!" but he restrained himself from doing so, as he saw her approaching with a consoling smile. He eyed her for a moment

and said firmly, "I'm going out. No dinner for me." She gave him a pained look. She knew better than to argue with him. She had long resigned herself to bondage to a man with a vile temper. Despite this, she had so far stood fast by him whenever he was in trouble.... He brushed her aside and went to dress.

Shortly later, he emerged from the dressing-room. As he neared the door, he felt someone tugging at his T-shirt. It was Jive. "Where are you going, daddy?" she asked sadly. He gave her an unkind look. He felt that he was going to blow up but he controlled himself. Instead, he indicated in a matter-of-fact way, "Jive, dad must go out to meet a business friend. It's part of my work, you know." It was a lie. He forced a smile on her while Amy watched them with concern. He took out a five-dollar note from his wallet, put his arm around her and, in a voice artificially contrived, said, "Here, keep this, darling, to buy something, say a doll." She glanced at him, wringing from herself an unwilling smirk. She kissed him on the cheek. "Bye bye, daddy!" she exclaimed and ran towards her mother. Amy held her tightly. It was all she really had and loved. Ricky closed the door behind him and took the lift down. He went to his car and soon it sped away carrying him on one of his jaunts. For several months, he had never had a fling. Henceforth he would abandon himself.

1

THE WOODEN LIGHTERS and other small goods-carrying boats jammed the mooring places in the basin and elsewhere along the waterfront. They stretched nearly one-and-a-half kilometres into the river. Even though they were packed together, it was a matter of amazement that the innermost ones close to the quayside could manoeuvre themselves out when they wanted to do so. The crowded fleet, the lifeline of commerce with the Eastern countries for more than a hundred years, served as a sort of floating habitation for the small population of lightermen and their assistants. The crafts, lying close together, acted as interlocked pontoons for them to move from one to another with agility. Even when the boats were jostled about by the tide or the backwash of moving engined-vessels, travel to and from the maze of nestled boats never really seemed hazardous. The different kinds of craft in their choice berthing areas never failed to be an entrancing sight to the tourists. The bigger ones had large eyes painted at the top of their sterns; each had a sheltered cabin for the crew in the rear with a resting place for the sea goddess or other deities, a place to eat and sleep and a central empty hulk to take

in the goods lifted overside into them by the cranes of ocean liners and coasters. From the top of high-rise buildings, the boats looked like conglomerations of brownish sea creatures huddled together for protection. But, when there were too many of these craft day in and day out, it was a fair indication that the seaborne trade was slack.

The blazing sun at noon forced the lightermen and labourers to disperse under the shade of the few large trees along the river bank. Some were having a nap. Others were playing *pak korw*, shouting jubilantly at each triumph and cursing in the vilest language at each deal of poor cards. The stakes were small sums of money. Usually there would be a non-player who kept a lookout for policemen on patrol. Under one of the trees, a few lazing or underemployed workers were killing time with idle talk. As usual, the topics drifted to diminished earnings, petty tiffs among themselves, difficulties with the enforcement officers, the miserliness of the towkays, domestic problems, liquor and women. Aimlessly the conversation went on to fill the time before the port gates opened.

“There’s a standstill in produce,” one of them moaned. Produce meant trade in rubber, copra, coffee, pepper, spice, ellipinuts and other products of the entrepot trade. Produce was also a nerve-wecking game of forward buying or selling, instant sale and purchase, temporary hoarding or withholding of supplies to gain a brief but nonetheless profitable monopolistic hold on the market as well as ingenious sly methods of commerce

learnt through decades of hard experience. Produce finally was a paperchase, as the prices climbed up and down in the market report. Fortunes were made; appalling losses were borne. The astute brokers made a steady but quick income when they played paper more cunningly than others. More often than not they picked the choice morsels, having better foresight and being able to tap some reliable grapevine. The greedy, gullible and unlucky were wedged in. Together with the foolhardy, they paid for their folly with heavy losses; occasionally, a few became bankrupt almost overnight.

An onlooker caught up the remark about the market being nearly dead with his opinion, “Well, it’s those rich nations holding large quantities of buffer stock. They don’t want to be squeezed. So they...”

