

SINGAPORE **E** CLASSICS

SON OF SINGAPORE

TAN KOK SENG



TAN KOK SENG is the well-known author of a trilogy of books based on his life: *Son of Singapore*, *Man of Malaysia* and *Eye on the World*. His fourth book is a novel, originally published as *Three Sisters of Sz*, by Heinemann Asia in 1979.

Tan's books were all written first in Chinese and afterwards 'rendered into English' in a collaborative effort with his former employer, Austin Coates, for whom Tan worked in Malaysia and Hong Kong. Although his four books had been reprinted several times since their first publication, they were out of print for many years. *Son of Singapore*, *Man of Malaysia* and *Three Sisters of Sze* are now available from Epigram Books.

Tan resides in Singapore with his family.

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SON OF SINGAPORE

TAN KOK SENG



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To my children

Introduction

Son of Singapore, this book you're holding, marked the debut of local writer Tan Kok Seng. It is an autobiography, and covers the early years of his life: growing up on a farm in Singapore, working as a coolie on Orchard Road and finally moving to Kuala Lumpur to work as a driver.

Tan Kok Seng might seem a rather unlikely example of a literary figure. Even today, on the National Book Development Council's database of Singapore writers, he is described as a "writer and labourer". Still, when *Son of Singapore* was published in 1972, reviewers were quick to praise it, thanks to its accessible and entertaining prose.

The book is packed with many elements of a fiction best-seller: it follows a likeable young character, feisty in spirit and curious about the world, who is plagued by a series of perplexing problems, often because he can be excessively earnest.

For his effort, Kok Seng was celebrated as one of the country's Men of the Year by the *New Nation* newspaper. They used a nice photograph of Kok Seng. He was 33 years old then, looking young and confident, even radiant.

This book changed his life.

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As you read *Son of Singapore*, at one point you'll find Kok Seng reassuring himself that "Heaven will never impede anyone on the upward path". (160)

One might also observe that "Heaven will never impede anyone with a worthy story to tell".

In Kok Seng's case, he had only studied up to Primary Six in a Chinese school. Throughout his growing-up years, he could barely mumble a few words of English. And his early work experience could be summarised in two words: coolie, driver. So then, with all the odds seemingly against him, how did this acclaimed book, this literary legend, come to be?

Kok Seng told me this story:

He was working in Hong Kong as a driver for the British diplomat Austin Coates (also sometimes more affectionately called "Kao Tze" in this book). Coates had regular assignments all over Europe, and it was part of Kok Seng's duties to go along. All that he saw stirred him to spend his evenings writing down anecdotes about his life and recording his philosophical musings, thinking he would share these with his son and daughter when they were older.

Kok Seng started out writing in Chinese, scribbling away in the evenings, and his diligence caught the attention of his employer. To summarise things: Coates decided to lend his young friend a hand and together they translated Kok Seng's

journal into English, working in the evenings to shape the material into the compelling narrative that would eventually be published as *Son of Singapore*.

In his preface to the original edition of *Son of Singapore*, Kok Seng mentions: "It is somehow difficult for an Asian to expose himself and his inner workings in public."

In this case, he had originally intended to write only for his own children. But heaven—and Austin Coates—decided otherwise. And with the success that came swiftly, Kok Seng's inner workings indeed ended up being exposed in public, studied in schools and lauded in the media.

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Son of Singapore tells a coming-of-age story about a youngster who in hindsight seemed almost destined to be a writer or poet.

