

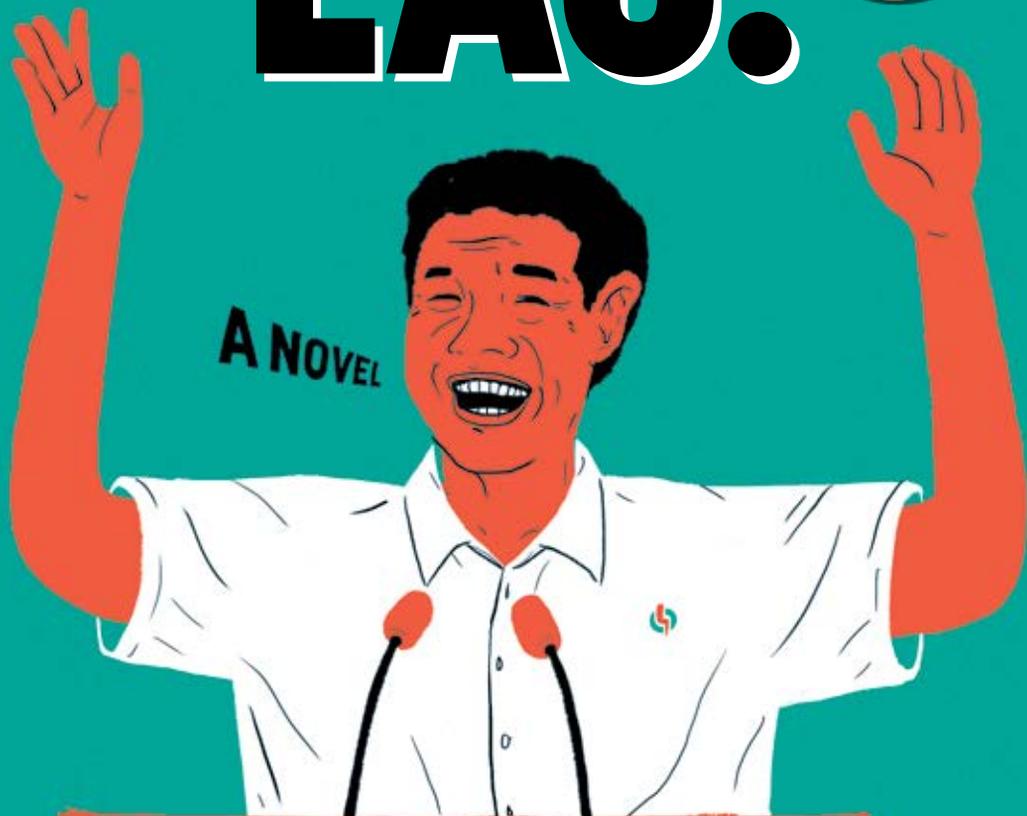
LET'S GIVE IT UP FOR

GIMME LAO!

FINALIST



EPIGRAM
BOOKS
FICTION
PRIZE
2015



A NOVEL

SEBASTIAN SIM

**LET'S GIVE IT UP
FOR GIMME LAO!**

ALSO FROM THE EPIGRAM BOOKS FICTION PRIZE

WINNER

Now That It's Over

FINALIST

Death of a Perm Sec

Sugarbread

LET'S GIVE IT UP FOR
**GIMME
LAO!**

A Novel

SEBASTIAN SIM



EPIGRAM BOOKS / SINGAPORE

To My Mother

Copyright © 2016 by Sebastian Sim
Cover Illustration by Yong Wen Yeu

All rights reserved
Published in Singapore by Epigram Books
www.epigrambooks.sg

NATIONAL LIBRARY BOARD, SINGAPORE CATALOGUING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

NAMES: Sim, Sebastian, 1966-

TITLE: Let's give it up for Gimme Lao! / written by Sebastian Sim.

DESCRIPTION: Singapore : Epigram Books, 2016.

IDENTIFIERS: OCN 936527164

ISBN: 978-981-4757-32-4 (paperback)

978-981-4757-33-1 (ebook)

SUBJECTS: LCSH: Families—Fiction. | Singapore—Fiction.

CLASSIFICATION: LCC PR9570.S53 DDC S823—dc23

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, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

FIRST EDITION: March 2016

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ONE

THERE WERE THREE things Gimme Lao did not know about himself.

The first occurred at his point of birth. The second happened way before he was born. And the third repeated itself many times over his life.

Strictly speaking, the third was not about him. It was about the pivotal impact he had on other people, which he never found out about.

