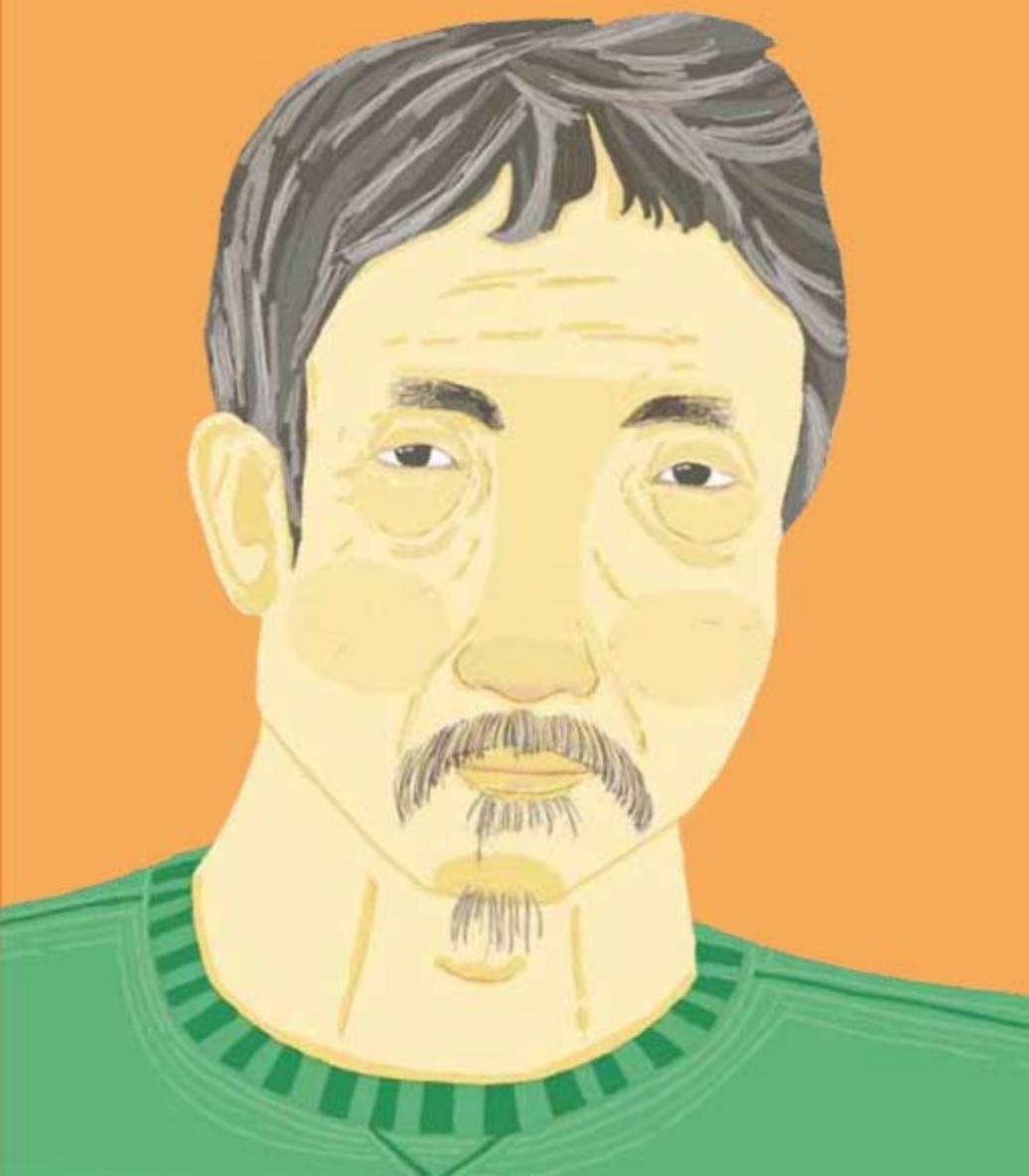


SINGAPORE **E** CLASSICS

SPIDER BOYS  
MING CHER



MING CHER was born in 1947 in Bukit Ho Swee, Singapore. One of seven children, he left school at thirteen and became a street drifter. At the height of the Vietnam War in the 1960s, he was a construction supervisor on a hospital project in South Vietnam. He later became a merchant seaman.

Ming Cher has lived in New Zealand since 1977. He speaks and writes English, and is also fluent in Hokkien, Cantonese, Mandarin, Malay, Indonesian and Vietnamese. He currently works and writes on a farm north of Auckland. *Spider Boys* is his first novel.

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# SPIDER BOYS

First Singaporean Edition

MING CHER



EPIGRAM BOOKS / SINGAPORE

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

This edition was re-edited by Jocelyn Lau from the Penguin Books edition.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This novel is dedicated to my parents,  
and especially to my son, Marco Ming Cher.

## Introduction

UNDERSTANDING THE VARIETIES of English used in this revised version is crucial to reading it accurately.

In the original version of *Spider Boys*, published by Penguin Auckland in 1995, there is no distinction between the narrator's voice and the dialogue of the characters. Anyone familiar with the repertoire of Singapore English would pause at reading an excerpt like this:

Kwang goes to school in the morning session and Ah Seow in the afternoon. When Kim was twelve years old, her mother went to work as a live-in servant, coming home twice a month. Kim runs the housekeeping. Their mothers had big quarrels. But for them business is as usual.

One night, through the gaps of rough plank walls dividing their bedrooms, Kwang whisper, "Ah Seow, Ah Seow... keep this one for me." And pass him a spider box.