“You’re right,” a food carrier jabbed in, although he knew next to nothing about the subject. His chore was to distribute tiffin carriers of cooked food and rice to some of the lightermen. However, his towkay’s business was waning because the workers preferred to eat cheaply at the numerous fixed and itinerant stalls along the riverside.

“Shut your trap, idiot!” a lighter steersman reprimanded him. “What do you know about trade? Your boss is giving us less tasty food nowadays. You yourself do nothing but piss in the river.” There was raucous laughter. The food carrier retracted to the background. He felt small.

The gambling by the group under the adjacent tree stopped,

as time was about up to start whatever work there was. The men were all puffing their cigarettes and throwing the butts indiscriminately about. One of them spotted the tally clerk approaching from a distance.

“Son of a bitch!” a labourer exclaimed with vehemence. He spat on the ground. The small crowd resented his abusive language, for the clerk was one of the more reasonable of that occupation. Tally clerks dictated the pace of work and were better educated than the stevedores in those days.

The clerk waved a hand at them. “Hey, what are you chaps doing there? Still talking of your nocturnal adventures? Time for work, you know.”

“Damn you! Don’t play the role of the virtuous man, Ah Too. I saw you at a Geylang brothel last year,” one of the crowd retaliated and confirmed his statement with a common expletive. The crowd tittered.

The clerk conceded, “All right, all right. I was only jesting. Don’t take me so seriously. At any rate, what’s the hot topic today?”

“None,” replied a few of them together.

“Well, I’ve one to tell you,” Ah Too casually said, rousing their interest in gossip. He sat on a boulder. They gathered around him, gaping at him with expectant eyes.

“There was a terrific commotion at Chop Moh Aik Hin just now,” he began. “Proprietor Lau Beh was fuming and swearing. He was in a quandary about how to pay commission

to two claimants!” Chop Moh Aik Hin was a well-known rubber commission agent and exporter.

The crowd chanted in unison, “That’s strange. We seldom hear the like of it.” The lighter steersman asked, “Who are involved, Ah Too?”

The clerk deliberately kept them in suspense by lighting a cigarette and looking at his watch. “Well, Goh Lin and Ah Kwang.” Goh Lin was a reputed rubber broker, Ah Kwang a freelancer in the produce line. However, the latter also did odd jobs for a number of small firms, even fly-by-night ones. The clerk continued, “You see, Goh Lin claimed that this morning he rang Moh Aik Hin’s manager to tip him about the rubber transaction. That was at ten-thirty. On the other hand, Ah Kwang declared that he had phoned the firm’s clerk, Mr. Loh, at nine o’clock to close the deal. Loh has confirmed Ah Kwang’s phone call.”

A bystander interrupted, “How could Ah Kwang conduct business through the firm’s clerk? Wasn’t he naive?”

Ah Too turned and looked at him disapprovingly. “You don’t understand. The firm had, in the past, insisted that all business be conducted with the manager or the towkay. But, when Ah Kwang rang up, the manager hadn’t come to office yet. Loh confirmed this too. The towkay was still asleep at home.”

The lighter steersman could not contain his curiosity any longer. “Well, what’s the commission payable?” he asked Ah Too. “Yes, what’s the sum?” the rest pressed him for an answer.

The clerk took a puff of his cigarette and calmly answered, "Fifteen thousand dollars!" There was a 'whew' from the listeners. Ah Too continued, "So the towkay wanted to split the commission half half. But both claimants, particularly Goh Lin, were dissatisfied."

The foreman of the labourers, who had quietly slipped in to listen to the story, ventured his opinion, "If I were the firm's towkay, I wouldn't give a cent to Ah Kwang. That man's a rogue. Always cutting in when there's money to be made."

The clerk remembered that only several days back Ah Kwang had allowed him to keep a case of VSOP brandy in the harbour area. As he had to make some show of supporting the old man, he cautioned the foreman, "Be careful what you say. If Ah Kwang hears about it, he'll skin you alive."

The foreman retaliated with, "Let him. I'll bash him up. I know him only too well."