Take for example Yik Fan. Gimme Lao and Yik Fan went to the same primary school. Being two years apart, they were not in the same class, nor did they end up in the same extra-curricular sports team. As far as he was concerned, Gimme Lao never knew Yik Fan existed.

Yik Fan, on the other hand, would never forget Gimme Lao.

Specifically, Yik Fan would never forget the spectacle of Gimme Lao's public humiliation on stage during school assembly. Not the fierce sobbing of the subject of ridicule, nor the malicious smirk of the disciplinary master as he made the boy put on a frock and applied cherry red lipstick on his lips. The entire assembly was collapsing in riotous laughter, and no one noticed that Yik Fan was trembling with fear.

When Yik Fan reached home that afternoon, he quickly retrieved the lipstick he hid in his socks drawer and threw it down the rubbish chute. For the following two Sundays after his mother left for the market, he refrained from slipping into her high heels and prancing around the house like he usually did. By the time the third Sunday rolled around, the suppressed urge had become an unbearable itch. The boy succumbed. But the thrill of slipping his feet into the familiar comfort of his mother's high heels was sullied by a new apprehension. He saw his eventual downfall with clarity and certainty. It was only a matter of time before he would be paraded on stage, a subject of ridicule for the entire world's entertainment.

Yik Fan countered the fear with pain. He brought out his mother's nail clipper and clipped deep into his toe, tearing off a tender chunk of skin and flesh along with a sliver of toenail. His mother chided him for being careless.

The boy continued to be careless. As a teenager, he was always scraping his heels against the spikes on his bicycle chainring. When he was riding his first motorcycle, the exhaust pipe must have seared his thighs a dozen times. After he got married, his wife was shocked at how easily Yik Fan could hurt himself. There were always razor blade cuts on his lips, and bruised nails where he had stubbed his toes. She sighed and accepted the fact that her husband was hopelessly clumsy.

Yik Fan accepted the penalty of pain for the right to continue with his secret fetish. After his firstborn arrived, his wife was so preoccupied with the baby she left him very much to himself. That was when Yik Fan became emboldened. He bought a new kimono cardigan, a crepe gown and a split dance dress in sultry red to expand his repertoire.

On Sunday afternoons when his wife brought the baby to the in-laws, Yik Fan decked himself out in elaborate outfits and enacted scenes of fantasy. He was supposedly a damsel in distress chained up in a dungeon on that fateful afternoon when his mother-in-law came in unannounced to retrieve the tin of baby formula. He panicked at the sound of the key at the front door and dropped his key to the handcuff. The look of horror on his mother-in-law's face searing into his psyche was many times more painful than the multiple burns from the motorcycle exhaust pipe. After she left, he extricated himself from the bondage and sat in a daze for a full hour before realising that it was all over. The last image he saw before he applied the blade to his wrist was that of Gimme Lao on stage at the school assembly 20 years ago, sobbing fiercely as the crowd roared with laughter.

Gimme Lao did not know that. Neither did the disciplinary master who humiliated him on stage. Both of them went on living their lives, oblivious to the fact that their actions planted shame and fear so deep in a little boy's psyche it led him to end his own life 20 years later.

The second thing that Gimme Lao did not know about himself happened way before he was born. Both his parents decided it was better that Gimme Lao not know. Grandma Toh, the only other person who knew, was sworn to secrecy.

Grandma Toh was a widow who lived next door to Gimme Lao's parents in their single bedroom flat unit. She was entrusted with babysitting duties while Gimme Lao's parents worked. She understood the gravity of the secret she was supposed to keep, and agreed wholeheartedly that Gimme Lao should never be told. But the secret grew like a throbbing tumour in her throat. It was a relief to her when

Aunty Seah, who lived two doors away, accidentally scraped her foot against the lid of the secret and proceeded to pry it open with curiosity.

“Don’t you find it strange that the boy’s grandparents never visit?” Aunty Seah mentioned casually when she came visiting one afternoon.

Grandma Toh bit her lip as she rocked the baby suckling the milk bottle in her arms. She prayed that Aunty Seah would veer off the topic and not tempt her.

“When the young couple moved in a year ago, I thought it was nice to have newlyweds join us in the block. The husband was especially amiable. Mild-tempered fellow. Can’t say the same for the wife though. I am pretty sure she’s the one who wears the pants in the house.” Aunty Seah continued with the gossip. “But what irks me is that the couple is so secretive. No one in the block knows about their past or their background. Seriously, what is the big secret that they cannot share?”

Grandma Toh felt an actual, physical constriction in her throat. It was such a torture to know and be forbidden to tell.