"Only one?" Ah Seow took it and report, "There are only two of your other spider left, the rest all sold."<sup>1</sup>

The first paragraph is written in standard English. But in the first sentence of the second paragraph, there is this sentence,

“Kwang whisper...” And the next sentence reads, “And pass him a spider box.” The question to ask is, what happened to the tenses governing the words ‘whisper’ and ‘pass’? Given the tenses used in the first paragraph, which legitimately mixes the present and past tenses, the reader would expect the words ‘whispered’ and ‘passed’. Likewise, in the sentence “Ah Seow took it and report”, there is the discrepancy between ‘took’ and ‘report’.

In her essential study of the Singaporean-Malaysian Novel in English, *Different Voices*, Rosaly Puthuchery writes, “There is a need to know what English sounds like before it can be represented. This is rather problematic for writers who live away from Singapore.”<sup>2</sup> These sentences sum up the mixed linguistic situation of *Spider Boys* precisely. Although the author Ming Cher, born in Singapore in 1947, spent his early impressionable years as a boy and young man on the island, he subsequently migrated to New Zealand. One blurb in the 1995 version has this to say: “Ming Cher writes only in English he learnt at school and spoke on the streets of Singapore. He is fluent in Hokkien, Cantonese, Mandarin, Malay, Indonesian and Vietnamese, but in none of these languages does he read or write.”<sup>3</sup>

Very likely, his long absence from Singapore and the lack of communication with speakers of Singaporean English led him to recall the Hokkien and Cantonese dialects he spoke and heard in Singapore in the mid-fifties and how they can be represented in a ‘low’ variety of English.

Language apart, there are merits in the novel which warrant this new version, and the rest of this introduction deals with them. This work recreates vividly and accurately aspects of colonial Singapore in the mid-fifties: gangs and gang rivalry, fighting spiders, fighting fish, kite flying, adolescent angst, religious observances and superstitions amid working-class poverty. As someone born in 1940, who also flew kites, kept fighting fish and spiders and took part in competitions (though not in the way described in the novel), knew gangsters in my district of Hougang and grew up hearing stories of old wives’ tales, I can testify to the authenticity of the novel.<sup>4</sup>

A common feature of the gangs who were members of Chinese triads is that they were organised around hobbies like spider fighting (on which they could bet and make money), or according to districts they lived in (Chinatown or Bukit Ho Swee), or according to the Chinese dialects they spoke. The boys and their girls and families would speak Cantonese in Chinatown and Hokkien in Bukit Ho Swee. Hokkien was the *lingua franca* across dialects. It was usual practice for there to be ‘honour among thieves’ as part of a basic morality, despite the violence. They observed bonds and thus, despite fierce rivalry, Kwang and Chai managed to patch up, and later, Kwang and Yeow. As well, in this excerpt, hero-worship, a common trait among adolescents, is apparent:

I have been even farther—up to Changi! Everywhere is the same at this time. Wait for the kite season to finish in another

month and then it will pick up.” Their friendship was united, like it was in the old times.

Kwang was quiet as they joined the gathering of spider boys crowding around Ah Seow’s new hero. When they arrived, the spider boys all stood up to make way for their reunion. They all cherished the night, especially Yeow, who quietly rubbed his hands with satisfaction.<sup>5</sup>

Old beliefs in traditional Chinese medicine also flourished. Thus Kwang, who stepped on a rusty nail and developed tetanus, recovered through herbal ministrations (see pages 106–108).

Two other features are worth mentioning, namely the climactic contest of spiders and the thriller element. The build-up to what was to become the Spider Olympics is believably presented as an exaggeration, heroics common to impressionable boys living in spare, colonial Singapore. Boys would like to be men, to have adult identity that enables them to be part of social groups, to gamble like men and have money to throw around at girls and whores. There are many competitors, referees, rounds leading to a final, unexpected victories and defeats and a fight to the bitter end. Towards the climax, the spiders became identified with their owners and the areas they represented: “Although Kwang had no left arm, and Jurong was by now limping on only five legs, the two tired spiders war danced for a record thirty seconds before they jumped at each other...”<sup>6</sup> All this is narrated without a touch of irony, but the alert reader cannot but be

aware that at the end, the losing spider tumbled “down the bottle-crate cliff. In their rush to get a close look, the roaring crowd kicked down the stadium.”<sup>7</sup>

The thriller element is in the rivalry between the two leaders, Kwang of Bukit Ho Swee and Yeow of Chinatown, not only for the title of the ‘king’ of the spider boys but also for the love of Kim, their common love interest. The bond between them is temporarily shattered when the more experienced Yeow wins over Kim. Yeow is captured by rival gangs in Penang; he is badly hurt, but survives. Kwang spies on Yeow when he visits a well-heeled prostitute, but the expected stand-off is aborted, the rivals make up and the novel ends happily. In this sense, it is a gangster novel.

The writer of fiction who writes in English but whose characters do not speak English faces several problems in presenting them. One way out of the problem is for him to have his narrator use a standardised English while his characters speak a variety of non-standard Englishes. The narrator is impelled to create, in dialogue which is spoken, authentic speech, or—more accurately—speeches, if the characters belong to different dialects. This difference has to be addressed and one way is to use the idiom peculiar to the language to be presented.

Thus, in this exchange which would have taken place in colloquial Cantonese, there is a reference to ‘water’ to mean ‘money’:

“Something worth thinking,” Lame Leg said, impressed by the large amount of cash. “The **water** on the table is not small. That smooth guy is easy with it.” He used the Cantonese idiom, ‘water’, for money.

“I know what you mean,” the chief replied. “But we don’t sell the rules. All our brothers have to get the facts straight.”

“Sure, but nothing will change. Better to bleed the **water** before we bleed his blood.”<sup>8</sup>

Sometimes, the original Chinese idiom is retained to convey the force of the original, or because the phrase cannot be accurately translated, or it has become embedded in the lexicon of Singaporean English. Take this paragraph, for instance:

The boy with many sisters returned, lots of girls following behind him. The two referees now urged everyone to draw a coloured satay stick from a tin to determine their viewing position. “*Tew chiam! Tew chiam!* Red in front! Blue, white, green follow behind!” Nearly two hundred boys and girls jostled their way into the arena.<sup>9</sup>

The Hokkien phrase ‘*tew chiam*’ means ‘draw lots’ in English. There is another usage of this phrase on page 182.