The clerk gazed at his watch. "Well," he concluded, "let's not get ourselves worked up over a matter of no concern to us. Besides, time's up for work!" He was glad to wriggle out of the awkward situation. Like the boxer who was cornered a second before the bell rang, Ah Too felt glad he got out of a tight spot in time and walked away just a little shaken.

Confusion reigned at the rubber commission firm of Moh Aik Hin. Towkay Lau Beh was furious. He threatened to sack his manager for not coming to work earlier and he castigated the clerk for having dealt direct with Ah Kwang. He kept

thumping the table of his office. He opened his cabinet where he kept an assortment of liquor. After finishing a third of a glass of Ngo Kah Pi neat, he came to a decision. Apparently the Chinese wine had helped him to do so. He would cut his profit slightly and give Goh Lin and Ah Kwang ten thousand dollars each. He summoned them to a quiet bar. There he told them that there was to be no raising of voices or acrimony. He would present each of them with ten thousand dollars as commission. That was final. Goh Lin still looked unhappy but perforce accepted the proposition, as Lau Beh was one of his best clients. Ah Kwang welcomed the offer with affable grace and flattered the towkay for his wise decision. They all had a round of drinks and the claimants agreed not to raise any further controversy over the matter. Lau Beh felt his inner coat pocket for his bulging wallet. He extracted a cheque book from it and tore out two written cheques, giving one each to Goh Lin and Ah Kwang. He then called for the bar girl and settled the bill. The three men shook hands with one another. After that, each went his own way.

At Chop Moh Aik Hin, the manager was having it out with the clerk. The argument was so heated that some of the staff left the office for the sake of peace of mind. Others, however, seemed to enjoy the verbal confrontation between the two men. The manager kept control of himself, until his subordinate mentioned an old bitter incident involving themselves. This made his superior spring from his chair and advance

menacingly towards the clerk who flung a few bad words at him. It seemed both would come to blows with each other.

Fortunately, the staff separated the two men still bawling at each other. The manager shouted at the top of his voice, "You caused me to lose my bonus. Damn you, you'd better look out. Bastard!" He appeared flushed all over. The veins on both his temples enlarged conspicuously. Cold sweat studded his brow. His body shook; his lips quivered. His antagonist was used to violent quarrels at the waterfront. Despite this, he restrained himself when he saw his superior in a tantrum. He wrested himself free of the hold that his colleagues had on him and backed away. He then ran out of the office, pushing his way through the inquisitive crowd that had gathered at the main entrance. The manager returned to his chair, walking in an unsteady gait. He sat down and placed his hands against the sides of his head. He closed his eyes and remained in that pose for some time. When he regained his composure, he sensed the watchman eyeing him with some concern. All the staff had gone home. He told the man to lock up and struggled out of the office towards the carpark. The crowd at the entrance had dwindled. They observed him with a mixture of amusement and pity. He was not conscious of their presence. He simply walked on like a robot.

The news of the settlement made at the bar spread like wildfire. The lightermen, stevedores, tally clerks and other waterfront workers praised Lau Beh for his compromise

solution. However, privately, most of them clung to the strong suspicion that Ah Kwang and the rubber commission firm's clerk could have acted in collusion. They could be right because, a week later, the clerk was spotted wearing a gold Rolex. At the end of the month, he had left the service of the firm and joined another.

2

AH KWANG'S MISTRESS, Soh Mei Mei, lived in the bungalow that was almost shut from view by two aged bougainvilleas, one on each side of the front gate. She was a subtenant and she occupied the upper floor of the two-storey building. She gained access to her apartment by climbing a flight of concrete steps at the back of the garden and unlocking the only door leading into the hail. She had only one child, an adolescent son whom she gave the name Sonny. Mother and son, however, were on inimical terms with the chief tenant and his family occupying the ground floor. They taunted each other on the slightest provocation and, almost daily, hurled sarcastic remarks at one another. When Sonny played his hi-fi set, he did it very loudly. It was so unbearable that his mother had to put on earplugs to mute the throbbing beat of modern pop backed up by the blare of supporting instruments. The family downstairs could feel the windowpanes and wooden partitions vibrating. The chief tenant would rush out to the garden and yell upwards to Sonny to reduce the volume of his hi-fi. To no avail! So he waited for the upstairs occupants to sleep and turned on his television at maximum volume.