Kok Seng's earliest memories were of the Japanese Occupation during World War II, a time filled with dread and fear. He vividly describes how a desperate young boy brought shame to his family by sneaking into another neighbour's house to eat a bowl of rice. Kok Seng recognised this as a big lesson in the human condition: "When someone becomes crazed with hunger, he dares to do mad things." (9)

From here on, Kok Seng developed a quiet pride in being able to think for himself. He started valuing wisdom

and pithy communication; he was suspicious of misguided aphorisms:

The older generation used to say more children meant more prosperity. In fact, it was not so. Fewer children were easier to finance. There was more likely to be enough to go round. Yet, somehow, the older generation, despite having themselves experienced the hardships of being born into large families, could never grasp this idea. (37)

And when Kok Seng left school at a young age to help his father as a farmer, he became determined to ask even more difficult questions about life and its secret workings:

In the world there were, I knew, many things I did not understand. I hoped one day to be able to learn more.

But books I had left behind me forever. Now my only hope was to learn from human society itself. The only university I would ever go to was the university of the world. (53)

Like many other writers, Kok Seng learnt to live as a stranger in a strange land, surrounded by confusing customs and conflicting loyalties. As a child in his own home, growing up on a farm, he had problems with the superstitions and expectations of his other family members. In his early working life as a coolie, he learnt to observe with detachment the

differences between the rich and poor, the politics at work, and the gulf between appearance and reality.

In his personal life, too, he came to socialise with a surprisingly candid group of Europeans who defied his assumptions about race and language and friendship. These “Red Hairs”, as he called them, mixed freely with people from all walks of life. They spoke English as well as Cantonese, Hokkien and Shanghainese, all fluently. Kok Seng felt challenged. These foreigners had mastered his language. He had to learn theirs too! But how?

Slowly, through courage and determination, Kok Seng came to realise: when a man is on an upward path, heaven will not impede.

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It’s good that Kok Seng’s upward path was lined with many comic moments. Or this book would not be half as entertaining. If you don’t mind a short preview, here’s one of his anecdotes about the life of a Chinese farmer in those days:

My father was carrying two baskets of ducks to the Sixth Mile market when he was arrested and taken to the police station, ducks and all. He had no idea why.

His only language being Teochew, he had to wait a long time in custody until a Teochew interpreter could be found.

He was then told that the reason for his arrest was that the ducks were tied by their legs. It seems this was a case of cruelty to animals. Ducks, he was informed, must be carried with their legs free, like human beings.

“How would you like to be tied up that way?” the non-Teochew speaking inspector asked. “You deserve to be fined by being tied up the same way yourself.”

My father replied, “How can ducks and human beings be treated the same? Ducks are sold for human beings to eat.”

The inspector turned to the interpreter, “Remind him he’s in the police station. He can’t talk like that here. Tell him his ducks are confiscated. Any more trouble from him, next time he’ll go to prison.”

So my father’s ducks were confiscated by the police and were never seen again. (142–143)

As Kok Seng tells it, those were indeed strange times to be a son of Singapore.

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After Kok Seng published this first book, he kept going. In collaboration with Austin Coates, Kok Seng wrote two more autobiographical books. They are: *Man of Malaysia* (1974), about his experiences adjusting to life as a husband and father in Malaysia; and *Eye On The World* (1975), a journal of his

globetrotting days that attempts to make sense of the many greatly different cultures he encountered.

He also wrote one novel: *Three Sisters of Sz* in 1979, about how three daughters of the Sz family in Penang faced the unromantic realities of life.

Kok Seng continued working with Coates as his personal assistant. To an observer, a relationship between a diplomat from England and a farmer’s son from Singapore might have seemed unlikely. But the two remained friends to the end, even after Kok Seng retired, talking frequently on the telephone no matter how many countries separated them, until Coates passed away in 1997, in poor health at the age of 75, just a day after Kok Seng and his son flew to Portugal to visit him.

Even after all he has written, Kok Seng still has many more entertaining stories about his adventures with Coates. Perhaps he might write another book about this.

For now: we wish you happy reading! And good luck on your own upward path.

Don Bosco, June 2013

Don Bosco has worked as a writer, lecturer and technologist. He currently publishes fantasy stories, which are set in Asia, for young readers. He lives in Singapore. His website is www.SuperCoolBooks.com.

SON OF SINGAPORE

War

“SISTER! SISTER!”