The two examples quoted above, from Cantonese and Hokkien, demonstrate the language choices made in this novel. It is worthwhile to quote, again, Rosaly Puthucheary, who was mentioned at the beginning of this essay. She writes, “The most important challenge facing the writers of novels about Singapore

and Malaysia in English is, therefore, the artistic representation of the person speaking... The main task that faces the novelist from this region is how to represent the various languages of everyday speech that he encounters in his multilingual environment.”<sup>10</sup>

I hope enough has been said about the linguistic choices facing the writer in English who presents non-English-speaking situations and places, enough for the reader to move on to focus on other fictional characteristics.

Robert Yeo, August 2012

Robert Yeo, born 1940, kept spiders and fighting fish and flew kites as a boy growing up in a kampung. His latest book is *The Best of Robert Yeo* (Epigram Books, 2012), which collects his poems to date. He has published several books of poetry and plays, and edited many anthologies of Singaporean writing. The opera, entitled *Fences*, for which he wrote the libretto to music by John Sharpley, was successfully staged in August 2012 in Singapore.

#### NOTES:

1. Ming Cher. Auckland, New Zealand: Penguin, 1955, 3.
2. Rosaly Puthucheary. *Different Voices: The Singaporean/Malaysian Novel*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009, 288.
3. Ming Cher. 1995. Blurb.
4. Robert Yeo. *Routes: A Singaporean Memoir 1940–75*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2011, 25.
5. Ming Cher. *Spider Boys*. Singapore: Epigram Books, 2012, 97.
6. Ibid. 189.
7. Ibid. 190.
8. Ibid. 134.
9. Ibid. 45.
10. Puthucheary. 17–18.

## Characters

- Kwang (also known as Shark Head and Monkey Boy)—Son of Pau Shen (deceased) and Yee; leader of spider boys
- Kim (Swee Kim)—Daughter of Ah Hock
- Ah Seow (Tain Seng)—Kwang's deputy; brother of Kim
- Pau Shen (*kung fu* man)—Kwang's father (deceased)
- Yee—Kwang's mother
- Ah Hock—Kim's father
- Chai—Son of Big Head; Kwang's spider rival
- Chinatown Yeow (also known as Smiling Boy)—Leader of Chinatown street boys
- San—Chai's deputy; son of Wong
- No Nose—Village kite-maker
- Blind Man—Village storyteller
- Wong—Village calligrapher and letter writer; San's father
- Big Head—Gambling den operator; Chai's father
- Ah Paw—Chai's grandmother
- Big Mole—Orphaned Chinatown girl; protector of Sachee
- Sachee—Orphaned Chinatown boy; spy for Yeow
- Ah Sou (also known as Cigarette Woman)—Yeow's adoptive mother (godmother)
- Cheong Pak—Ah Sou's husband; Yeow's adoptive father (godfather)
- Ng Koo—Rich widow; high-class brothel owner
- Shoot Bird—Merchant; initiator of Spider Olympic Games
- Hong—Burglar; former spider boy

SPIDER BOYS

Singapore

1955

## Mother's Rule

THE WRESTLING SPIDER is a nomadic hunter that lives between closely sandwiched leaves. Its body, which is the shape and size of a grain of rice, is black and covered with iridescent spots and stripes—dark green, turquoise, blue, red, even purple. Its head is about half the length of a grain of rice and broader. The female spider has a black face; the male has a white face and a slimmer body, as well as longer legs and ‘arms’, as well as a needly point at its rear end, which makes it look like a scorpion. The male spider is like a jealous sex maniac that cannot resist the sight of a female. It gets mad at its fellow males and does a war dance before it fights. It jumps as quickly as a ping-pong ball when caught fresh. ‘Spider boys’ all over Singapore called these fighting spiders ‘Panther Tigers’, and caught them to keep as pets or for betting on and selling.

Kwang had been fascinated by wrestling spiders since he could walk and talk. He and Kim had grown up like sweethearts in the house with the bamboo balcony, which their fathers had built together.

Kim—Ah Hock's daughter—watched as Kwang blew gently at a female spider inside a flat tin box while tapping its butt gently with his thumb, his other four fingers spread out underneath for support. It was to make the spider stay still. Then he let a male spider from another box hop in. At the sight of the female, the male spider raised its arms in a desperate effort to approach, which made the female wriggle hard under Kwang's thumb, as if pleading with the other creature, "Help me! Help me!"

"Hey," Kim said, pointing at the male spider, "can you see, the needle on the spider tail is getting longer. You know why?"

"Of course! That one is the male, white face. The needle is like my thing, here!" Kwang pulled down his elastic shorts and flipped his penis up and down until it grew larger. "Same like mine, a male part can expand!"

Kim touched his thing and giggled. He jerked with a shiver.

Sometimes, Kwang and Kim pretended to be spiders and wrestled together. Sometimes he would ride on top of her, like a male spider. Just before he turned seven, his mother, Yee, gave him his first big whacking for penetrating Kim. Yee told Ah Hock that Kim was also caned by her mother. Ah Hock, a tall and strong coolie, was furious at seeing the cane marks on his daughter's body and nearly beat his wife, who loved her son, Tain Seng, more. From then on, Kim was free to do whatever she liked.

Even after his father, Pau Shen the *kung fu* man, died when he was ten years old, Kwang's love for wrestling spiders did

not die. When his mother was at home, he would pretend to be studying hard, staring into a book and saying any English word that came to mind: "A—boy, C—dog, B—orange!" His mother, who could not read or write, would then look pleased and leave him alone.