The war of decibels went on for days, until both parties, worn out by attrition, decided to call it off temporarily. This happened when one of them lowered the volume of his machine for a few days. The truce was soon broken and the assault of din, matched by verbal acrimony, started all over again. It made the chief tenant's wife really sick and she was a heart patient. Her daughter found it difficult to study and she took a bus to the National Library to do her homework. When Sonny had his vacation, he would go upcountry. There would be peace for a couple of days. Then, for no rhyme or reason, the chief tenant, egged on by his ailing wife, would turn on their television set at full volume. The wife would stroll to the garden and, despite her weak constitution, shout shrilly in the direction of the window of Soh Mei Mei's bedroom, "Loose woman, prostitute, how do you like the sound of our expensive TV set?" Soh Mei Mei would hear her censure, yell back unladylike words at her and rush for her earplugs. The wife would then visit her neighbours and talk bad about Soh. When the latter's son returned, she would complain to him about the chief tenant's inconsiderate behaviour. Sonny would lose no time in trying out his new records as loud as he could with the bass adjusted to provide the sonic boom. Thus the cycle of madness was repeated.

The chief tenant had exhausted all means to eject his upstairs subtenants. As time went on, he grew more and more bitter over his utter lack of success in dislodging them. He raised

the rent. Not long after, he had to eat humble pie and lower it again. He locked the front gate. His subtenants secured the services of a lawyer to get a court injunction order. The gate had to remain open; at any rate, Sonny just climbed over it when it was locked. The chief tenant vainly hoped for unpunctuality or failure on the part of his vexatious subtenants to pay their rent. He hoped in vain, for Ah Kwang's AR registered cheque arrived without fail on the last working day of each month. The chief tenant despatched the receipt to his subtenants in the most unconventional manner. He told his ten-year-old son to shape the piece of blue paper into a projectile and from the garden hurl it into the bedroom of Soh. So she shut all the upstairs windows. The chief tenant was forced to slip the receipt under the doorway. Ever since he took in the first subtenant, he had sealed the head of the main staircase from the upper floor to the downstairs hall because he wanted privacy for his family. He was thus forced to use the concrete staircase when the occupants were not in and, like a postman, humbly tender the receipt under the doorway.

Apart from the intermittent war of decibels, there were several other sharp skirmishes. One concerned the letterbox at the front entrance. Soh and her son's letters were often tampered with. They retaliated by retrieving their mail and pouring water into the letterbox, flooding the precious letters of the chief tenant and his family. After both parties had enough of raids on the box, a stalemate would prevail and a truce

subsequently would be arranged through the good offices of the neighbour. It would hardly last a month before the box again became the bone of contention. The postman shook his head. He had never come across such a chronic case of childishness and pettifogging, until he himself was at a loss whether to deposit the chief tenant's letters first into the box or the subtenants'. At times, he used plastic to wrap up the lots of mail separately before dropping them into the box. He was even willing to deposit the letters, if separate boxes were installed, but the chief tenant would not expend a single cent on his subtenants while Soh likewise cooked up some excuse not to incur the expenditure.

Another piece of action was fought over Ah Kwang's car, which used to be parked at the back of the garden close to the concrete stairs. The chief tenant suddenly objected to this, giving the most puerile reasons such as the passage into the garden was being eroded by tyre marks and the garden was being polluted by the exhaust smoke emitted by the car. Ah Kwang failed to reason matters out with the chief tenant. However, he too was stubborn and refused to park his car along the roadside. The next morning he would find a flat tyre or some defect caused to his car. It was only a matter of time that he was forced to give in and park his car once again along the roadside. One day, the chief tenant's wife had a heart seizure late at night. Fortunately, Ah Kwang was able, in spite of Soh Mei Mei's strong objection, to drive her to the

hospital as all the ambulances happened to be busy answering other calls. For his act of kindness, Ah Kwang was allowed to park his car in the garden and he was assured that nothing adverse would befall it. Not for long though! Predictably, when the old lady came home and Sonny started his row with his hi-fi, Ah Kwang was advised that his car would remain safer if it were parked outside the garden. He took the cue but hoped that the street urchins would not play about with it or steal a hubcap.