A little boy is shouting after his elder sister. A young girl is running away barefoot beneath the coconut palms, leaving her baby brother abandoned.

“Sister! Wait for *me!*”

The sister is running straight ahead into the mangrove forest that lies beyond the coconuts. The little boy, seated on the bare earth, bursts into tears, wailing, “Sister! Sister! Don’t you care for me any more?”

The next moment he is toddling after her. A cry of alarm from his mother at the door of the wooden house: “Ah Nam! Ah Nam-*ah!* Come back here at once!”

The little boy hears, but does not turn, moving away now on hands and knees. Dashing out of the house, his mother grabs hold of him and carries him back. In an anxious whisper, indicating the farm gate some distance away, she says, “Look! Japanese soldiers! They’re after your sister. They’ll take her away!”

Ah Nam rubs the tears out of his eyes and looks. Soldiers are

strolling through the farms in the neighbourhood. He quietyens down at once.

“Next time any Japanese come,” the mother says urgently, “remember: don’t run after your sister. You’ll give away the place where she hides.” And in a warning tone she adds, “If they ever find her, you won’t have any sister to carry you any more.”

To a little Chinese boy, his elder sister is the most important person in his world, more important than his mother, who is too busy with other things to have time to attend to him. He rides on his sister’s hip; he walks holding her hand. It is she who looks after him, plays with him and teaches him things. Hearing his mother’s warning, Ah Nam cries helplessly.

“All right, Mother,” he mutters. “But could you ask the Japanese soldiers not to come near our home?”

His mother gives a slight smile, and says more soothingly: “Very well. Quiet. Don’t cry. Mother has a lot of things to do. Now I must go and feed the chickens. They’re cluck-cluck-clucking for their food.”

• • •

This was the Japanese Occupation of Singapore. Everyone, but especially young women and girls, lived in dread of the Japanese military. The soldiers in that part of the island had raped many. Some of the younger men had been brave enough to defy the Japanese, and had been killed.

Living in this village were seven or eight families, all of them Teochew, who came from the eastern part of Kwangtung province. In addition, they all came from the same county (*hsien*) in China, and all were farmers. The village was under the coconuts on the east side of Singapore, off the old horse track leading to Ponggol. It was 7 miles from the city.

Each house was separate, standing in about 8 acres of land. One of the houses close to the sea was Ah Nam’s family’s house, built of wood, with pole foundations and attap roof. Inside the house were two plank divisions. In the centre was the main room with the ancestral photographs, on either side a bedroom. Detached from it, with a lower roof, was a smaller structure used as the kitchen.

Not far from the house were four wells. Two of them, near the pigs’ huts, were for the pigs, providing water for their drinking and, after their meal, their bath. The third well was near the chicken huts, and was for the chickens and ducks. The fourth well, near the house, was for Ah Nam’s family. About 200 yards away was a small wooden box about a man’s height. This was the family lavatory. One would not see anything like this except in a place like this. This was the village.

Ah Nam’s eldest sister was 16. On this account she had to be very careful not to let the local group of the Japanese military find her. Actually Ah Nam’s family had led simple, straightforward lives in the village. But since World War II they had never had a peaceful day. From one day to another, things

became more and more tense, especially for the eldest sister.

One day, nearing the Mid-Autumn Festival, came a sound from Ah Nam's house: "Which day, which month, which year, will peace come?" It was the voice of Ah Nam's mother. Sitting down together was Ah Nam's whole family. It was after lunch.

Father replied, "Who knows which day there will be peace? We're lucky to have tapioca to keep us alive for today."

And Mother said, "Last year, at the Mid-Autumn Festival, Ah Nam's dry mother (similar to a godmother) came, bringing us moon cakes and other things. We've still not heard from her. D'you think she's safe in her place at Eighth Mile?" For this was another feature of the Japanese Occupation. For fear of the soldiers, few people moved about, so that what took place a mile or two away no one knew.