Tain Seng, Kim's brother, was a year younger and nicknamed Ah Seow ("something wrong in the head") by all the spider boys in the village, for he would go into fits of psychic hallucinations when he got very nervous. Otherwise, he was brilliant at school and good at the spider business. Tall and handsome, Ah Seow was also Kwang's spider agent and safeguarded the knowledge of Kwang's hobby from the fierce Yee.

Kwang went to school in the morning and Ah Seow attended the afternoon session. When Kim was twelve, her mother went to work as a live-in servant, coming home twice a month. So Kim ran the housekeeping. Their mothers quarrelled frequently. For the children, the spider business went on as usual.

One night, through a gap in the rough plank walls dividing their bedrooms, Kwang passed a box to Ah Seow and whispered, "Ah Seow, Ah Seow, keep this one for me."

"Only one?" Ah Seow took the spider box. He reported, "There are only two of your other spiders left, the rest all sold."

"Don't talk so loud and so much lah!" Kwang growled. "My mother's in a bad mood. I wait for you at the usual place before cock crows. Can you wake up earlier?" Kwang was lying underneath a mosquito net on a raised plank floor, which was

the bed he shared with his two younger brothers. "You climb over and wake me up lah," said Ah Seow in the submissive voice he used when Kwang demanded something from him. He had relied on Kwang for protection against the village bullies since he was growing up.

The next morning, the boys crawled out of their mosquito nets and jumped out of their bedroom windows into the narrow alley between the back of their houses and their neighbour's wall. Ah Seow clapped away the dust from his clothes and moaned. "So early...!" He rubbed his sleepy eyes on the sleeves of his shirt. He had the spider boxes inside a canvas bag over his shoulder.

"Don't talk cock!" Kwang elbowed him. "I tell you something when we get there, run!" He pushed him into a race. They took shortcuts and ran up slopes and passed the backyard of a farmhouse on their way to a small plot of big yam leaves. The morning dew had pooled on the waxy surfaces of the leaves.

Ah Seow asked breathlessly, "What is the big news?"

Kwang ignored him and tilted a big leaf back and forth, dreamily watching the larger dewdrops merge with the smaller ones. He was in his own world for a while. "Bring out the spiders," he ordered. "Bring out the Panther Tigers." Kwang scratched his lean, shirtless body, which was scarred by mosquito bites and by cane marks from beatings by his mother, who wanted him to stay at home and study hard.

Ah Seow squatted to take out two metal cigarette cases

from his bag. "Sold at six for one-dollar-fifty, only the best two are left," he reported and passed him one box.

Kwang pursed his lips. "Not this one! The one from last night."

Ah Seow, who knew Kwang 'inside out', realised he was in a boastful mood. "Oh!" he slapped his forehead. "Forgot to bring that box!"

"Real or not?" Kwang frowned, looking hard at Seow from under his thick eyebrows. Kwang had an odd look. Other than his bulging forehead, flat nose and small, mean eyes, he had a strange haircut. His mother had cropped his thick black hair straight across, two inches above his ears. It made him look as if she had put a half coconut shell over his head and cut his hair roughly around it, so as to save money from going to the barber. When water was poured over his head at bath, it looked as if a mini waterfall were cascading before his eyes—and his nose would stay quite dry.

Ah Seow gave up the tease. Smiling broadly, he took out a box that he had hidden in the back of his elastic shorts, under his shirt. "Nah!" He held it out.

"Don't talk cock and waste time lah!" Kwang snatched the box from Ah Seow and asked proudly, "Did you see it?"

Ah Seow jerked his shoulder upwards, palms opened to indicate innocence. "Dare not see, wait for you!"

Kwang opened the spider box. It had two box-size pandan leaves fitted inside, one upon the other, and the leaf on top had a hole in the centre. Kwang tapped on the leaf with a finger.

A white-face spider crawled out from the hole, looking like it was yawning; its arms moved up and down, as if it was readying itself for the morning world.

“Come on, jump, jump.” Kwang urged, his brows moving up and down in anticipation. It didn’t take long for his spider to respond and jump onto his palm. Kwang held out his other hand to encourage the spider to jump again. He did this test repeatedly, each time increasing the distance between his two hands to see how far his new pet could manage in a single leap. After a few minutes, he allowed the thirsty creature to jump onto a big leaf to walk about and drink the morning dew. Kwang’s absorption in his observation was so complete, as it always was; his focus still puzzled Ah Seow.

Kwang snapped his fingers and held out his palm. “Ah Seow, Ah Seow, pass me my bedbugs.”

Ah Seow put a small Tiger Balm tin case on Kwang’s palm and stooped closer. “Rare purple!” he commented. “Did you try it out yet?”

“No need to lah!” Kwang said confidently. “Block the spider in your palm and see how heavy it is.”

While Ah Seow felt the new spider jumping between his hands, Kwang nipped out the fattest bedbug from the Tiger Balm case, which had been caught underneath the straw mats on his bed and fed on his own blood.

“Heavy?” Kwang asked. “I feed it first.” Swiftly scooping the spider back, he blew at it so that it would remain motionless

on its box while he dropped the bedbug onto the same surface. He stopped blowing and the spider pounced. Breakfast now in its mouth, it looked up at Kwang as if to say: “I want a dark place to enjoy my meal.” Kwang guided his new pet into the box and snapped the lid shut. He beamed at Ah Seow. “The snapping bite on the bug’s neck is so fast and accurate. See anything about the head?”

“Yah, yah,” Ah Seow nodded. “The head is much broader than usual. Where did you catch it?”