On the day that Ah Kwang drew out part of his commission pay, he proceeded to the bungalow. He parked his car along the side of the road and locked it. He entered the garden, almost colliding with the chief tenant's son who was rushing out without looking where he was going. The boy brought himself to a halt, turned round and glared at him. Ignoring him, Ah Kwang ambled to the back and with some eagerness climbed the concrete stairs. He opened the door with the duplicate key.

"Is that you, mom?" Sonny inquired, out of sight. Ah Kwang did not reply immediately. He deduced that Soh was not in and wondered where she had gone to.

"It's me, Sonny!" he answered in a voice indicating that he was trying to be friendly. "What are you doing in your room, son?" Sonny did not bother to come out of his room to greet the old man. He had never regarded Ah Kwang as his father, although he was not averse to receiving money from him

through his mother. He kept conversation with his 'father' to the minimum and, when he was in the mood, addressed him as Ah Peh or Uncle. He regarded the appearance of the old man with a mixture of amusement and disdain. Ah Peh was badly dressed and looked unsightly with his paunch. He was ageing and neglected to comb his hair neatly. He had small eyes and a pair of abnormally large ears. He was an incongruous match for his mother. At that moment, Sonny had almost finished cleaning his pop records and started to put them back on the racks. He cleared a few other things away. After that, he put on his pale pink shirt, combed his hair and shot out of the room.

"Where's your mom?" Ah Kwang insisted.

The young man barely looked at him and replied indifferently, "She's out. I don't know where." He brushed past the old man who went to the sofa and sat down. The apartment was stuffy. It also smelt of Sonny. So Ah Kwang got up, opened a window and switched on the fan of the sitting room. He waited impatiently for Soh. He wanted to give her money and also to sleep with her. He waited, feeling a little tense and glancing at his watch from time to time. Two hours crept slowly past. It was six o'clock. Yet Soh was not back. He was getting annoyed and was on the verge of grumbling aloud when he heard her familiar steps along the garden path and the patter of her high-heel shoes up the concrete staircase. The lock of the door clicked. Soh entered. She was wearing a daringly thin blue blouse matched by a dark orange miniskirt. She had a

prominent bosom. Her hair was exquisitely done. Heavily rouged and distinctively scented, she looked somewhat attractive despite her middle age.

“Where on earth did you go, sweetie?” Ah Kwang demanded. He came up and held her hand.

“Where? Do you expect me always to be in this hell of a home all the while putting up with the infernal noise around? And you haven’t come here since last Wednesday,” she pouted.

“All right, all right! I just asked you a question. If you don’t want to answer, it’s all right with me, sweetie,” he assuaged her. Having kept her as his mistress for sixteen years, he knew her every temperament and whim. He had spoilt her thoroughly.

“Come, let’s go to your bedroom. You’re changing, aren’t you?” he suggested.

She knew what he wanted. She would play a little hard to get. Besides, she had to prepare dinner for both of them. Ah Kwang would be too lazy to drive her to some cosy place for a meal.

“Listen, Kwang. You haven’t give me the hundred and twenty dollars you promised me last week,” she reminded him. She was running short of money and not his company.

“Small matter, lah. I’ll soon be giving you more than that, sweetie,” he assured her. He dug into his trouser pocket, extracted an old wallet and took out three hundred dollars from within. “Here, sweetie, keep all the money,” he told her, as he put his arm round her waist and kissed her below the ear. “Now, shall we go into the room? You have to change your dress

and make dinner for us. I don’t feel like driving this evening!”

She had anticipated all this. After receiving the money, she was prepared to be accommodating to him. She smiled at him. “You rogue, you’re always wanting that. Why are you men so impatient when it comes to that?” she playfully chided him.

Ah Kwang looked at her from head to foot. He winked his eyes and followed her into the room. He helped her undress but she pretended to reject his help. When she was bare, he took off his clothes. He was roused. Soon they were rolling about on the bed naked. It was already dark and not a single light of the apartment was switched on. They were too absorbed in each other to be aware of it.