The mother paused, then said quietly, "D'you think we can live through this year?"

Ah Nam's father replied, "Better not think too much."

At this moment the dog started barking furiously. Could it be the awaited visitor coming? Ah Nam's mother called the eldest son excitedly, "Ah Ching! Quick! Run and see who's at the gate!"

Ah Nam's eldest brother ran out to the gate, Ah Nam chasing him like mad.

But a few seconds later the two brothers ran back. Their faces had turned green, their lips white. They ran to the house, stammering, "Ja—Ja—Japanese! Outside the gate!"

Ah Nam's mother, hearing this, shouted at the top of her voice, "Quick! Hurry up! Where's your elder sister?"—her first thought—"Tell her there are Japanese soldiers at the gate!"

For a moment the whole family stood up, shocked by hearing her shout. Only Ah Nam's eldest sister answered from the kitchen, "Yes! I'm here. I'm going!"

She ran straight like a bird to the forest. In the twinkling of an eye she was swallowed by the mangrove trees and the muddy filth beside the river, where nobody except Ah Nam's family would be able to find her. The whole family was standing at the door of the house.

Ah Nam, who had learned his lesson about not following his sister, watched her as she disappeared. Then, turning round, he found the Japanese military at the door. One of them had three stripes on his shoulder. He commanded the others, "Chee-chee, koo-loo, koo-loo."

Ah Nam's family did not know what this meant. Only Ah Nam, this boy aged four, having now learned some responsibility, thought he was very clever and said angrily to the Japanese, "You devils! You think you can take my elder sister away? I can kill all of you!"

Ah Nam's mother was frightened to death.

All the Japanese soldiers looked at Ah Nam, and one of them said to the rest, "Chee-chee, koo-loo, koo-loo." All of them laughed.

Ah Nam's mother pressed Ah Nam's little hand, and said

quietly to him: "Stop chattering." Then, raising a finger close beside her skirt just below Ah Nam's ear, she said, "Look at that Japanese. He might take *you* away. Then Mother will be able to do nothing for you."

Luckily none of the Japanese could understand any of this talk in Teochew. The Japanese inspected the whole house, and went away smiling. Before the gate one of them turned back to look at the house. Then slowly they went.

After they had gone, Ah Nam's father called him, "Ah Nam! Ah Nam-*ah!* Can you or can you not keep your mouth shut?"

He walked up to Ah Nam, suddenly seized his arm, and slapped his face with the full force of his open hand.

"Lucky they didn't understand what you said," he roared. "If they had, your father and mother would have been killed." He was terribly angry as he said this.

Ah Nam's mother went up to the father. "He's only a little boy," she said. "He knows nothing." And turning to Ah Nam himself, she said: "Remember next time, little boy, have ears, but have no mouth. And don't show heavenly courage. Understand?"

On any ordinary day, Ah Nam got slapped by his father and berated by his mother, and every time he cried. This time he didn't cry.

Silent, he gripped his mother's thigh in terror.

• • •

In fact, the whole family lived in terror, day by day, month by month. It lasted a long, long bitter time.

It was hard to have even two meals a day. Older people, like Ah Nam's father and mother, ate only tapioca, and every meal was the same.

The human body needs something more than this. But Ah Nam's parents thought only of their children. Every now and then they managed to get very little rice, and when they did, they never ate it themselves. All was kept for the children. They used to say, "Children's health is much more important than that of older people like us. For us it doesn't matter. But children without rice easily get sick."

At that time Ah Nam's family was a home of nine mouths: his father and mother, four daughters and three sons. Ah Nam was Number Two son, Number Six in the family. Aged four, how could he know what was good and what was bad?

Yet even then Ah Nam asked himself why his parents wanted to have so many children. It was because they had so many that he himself was to have so very little education.

• • •

The year 1944, a day in December, the wet season.

Three years of war.