“At the end of Number Ten STC bus terminal, behind the row of hawker stalls at the large rubbish pit,” said Kwang, his piercing black eyes growing larger from the recollection. Those eyes showed anger and fear, from crying for freedom, “Freedom from mother’s rule!” Ah Seow stood back, a little confused, “But that place... that place was burnt down by a big fire two years ago?”

“It is green again! Different leaves, too. Pandan and lallang now cover up the whole place. There’re a lot of mosquitoes and flying red fleas, bred from the wet rubbish dump.” Talking faster, Kwang scratched his body again. “They like the red fleas, that’s why their colour is so dark purple.” Ah Seow suddenly caught on. “There must be a lot more!”

“I spent nearly one hour, then I caught this one, but another one escaped! Remember? Remember what the Blind Man always says in his story? After a fire, if anything lives again, it’s very strong. I can tell by the look of this Panther Tiger.”

Ah Seow asked quickly, “Do you want to fight with Chai?”

“This time I will win back all the money I lost to Chai,” Kwang proclaimed, the yellow spider box in his hand. He squatted. “Ah Seow, how much money all together?”

Ah Seow squatted in front of Kwang and took out two spider boxes and the money from his bag. “Nah!” he said. “One dollar sixty—if I sell the two best ones at forty cents each, all together two-forty. Nah, one-sixty.” Ah Seow threw the coins onto the ground, which was bare of vegetation on account of their regular visits.

Kwang stooped to pocket the money and tossed twenty cents back onto the ground. “Nah! Your commission.” With his bare foot, Kwang pushed the two spider boxes towards Ah Seow. “Sell for me, I need the capital to go back and catch more before anybody finds the new place. Feed the old spiders with fly heads, save the other bedbugs for my new spider to eat.”

Ah Seow put the boxes into his bag and rubbed the twenty-cent coin on his hand. “How much do you think Chai has?”

“What about you, how much can you lend me?”

“One dollar the most,” said Ah Seow, looking at the ground as he thought.

“Not enough! I need three dollars!” Kwang exploded. “I want to skip school for a few more days to catch more.”

“Why don’t you ask my sister? She has all the marketing money from mama and papa.”

“Cannot! I already owe her five dollars. Kim is not talking to me anymore. If you don’t trust me just say so!”

“The most is two dollars,” Ah Seow made his offer firmly. “No more.”

As Kwang walked away, he said, “I want the money today.”

More roosters were now crowing. As they walked down from the farming area, Ah Seow advised Kwang, “The place is so far away. Bus fare and eating outside in that expensive area will cost you at least eighty cents a day even if you don’t use Tiger Balm to stop mosquito bites. Remember the last time? You won until Chai lost his temper and nearly started a fight with you again. The next day we lost everything in that big match.”

Kwang punched his palm. “We lost in the sixth round!” He recalled something else, and punched harder into his palm. “Get caught by my mother the next day too. That time my luck was really bad. Fuck!” He thoughtfully examined some old, hard-to-heal cane marks.

“Everybody is still talking about it at the banyan tree.”

“This time, this time is going to be different.” He shot a look at Ah Seow and started counting with his fingers.

“This Saturday and Sunday my mother is working on night shift, I cannot come out... have to wait for maybe something like ten days.”

Ah Seow reminded him as they plotted, “I can guarantee everybody will save up for a return match between you and Chai, but what about our capital?”

“I see what I can catch first. If good, I will try it out with the Chinatown shoeshine boys first, make capital first.”

“You mean those street boys?” Ah Seow warned. “Don’t touch them, too risky! They use knives. Can’t fight with them, they get in a group and throw red pepper in your face, not gentleman!”

“I know. I am not that stupid, I meet their chief.”

“You mean Chinatown Yeow? That king of street boys!” Yeow was legendary even among the adult gangs in Chinatown.

“Yah lah!” Kwang replied modestly. “I talked to him about me in his territory over a cup of coffee. He agreed everybody should be gentleman, win or lose.”

Ah Seow, who hero-worshipped tough boys, got excited. “How did you meet him? What do you think of him?”

“When we do well, I’ll introduce him to you,” he jabbed his assistant’s arm and motioned with a tilt of his head. “Let’s run!”

• • •

Climbing back into his bed, Ah Seow didn’t wait long before he heard Kwang shouting to his brothers, four and five years younger than him, “Wake up! Wake up!” They went for a wash at the well. “One! Two! Three!” Kwang shouted as he threw a bucket in. “One! Two! Three!” his brothers sang in response, as he hauled the bucket out of the well. Using empty cans, the boys scooped up the water, threw it at each other, laughing and giggling merrily. After their bath, they raced home to eat whatever was available for breakfast. Their mother

was still asleep; she had done a late shift at a labouring job on a ship. Food was usually plain rice with soy sauce; anything more than that was a feast. Kwang had said many times to Kim and Ah Seow, “If my mother treats me like Chai’s father, no need to go to school. I can make more money than my mother.” He had secretly been supplying extra food for his kid brothers from spider money. An average spider could fetch up to twenty cents, which could buy two bowls of rich curry laksa soup—very delicious with plain rice—or two salted eggs, or three fresh eggs.

## 2

## Panther Tiger

KWANG SKIPPED SCHOOL and went back to the STC bus terminal. To save some money, he did not use Tiger Balm. After a few hours, he caught two spiders. “Fucking mosquitoes!” He cursed and scratched all the way out of the bushes and crossed the road. He sat on the bench at a cart stall that was parked by the roadside, under a tree. A burly Indian man sat behind two twenty-gallon copper drums of hot water, which were simmering over a charcoal fire.

“*Teh!*” He ordered a glass of tea in Malay, holding up an index finger. While waiting, Kwang helped himself to two curry buns—his favourite snack—sitting inside a glass jar on the counter. He gobbled them down quickly.