Half an hour later, Ah Kwang got up and groped about to locate the switch of the small bedroom lamp. He managed to get it lighted. Taking out his pyjamas from a small drawer of Soh’s wardrobe, he put them on. Soh dragged herself into her *foo* and wore her *sam* without bothering about her bra. She walked slowly into the bathroom. After some time, she emerged and switched on all the lights of the hail, sitting room and kitchen. She was hardly in the mood to cook a dinner. So she opened a few tins of canned food to heat up for dinner and cooked the rice.

Ah Kwang came to the kitchen and asked, “Where did you go today, sweetie?” She kept silent. “I asked you a question, Soh,” the old man persisted. At this juncture, he could afford not to call her ‘sweetie’, if he did not want to.

“You should know. I went to have my hair done in town and no sooner had I come home than you undid it!”

“Sorry, sweetie,” the old man apologised. He believed her this time. He suspected that she had been unfaithful to him on a few occasions in the past. What could he do about it? He was not rich to tag her along with him. He worked so hard using his acumen to maintain two families and just made it. It was impossible for Soh to live together with his first wife. So he let his suspicions rest. After sixteen years, he decided to let sleeping dogs lie. Furthermore, he did not wish to talk of her obsession with mahjong. She was quite touchy about it.

“Sonny was in but he went out when he saw me enter. Sweetie, I think you’d better tell him to avoid his present company of friends. They always frequent the bar where that notorious girl, Fanny, works... Why, when I was young like him, I never stepped into such immoral places. My father held me on a tight leash. Our young people today have too much freedom. They’re running wild!” Ah Kwang had on many occasions wanted to bring up the subject with her but feared a possible rebound.

Soh did not seem very interested. She simply observed, “What’s wrong with his going to the bar? He’s old enough to take care of himself. You businessmen always haunt these sleazy joints and maybe you too might have gone to that very bar for all that I know.”

Ah Kwang retracted guiltily. Soh happened to be right.

A year back he had been there once in the company of two friends and he had fooled around with the other bar girl called Sally. He wished he had not raised the subject.

Soh continued, “Sonny’s a grown-up lad. He can think for himself. If he joins bad company and lands into any trouble, that’s his lookout. He’s your son, you know.”

Ah Kwang did not; he had doubts whether Sonny was of his flesh and blood. The boy looked so different from him and also from the three children by his first wife. He had a nature and a temperament diametrically opposite to Ah Kwang’s. He liked to idle and was fond of Western unisex fads and fashions. He had a mania for pop music and was always in and out of jobs, never sticking for long to any, restless, and without ambition. Even if he had, his incomplete education would be a serious handicap to any progress. He was disrespectful to elderly people, thought poorly of his bosses and was always squeezing money from his mother on some pretext or other. Of late, he had started to drift, wandering about the city aimlessly and sitting alone at some vantage point of a high-rise building watching the girls pass by. Usually he avoided male company. Should Soh pass away, he would perhaps become a confirmed loafer roaming the streets. He would probably succumb to drugs and soon that would be the end of him.

Ah Kwang stopped talking about Sonny further. He did not feel deeply committed to the boy’s future and had said enough. In the past, when he used to lecture to his mistress

about the boy, she would chide him and trouble would erupt. In revenge, Sonny would make the old man's stay in the apartment as unpleasant as it could be. A chain reaction would start, for the boy would annoy the chief tenant and his family by playing his hi-fi set very loudly or throwing things violently about the sitting room. The war of decibels would be declared and Ah Kwang would have to leave the apartment. He did not want to be a casualty of the conflict that he unintentionally triggered off.

It was eight o'clock when the couple had their dinner. Soh Mei Mei excused herself to set her slightly crumbled hair. The old man had to remain alone reading a few old magazines and listening to the radio. It was boring. He recalled all those moments when Soh was busy and he was left alone. He disliked being left without company. He made up his mind to buy a portable television set for Soh. At least, he could have some entertainment while she was attending to her domestic chores. But first he had to make sure that Sonny would not persuade his mother to trade in his hi-fi for a new stereo set. That would cost him money!

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RICKY STAR

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