Ah Nam's father, lying on his hard wooden bed, said one morning as he woke up, "In China, winter is very cold. Why has

Singapore suddenly turned so cold? Is the weather changing?”

For the past few days he had not been feeling well. How can the weather change in Singapore? We live in the hot belt, and it's permanent. From that moment the family knew he was gravely ill. They were all desperately worried. How to find money to see a doctor? This was the terrible question.

Ah Nam's mother went round to see all the other Chinese villagers in the neighbourhood. She got to Mother Wong and Eldest Uncle Ho, and asked what to do about medicine for Father. They both told her, "Near your house are those nice plants, *teng ti king*. You pull them up and use only the roots, between 10 and 15 of them. Boil them, and if you can find ginger, boil them with ginger. If not, boil them with molasses. If you cannot find molasses, put salt. Boil it for 20 minutes to half an hour, and give it to him to drink."

Ah Nam's father took the *teng ti king* for two days, and began to feel better. He continued two more days, and really and truly recovered.

This was how, when there were no medicines, we learned to use common herbs and weeds such as *teng ti king*, which was the Teochew name for the arrowleaf sida.

In the village those who knew how to survive lived. Those who got sick died.

Under military dictatorship every family had to look after itself. They could not look after each other. They had not the strength to do so.

Not far away from Ah Nam's family lived the Ng family. The father had died, and the mother could not find regular work. So one day she couldn't afford to buy even tapioca. Her children—as children are—did not understand this, and Ah Soon, her son, was very hungry that day. There was nothing to eat.

When someone becomes crazed with hunger, he dares to do mad things, and this boy, Ah Soon, went after dark to the house of a neighbour, the Neoh family. They had already cooked their rice, but had not yet sat down to dinner. They were standing outside their house talking to friends.

Ah Soon slipped into their kitchen, picked up the bowl of rice—there was only one—and downed it like a tiger devouring a wolf. After he'd finished, he put down the bowl on the kitchen table with such relief that it made a noise.

Mr Neoh, outside the door, jumped, thinking it was the cat. He leaped into the kitchen. He saw the empty bowl and the chopsticks. At a glance he saw it wasn't the cat. A cat doesn't eat with chopsticks. Hearing a sound under the table, he looked down and exclaimed, "Ah Soon! It's you!" and pulled him out by the hand. Ah Soon, terrified, resisted.

Then Mr Neoh shouted into the distance of the dark forest of coconut trees, calling at the top of his voice to Ah Soon's mother. He cried: "Come here! Your son! He's eaten my rice!"

Ah Soon's mother heard, and ran instantly through the dark to Mr Neoh's house. She was crying when she got there.

Sobbing desperately, she said, "How sorry I am I've not controlled this boy! But he's only eight. Before his father died we had rice to eat, and enough. But today none of us have had anything to eat. It's not Ah Soon's fault, I believe. It's the Japanese devils who have ruined us. It's because of them we've had nothing to eat all day. Please take pity on my boy, who is suffering like this."

Mr Neoh forgave the boy, but told the mother, "Don't ever let him come here again."

Chinese neighbours had never had to treat each other like this before.

• • •

Ah Nam's father, after recovering from his sickness, still had to continue supporting his family of nine mouths. Because of his days out of work, his burden had become heavier. Also, he had no regular job. By doing odd jobs, a day here, a day there, he could earn just enough money to buy tapioca. During the Japanese Occupation, it was difficult to find a job anywhere.

Another problem was that only the father earned money. Of the others in the family, the mother ran the house. The eldest sister was making homespun cloth, but this made practically no money, because the family always needed new clothes, and what she could sell outside brought in just enough to buy more raw material. Ah Nam by this time was five, his elder brother

nine. Even if they could work, who in this day and age would employ small boys?

Because of all this, every day their father wore a face which expressed his wretchedness. Why had life at this time become so bitter?