He peered at his new catch, which was jumping madly inside a flat metal box bedded with leaves, trying to escape. He kept blowing at it so that it would calm down and stay still for him to take a quick look. He snapped the lid shut quickly to prevent the agitated spider from getting executed on the edges of the box.

“*Teh!*” said the big Indian man, his voice deep like drum. He passed the cardamom tea to Kwang through the space between the two copper drums.

After a few quick sips of the hot tea, Kwang pointed at his wrist, “Baaboo?” The man winced at the nickname, but all the same he extended his hand between the drums so that Kwang could look at the time on his watch. Kwang thanked him with a quick salute, then handed the glass of tea back, his tongue lolling in and out to indicate that the drink was too hot.

Baaboo had a long moustache that was neatly curved upwards. “*Aachaa!*” he growled as he took Kwang’s glass and sat down to cool the hot tea by pouring it between two glasses with an expert hand.

Kwang took the opportunity to take off like a whip, without paying for his drink or bread, to catch the eleven-fifteen bus heading for Chinatown.

At Chinatown, he went straight to Lim Eng Bee Street, where it was quiet in the afternoons and there was a bustling night market in the evenings. He was a stranger in this territory. About a few dozen street kids from seven to fifteen years old habitually occupied the dead end of the street, gambling against one another. Squatting in patches, they played *ting tong* with two coins, matchstick guessing and cards and also compared their wrestling spiders. Kwang felt as if he were walking through a jungle, watched by all kinds of animals. Still, he wanted to make money by spider matching with

these cash-rich Chinatown boys. At a short distance away, he took a deep breath to steady his nerves, one hand gripping the strap of his schoolbag, before he entered the makeshift gambling den.

“Shark Head!” One of the kids with short spiky hair and sitting on a shoeshine box yelled out with a random nickname for Kwang. “Shark Head!” he shouted again.

“Come over here!” The boy curled his finger inwards slowly, ridiculing him, as if he were a dog.

Kwang walked towards him with a forced smile. “Did you see Chinatown Yeow?” He mentioned their leader’s name as if it were a passport for entry.

The boy, who was in his early youth, scanned Kwang from head to toe with goldfish-like eyes. “Find Chinatown Yeow for what?” He pointed a thumb at himself. “Talk to me first!”

Watched by all the animal eyes, Kwang felt it was a test of raw guts. “Not your business,” he warned Goldfish, waving a finger at him. “I came to look for Yeow. Don’t disgrace me like a dog with your finger. Okay?” He turned around to face the others. “Anybody wants to have a clash with my Panther Tiger?” He imitated spiders wrestling using both his hands.

Goldfish did not want to lose face, so he lurched forward to grab at the strap of Kwang’s schoolbag and pulled. Kwang slipped the strap from his shoulder, braced himself and pulled back. Goldfish tugged harder, but Kwang now freed the strap, sending Goldfish falling backwards onto his bottom. Although

Goldfish quickly stood up, Kwang lifted a knee to strike at his opponent’s groin.

“Aayaak!” Goldfish screamed as he doubled over in pain, his face instantly turning white.

Kwang tipped his eyes left and right at the animal eyes and warned Goldfish again with his finger. “Don’t try to big fish eat small fish. I am not good to eat.”

Squatting, Goldfish still could not bear to have his honour written off with his mates watching. The moment the pain subsided, he jumped at Kwang with a straight punch. Kwang twisted his waist so that the punch flew past him harmlessly, then aimed a chop at the back of Goldfish’s right elbow in a lightning move taught by his father. The fight was over in seconds. Goldfish held his elbow, which was shooting with pain.

Kwang said with arms folded, “If I don’t give face to Yeow, I already break your hand.”

Kwang knew he would not be able run away if everyone mob-attacked. He also knew that they would attack like a pack of wolves if any one of them were authoritative enough to order a kill. “Saak!” At the moment, however, they crowded around him with sceptical looks and did not break for him to pass.

He introduced himself. “I am from Bukit Ho Swee, I am here to play spiders.”

The boys were leaderless and could not reply, so they started to loosen up and look at one another.

To prevent their going wild, Kwang then bluffed, "Where is Chinatown Yeow? I can't find him in Santeng." Hearing their boss's name again, the group had second thoughts about advancing on Kwang.

Kwang walked out. Once outside the area, Kwang ran for one kilometre so that he could get to Pearl Bank School before the school bell rang at one-fifteen for the afternoon session. Scattered crowds of schoolboys were playing spiders. He asked a familiar face, "Win or lose?"

"Lost four matches."

"Where?"

"There!" Familiar Face pointed to a small group of school kids.

"Use mine to make some food money. Want or not?"

"How? They're all scared to bite with you."

"Just don't let them know."

"No money already."

"Money on me, make a hit yourself. Lose not your problem."

"How much do you want to throw down?"

Kwang counted out his coins to the last cent. He eventually won a few dollars from Pearl Bank School. Next, he rushed to Pearl's Hill School where he got Ah Seow to safe-keep his spiders. This was in case his mother got suspicious and searched him.

When he arrived home, he lied. "Mama, my teacher chose me to be a school prefect. Have to go for meeting. So tomorrow I come home late."

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The next day he snuck around to avoid Baaboo's stall. He ate inside a coffeeshop. Using Tiger Balm this time, he caught five more spiders at the same place. Then he went to Chinatown Yeow to complain.

"Yeow, I mentioned your name. Your boys in Lim Eng Bee still don't give face... What happened to what you say?"

"You don't fight them, you don't know them," Chinatown Yeow smiled. "I just passed the word around. Check it out yourself."

Early the next morning, on their way to exercise the spiders again, Kwang pulled Ah Seow backwards by the collar. "Walk slowly," he said, and flashed out a crisp red ten-dollar note. He waved it near Ah Seow's nose with a pleased little smile.

"Waah!" Ah Seow exclaimed. "How many matches all together?"