Before the Japanese came, Ah Nam's father came down from China for the first time from P'u Ning county in Kwangtung. He carried a bamboo basket, inside which were some clothes, daily necessities and some food. In 1920, he walked the whole way from P'u Ning to the port of Swatow to wait for a ship leaving for Singapore.

When the ship reached the Eastern Roads in Singapore harbour he did not land at Clifford Pier, or Red Light Pier to the Chinese, because of its original navigational aid. One of his friends who had known him in China, and to whom he had written giving his arrival date, hired a *tongkang*, or Chinese barge, and went out to the ship to fix things up for him. From the ship he was taken in the same *tongkang* to one of the creeks which, from near Red Light Pier, led direct by an inland waterway route to near Ponggol, a journey of some four hours.

He was landed off in a village called Low Koon H'ng (Doctor's Garden) to which he had been brought as a contract labourer, his job being to look after the landlord's ducks at a salary of eight Straits dollars (about four US dollars then) a month. The landlord kept ducks only because he needed their droppings to fertilise his coconuts, which in those days

commanded a much higher market value than ducks.

This was the time when Ah Nam's father got permission from the landlord to build his wooden house without paying any rent. He worked for the landlord for one-and-a-half years, during which he saved enough money to go back to China and fetch Ah Nam's mother and eldest sister (the eldest child), aged two.

They came straight back to Singapore to the wooden house built by Ah Nam's father, where they founded their home.

Ah Nam's father was of medium height. He was a reserved man, seldom expressing himself in many words. His face was rugged and strong, as if newly carved from rock. His body was equally strong, and very fine, all of him bronzed bone and muscle. He wore nothing but black Chinese cloth pants, worn half-length, cross-folded and rolled Chinese-style at the waist. He owned a white Chinese cotton-buttoned jacket, but when he put it on, either he was going out somewhere or he was not feeling well.

During the day he went everywhere barefoot. After his evening bath, when work was done, he would use a pair of wooden clogs in the house. He also owned a pair of brown leather slippers. When he put these on, it signified a formal occasion. His clothes were scrupulously mended, in earlier days by Ah Nam's mother and later by Ah Nam's elder sister. Due to their care, in the entire course of his adult life he never possessed more than four pairs of cloth pants and two jackets.

When the Japanese came, the landlord closed down his business and sold all the ducks. The pigs were taken away for the Japanese. The coconuts remained, of course, but they were the landlord's property. Ah Nam's father had to find another means of livelihood.

Under the old government his eight dollars a month was enough for a family of a few mouths to live a contented life. But during the Japanese Occupation it was difficult for him to find any kind of job. He had some savings when war started, but these were soon used up. Reduced to eating leaves and grass, he and his family were destitute.

One day in the third year of the war he left the house in desperation, and went round to all his friends, telling them of his troubles, and asking them to help him find some way of earning a living.

Not long after, one of his friends, a Mr Ang, coming to the house to ask after the family, mentioned something about a job in a small factory preparing hemp, which was being used as a substitute for cotton clothes. He asked if Ah Nam's father would be interested.

He was of course very happy. He took a deep breath, and said, "Can you introduce me to the factory boss?" Mr Ang replied, "Brother, no question about it. Tomorrow I'll come again and let you know." Ah Nam's family gave Mr Ang a cup of water to drink before he left. They had nothing else.

Early next morning Mr Ang came to say he'd fixed the job.

He told him to see him at his house the next day, when he would take him to the factory owner. He told him not to be worried, he was sure to be engaged. He then said goodbye, saying he had his own business to look after. Ah Nam's father and mother gave their deep thanks to 'Uncle Ang'.

After he had gone, Ah Nam's father's face wore a very slight smile, for the first time during three years of war.

• • •

Ah Nam's father had been working in the factory for two weeks when one day Ah Nam accompanied his sister to take lunch to their father.

The factory was not far from the house, about 30 minutes on foot. It was a small affair surrounded by bamboo and *lallang*. Beyond it was a tapioca garden.

Inside it was very simple. It had no modern machinery; everything was done by hand. The roof was made of attap, and the building was surrounded by a fence made of spliced bamboo to keep dogs and other animals out.

When Ah Nam's father went to work in that factory it was before dawn, and when he came back it was after dusk, too late for human beings to see others' faces. In the factory there was one other worker, and each had to carry through the entire process of hemp-making, a very tiring and wasteful way of working. Ah Nam's eldest brother helped in a small way, but

he was too young to be able to take much of his father's burden.

After four weeks of this work, once again Ah Nam's father fell sick—he was simply not having enough to eat. But this time the family knew how to find and prepare the necessary medicine for him, and he got better, though he was still really very weak. And Ah Nam's second sister, seeing her father was not strong enough to work without someone to assist him, begged him, "May I come and help you a little in the factory? Of course, I'm only a girl, but I hope, Father, you'll agree. The brothers are all young, and you can't carry on without help."

It was then that for the first time Ah Nam's father relented from the age-old Chinese custom that a girl must never go out to work. Up till then Second Sister had been helping her mother by washing clothes, looking after the little brothers and with general housework. The eldest sister spent her entire day making hemp cloth, and could not help in the house. Because of this, Second Sister's work was much heavier than that of anyone else in the family.

Once a week she had to go down to Fifth Mile and queue up all night to get the family's ration cards stamped by a Japanese officer. By this time the cooking oil was so adulterated it was orange-red, only fit for lamp fuel. Each adult was rationed to half a catty of rice a week.

In Singapore under the Japanese Occupation the people suffered much, and none more than Ah Nam's second sister, then aged 13. She had to work so hard, and there was no

alternative. It was an inescapable time. She had no schooling. Working from the moment she woke till the moment she slept, she struggled on from day to bitter day.

A few weeks after Ah Nam's father recovered, Second Sister no longer had to help him in the factory. One day at noon, when she had finished all her work for her mother, she was setting out to take lunch to her father and Ah Nam's elder brother.

Every time she took lunch to the factory she had two baskets slung from a pole on her shoulder. One basket contained the meal; the other usually contained tools and other factory necessities. In any event, the two baskets balanced properly. But that day the meal basket was full, the other empty. Accustomed as she always was to carrying the baskets by pole on her shoulder, she wondered how to do it, with one basket empty. Suddenly she smiled at Ah Nam, and asked, "Would you like to go and see Father again in the factory?"

Ah Nam shouted with excitement, "Good! I'd like to come!" She went on, "Today you've no need to walk. We have a car for you." Ah Nam was puzzled. The family did not have a car. Why should his sister suddenly say there was a car for him?

She pursued, "Have you ever been driven in a car before?" "Where is it?" he demanded eagerly. She laughed at him and said, "Well, today you're having a free ride." She pointed her finger at the empty basket. "There's your car waiting for you."

Ah Nam blushed, ashamed. "No, Sister, no!" he said. "I don't want it."

But his sister would not be moved. "You don't want to go?" she said. "Father's waiting for his lunch. Am I to go by myself?"

"All right, all right," Ah Nam replied, "I'll sit in the basket. But don't laugh at me."

As soon as he sat in it, his sister lifted the two baskets up, and off they went.

Ah Nam found it very comfortable swinging from side to side in his 'car'. Unaware of his sister's sufferings, as they went along he was laughing, saying, "It's good fun, driving by car!"

Before long they reached the factory, where his sister dropped him with a bump. This only made him laugh more. Second Sister turned on him. She was furious. "You big fat pig! How heavy you are! How dare you laugh?" But this didn't sink in.

"Sister! Sister!" Ah Nam exclaimed delightedly. "Can I have a free ride back?"

His sister shouted at him, "Are you dreaming? You great big heavy load!" Ah Nam, taking this in, was disgusted in turn.

"If I'd known," he answered, "that I wasn't going to have a free ride back, I wouldn't have come."