"Didn't count, won everywhere. Somebody offered me one dollar for this one." Kwang tossed a round spider box into the air and caught it with a leap. "Let's run...!"

On arrival at the yam leaves, Kwang pulled out a magnifying glass. "Do you know what this is for?"

"To look at spiders," Ah Seow replied. "What is there to show off?" But he was surprised. He had never seen anybody using a magnifying glass to study spiders.

He poked further. "What for? Who do you copycat?"

“Don’t insult me... I don’t copycat anybody,” Kwang snapped as he traced his spiders’ movements on the leaves.

Ah Seow could not understand what his boss saw in spiders, but he knew Kwang would never stop dreaming of winning the grand prize in the annual wrestling spider championship, which the best of hard-core spider boys from the fifty-two districts of Singapore participated in.

After examining his spiders one by one, from the way they fed to the way they drank morning dew, Kwang picked out the best two and pushed the rest towards Ah Seow. “Nah! Fight five matches with Chai at one dollar a match tomorrow. Win or lose never mind, but remember the spiders and the rounds in every match.”

“What is the new trick?” Ah Seow asked as he put the spider boxes into his bag.

“You wait and see,” Kwang mumbled, his mood changing and his face looking worried. “I must go back to school and pay my school fees. If I get sacked from school, my mother will finish me.”

“How many days did you skip school already?”

“Three days straight... hard to explain to my pig-face teacher this time.”

“If I am you, I will say my parents have no money to pay school fees, they ask me to stay at home.”

“Did that before lah!” Kwang erupted. “That fuck face teacher made me stand behind the classroom for half a day!

If it happens again I have to see the school principal.”

Knowing his pride, Ah Seow made fun of Kwang. “Will your legs be shaking if you face the school principal?”

“Don’t talk cock lah!” He landed a playful punch on Seow’s arm, fully aware that the same old lies would have to be repeated. By nature, Kwang was a quiet person, a dreamer with inscrutable schemes and private tricks. Ah Seow, a sensitive boy, followed him around like his alter ego.

Making their way home before the village awoke and leaving their bare footprints on the muddy tracks, Ah Seow had only a vague idea about using the five spiders to test Chai’s creatures. How exactly was his boss going to plan his next move? Ah Seow was not sure, so he fished around again. “What do you see in your glass?”

“You don’t know anything about Panther Tiger,” Kwang scoffed. He walked on without a word for a while, then said dreamily, “I want to know everything about Panther Tiger. Sometimes I like to be a Panther Tiger.... What my mother hates is what I like...!”

“What do you see?”

“Ask Swee Kim.”

“My sister? I thought she doesn’t like Panther Tiger anymore since our mothers’ big quarrel. She blames you. What did she say?”

“She said it has a crab face, I said it has a monkey face and let her look at it with my magnifying glass.”

“And then?”

“And then Kim said I have a monkey face like spider. I jumped at her, she kept laughing nonstop,” he said cheekily before dashing down the slope. Ah Seow shouted after him, “You disturb my sister again!” Although a few months younger, Kim had suddenly shot up to more than half a head taller than Kwang. Her usual skirt had turned into miniskirt, and her light cotton tee-shirt had started to fill out with her vibrant breast buds. Kwang liked to rub her rounded bottom and say, grinning, “Big bum!” And she would always bark back in mock anger, her ready-to-laugh eyes teasing him: “Snake head, mouse eyes!”

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The next day, a Saturday, Kwang’s mother was at home doing housework. Kwang pretended to study hard, as usual reciting any English word that crossed his mind to ‘bullshit’ her.

In a low-key match that afternoon with Chai’s deputy, San, the son of Wong, at the playground shaded by the huge banyan tree, their spiders won three matches out of five. The matches were watched by only a few dozen spider boys, who betted.

When Ah Seow came back with the news, he heard Yee threatening loudly to beat Kwang. “You look after your brothers, if I come home and hear complaints about you, I will give you a whacking!” She turned to Kwang’s two little brothers,

“Same for the two of you! Remember what I say, behave yourself! I will take you all out to eat *char siuw bao* once a month if you all behave yourself.”

The youngest son asked, “How many can I eat?” Roast pork buns were his favourite.

Hard work and constant strain had made Yee look ten years older than her age. She had suppressed anger in her eyes, which frightened Kwang like hell. She softened a little and dug into her pocket to give the boy ten cents. Raising her voice again, she said to Kwang, “You listen carefully! I leave you to look after the house. I found a good permanent job as a second cook in a very rich man’s house. Their rice drum is full enough for one month.”

Yee took out some money and counted it twice, privately thinking about her hard life. She placed her hopes in Kwang, whom she believed was a star at school, because he had shown her false school reports.

In a way, she was pleased as she held back her tears and handed him the money. “There’re forty dollars here, one dollar a day for food at home, twenty cents a day for schooling. Come and see me once a week. I want to know what happens at home. The rich people have a son, same age as you, make friends with him. That will help to keep the rice bowl going. Have to be smarter than other people nowadays.”

“I know, I know,” Kwang nodded tactfully.

“Clean yourself up. Then I show you my boss’s place.”

Kwang hurried to the common well with a towel over his shoulder, his heart and mind singing, "Freedom! Freedom to be free and wild at last!"

When Ah Seow met him at the well to report the three wins and two lost matches, he didn't care. Instead, he exclaimed dramatically, hands held up to the sky, "The heavens at last open the eyes for me!" He was imitating desperate *chap jee kee* women when they burst with joy upon winning a prize in the illegal lottery.