Carrying the lunch into the factory, his sister turned at the entrance, and said, "Ah Nam, you wait there and *think*..."

That evening, Ah Nam came home holding his father's hand, Second Sister walking with them, carrying the two empty baskets and the pole. And all the time Ah Nam grumbled as loudly as he dared—not very loud—saying, "No car to take me

home...if I'd only known...my legs are going to break with this walking...if I'd only known..."

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1945.

One day, Ah Nam woke up just in time to go with his father to the factory. This was something he practically never did; he usually overslept.

Near the factory were wild flowers, fruit trees such as rambutan and carambola, and the terrible *lallang*, the grass that always cuts one's skin.

This boy, Ah Nam, always loved to climb trees, and chase butterflies and dragonflies. He was nearly always alone, playing by himself. The one thing his father feared was his climbing trees. Once when he found him up one, he ordered him down and caned him mercilessly, saying, "If you climb up again I'll strike your legs and break them, not one but both!"

After he had been caned, Ah Nam never forgot what his father had said. From then on, he played only by plucking flowers, catching butterflies and chasing the elusive dragonfly, which to catch one has to be almost like a cat. When he caught a dragonfly by the tail he would put a piece of string round it, and enjoy having it fly around at his command.

That particular day his mother asked him to look for some young tapioca leaves near the factory, where it would be

possible to get them. "A young boy," she thought, "better he should do something useful by getting some vegetables for the evening meal." He did what he was told. Halfway through plucking the leaves, he suddenly heard from out of the sky a group of birds making the curious sound—koong-loong-koong-loong—not like any other bird. Seeing them, he stopped. Then, rushing through the *lallang* to his father, not noticing that in his excitement the terrible grass had brought blood to his legs, he shouted, "Father! D'you see? Up in the sky! The big flock of birds! Such big birds!"

He pointed his finger up in the sky. His father followed the direction in which he was pointing. Looking up, he suddenly made a loud sound, "Aoh!" Then he looked more carefully. "Those are not birds," he said at last. "They're aeroplanes—so many of them! It looks like the English flag on the aeroplane tail." And he added, "I've never seen so many aeroplanes flying together."

He went on reflectively, entirely to himself, "I think it must be that the old government has won the war."

Ah Nam, hearing this, asked his father, "What d'you mean, 'the old government'?" His father answered, "Sure, you know nothing about the old government. When you grow up, you'll know."

A moment later he added, "I think we'd better go home early today, and come back early to start work here tomorrow." He picked up all his things to take home, and moved off with

his two sons. And it was then that Ah Nam, not knowing what time it was, looked down and saw he was treading on his own shadow. It was noon.

On the way home all his father's friends called out through the trees as he passed, saying, "Brother! Victory! The old government has won!" Ah Nam felt very strange. Coming back from the factory on other days, he had never heard his father's friends calling out to him like this.

On arrival home, even before entering the compound, his father was shouting, "Ah Nam's mother! Ah Nam's mother! Good news! The old government is coming back."

She looked out from the kitchen door, and asked, "Where did you hear this?"

He replied, "On the way home Uncle Ang told me. Today he came back from the market. He was saying the Japanese military money is now useless. One catty of pork costs 3,000 to 4,000 Japanese dollars."

He went on resignedly, "But we ourselves don't have to worry. We have no more money left."

"Thank goodness!" exclaimed Ah Nam's mother rather unexpectedly, adding in a tone of inquiry, "I hid two silver dollars of the old government money. I wonder if they'll be any use now."

The father turned to her and said, "Keep them."

She said, "If the old government is coming back, d'you think you can find a better job, and soon?"

He didn't move. In a soft and gentle tone he answered, "It cannot be quick. During these three years and eight months every poor family like ours has become like a barren mountain and a dried-up river. The moisture cannot come back so quickly. But now we need no longer be afraid under the Great Terror, especially for Ah Nam's eldest sister. Now we shall be going back to the old days of the old government's time."

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