That evening, returning from the rich man's mansion, Kwang celebrated generously. He brought home three bottles of Pepsi-Cola, a steamed chicken costing three dollars, a dollar's worth of assorted meat and vegetables, and an apple for each of his brothers for dessert. He invited Kim and Ah Seow to feast together. Ah Hock, a quieter man since Pau Shen died, rubbed Kwang's head with his big hand. "Aaaa?" he asked in his deep voice. "Whose big birthday are you celebrating tonight?"

"Eat with us, Uncle Hock!" Kwang evaded the question.

Ah Hock at nearly fifty years old. Despite patches of white hair at the side of his ears, he was still strong, and still the same man who liked what he liked in his own simple, odd ways. He loved his daughter more than gold, and what she liked was what he liked too. He was engaged at eight, married at eighteen, and didn't have any children until he prayed for God's help. He knew Kim and Kwang got along well. He also knew what had happened: Kim had told him about Yee when he arrived home.

He'd already had his daily bottle of Guinness stout. He smiled at Kwang and walked back to his room to read his Chinese comics.

During the feast, it was all spider talk about the big return match with Chai the next day.

Ah Seow said, "You spent so much on food today, you have enough for the match tomorrow?"

"Why scared? I still have forty dollars for food from my mother, here!" He smacked his pocket a few times.

"Don't borrow money from me again!" said Kim, who ran the washing, marketing and cooking chores for Ah Seow and for Ah Hock, who worked as a cargo labourer.

"Don't worry," Kwang grinned. "I can now catch Panther Tiger any time I like. This time sure to win back."

Ah Seow asked, "How many matches tomorrow?"

"Seven all together."

"Late night at the temple tonight," Ah Seow said. "We go and spread the news at the playground. Blind Man is telling stories tonight." The Kuan Yin Temple was open till late on every first and fifteenth day of the lunar calendar.

Kwang's kid brothers wanted to go for stories; Kim acted on impulse. She stood up, tied her jet-black hair into a ponytail and said, "I go and ask my girlfriends to come. You and Ah Seow go and wash the dishes. Wait awhile for me." And the long-legged girl left in her flowery, baggy, *samfoo* pants.

Ah Seow had a psychic sense developed from listening to too many ghost stories and fairy tales. He was afraid of the

dark. He went into his room for the six-inch nail that he kept under his bed for defence against the *pontianak*, the female vampire that supposedly loved eating boys' testicles.

That night, at the temple courtyard under a binjai tree, Blind Man said, "Even a small boy can make a wild tiger in the jungle run away."

The children chorused, "How?"

"First of all"—he coughed lightly and raised a finger—"the boy must carry an umbrella. Must be brave when he meets the tiger in the jungle... he must remember... all tigers will pause to study their victims for a while before attacking... just like all animals. So, slowly and steadily, the boy must walk forward, step by step with the umbrella open a little, and close it... open a little bigger... and close, bigger and close, bigger and close, as he get closer. To puzzle the tiger—and *whoom!* Blast the umbrella fully open suddenly with a loud scream about ten steps away!" Blind Man demonstrated the full umbrella blast to his giggling listeners.

"That will make tiger run like a rabbit." He sipped his tea to relax and listen to the chattering before he told another story, about the Three Foxy Sisters.

In between stories, Ah Seow and Kwang went to the playground, which was busier, with older boys and adults strolling, talking or eating the food sold by itinerant hawkers. The latter shouldered their wares on two baskets hanging from both ends of a bamboo pole, and their sizzling gas lights

flickered as they moved under the full moon.

Kwang's sudden appearance surprised the spider boys from different sides. Many crowded around him and Ah Seow to ask for information. To fan the feelings of excitement and anticipation over Kwang's return, the boys told their faithful supporters to spread the news about the match on the next day and about Kwang's new spiders. They especially wanted to win over the kids that did not yet take sides, as these were, potentially, Kwang's new supporters.

That night Kwang tossed about on his bed, dreaming of winning much glory and a lot of money at the annual Spider Olympic Games. Every year, spider boys within each district competed among themselves for the three best spiders to present at the Olympics. The previous year's winner also won the right to hold the grand game in their territory in the following year. Bukit Ho Swee had no such honour in its history. In the former year, the winner was the Redhill group of boys; the Changi boys were second. Kwang's spider had been knocked out in the semifinal. That alone, though, had made him popular overnight and won him the respect of all the spider boys in the village, especially Chai, son of Big Head and spider voice of the gambling den operator.

Kwang and Chai had been best friends until the end of the previous year, when a joke degenerated into abusive words at the playground. Many spider boys witnessed that fight. Kwang called Chai's grandmother, Ah Paw, a witch. Chai called Kwang

a madman's son. Kwang leapt at Chai in a frenzied attack, catching the taller and heavier boy by surprise. They fought like mad dogs until they both rolled down the slope to a busy footpath near the temple. It took two men to tear them apart. Spider boys called it a draw.

Kwang's swollen face—black eyes, bloodied lips, bee-stung nose—did not receive any sympathy from Kwang's mother. She gave him a second hiding. As far as she was concerned, not studying hard was bad; fighting was wrong; and playing with spiders was the worst.

Serious spider boys in the village numbered more than a few hundred and they were split into two groups: those supporting Kwang and the ones behind Chai. Cash-rich Chai was an expert in picking winning spiders, and he had been buying expensive spiders to knock Kwang's out in the competitions. Because Chai had monopolised the spider business for so long, more people had begun to speak well of Kwang again. Previously, the pressure of losing their bets all the time made many of Kwang's supporters walk out on him, while some others decided not to take sides but to become independent third parties instead.

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**SPIDER BOYS**

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In the 1950s, street boys bet on their fighting spiders for money and power. Aspiring to be the leading ‘spider boy’, Kwang hones his skills for capturing and training the best spiders with the single-mindedness of a professional hobbyist. Chagrined, his childhood ‘sweetheart’, Kim, finds herself drawn to smiling-faced Yeow, Kwang’s powerful rival.

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