“And then when the young wife got pregnant, all the neighbours were happy for them. We kept a lookout for the inexperienced couple and gave them all the help they needed. You even volunteered to be her confinement nurse after the baby was born. But don’t you find it weird that the couple receives no visits whatsoever from their parents or their relatives? I mean, how would the couple cope if you had not stepped forward to take over babysitting duties when they went back to work?”

“Well, I did promise my cousin I would look after the young couple,” Grandma Toh muttered.

“How did your cousin come into the picture?” Aunty Seah asked, confused.

Grandma Toh sighed. It was simply too difficult to hold her tongue. “My cousin works as a maid for the Lao family, the one that owns the Three Rifles fashion brand. They have a massive mansion in Grange Road.”

Aunty Seah’s eyes widened. “Wait a minute. Are you telling me that Lao Sheng Yang, the father of this baby, who works as an administrative clerk in an insurance company, comes from one of the richest families in town?”

Grandma Toh nodded. It was so satisfying to be in a position to dispense secrets by the spoonful into a willing ear and watch the amazement grow.

“Was he kicked out of the house and disowned by the family because they were against his marriage?” Aunty Seah ventured a guess.

Grandma Toh frowned. It was a letdown when the listener was too quick to guess the ending. “It is a long and complicated story.”

“You have to tell me.”

“You have to keep it a secret.”

Aunty Seah nodded eagerly.

“My cousin has worked for the Lao family for decades. She practically watched Lao Sheng Yang and his two brothers grow up. She was there too when the boys’ mother succumbed to tuberculosis and became bedridden for many years. That was when Huang Rhoo was brought into the family as a goddaughter to look after the ailing mother.”

Aunty Seah’s eyes widened again. “You mean to say Huang

Rhoo, the baby's mother, was Lao Sheng Yang's godsister? That is kind of scandalous."

"There is more to it," Grandma Toh continued. "Huang Rhoo's father, who worked for Sheng Yang's father, was a compulsive gambler. He had to beg Sheng Yang's father constantly to cover his debts. In a way, he was selling his daughter to the family. Tuberculosis is contagious, and Sheng Yang's father would rather have someone from outside his family look after his wife."

"So that was how the couple met and fell in love," Aunty Seah nodded.

"Both were in their mid teens then. Huang Rhoo was doing very well in school before she had to quit and take on the nursing role. She begged Sheng Yang to continue tutoring her in the evenings. In fact, my cousin told me that between the two, Huang Rhoo was the smarter one. She could tell because whenever the two played Chinese chess, Huang Rhoo often lost her temper and chided Sheng Yang for making badly calculated moves. It's a pity she never went back to school. Otherwise she could easily get a better job now, instead of the drug-store assistant job she currently holds."

"Don't we all know about her temper," Aunty Seah raised an eyebrow. "Remember the time she kicked up a big fuss with the family living upstairs who hung their wet laundry out over hers and dirtied her drying bed-sheets? This is one woman with a fierce temper."

"Well, not unexpectedly, the young couple developed feelings for one another over time." Grandma Toh ignored the rude digression from the story she was telling. "When the mother eventually passed away two years ago, they decided to inform the family of

their intention to get married. That was when all hell broke loose. My cousin told me that Sheng Yang's father chased the girl out of the house and gave his son an ultimatum. Either he break off the relationship, or he would be disowned and cut off from the family inheritance. That was how the couple ended up fending for themselves in our neighbourhood. Now you should understand why the two are so secretive about their past. And remember that you gave your promise. Keep this secret to yourself!"

"Of course I will," Aunty Seah said. "But what I do not understand is, what is the big deal about the marriage? Granted the girl is poor and her father is a compulsive gambler. But is that reason enough to disown the son?"

Grandma Toh bit her lip hard. She was hoping to get away with sharing only half the secret.

"Is there more to the story?" Aunty Seah was as sharp as a brand new pair of scissors.

"I have told you that Huang Rhoo's father is a compulsive gambler. Why do you think Sheng Yang's father keeps him on the payroll and covers his debts?"

"Why indeed?"

"Because they are half brothers. The patriarch of the Lao family has more than one mistress hidden outside. So Sheng Yang's father has no choice but to keep him and two other half brothers on the family business payroll."

Aunty Seah's eyes widened for the third time. "Which makes Lao Sheng Yang and his wife cousins? That is incestuous!"

"Which is why you must keep this secret to yourself," Grandma

Toh reminded her in a hushed tone. “The baby must not know. Ever.”

Aunty Seah looked at the suckling baby with sympathy. “Poor little bastard. He could have inherited such a huge family fortune but for the sins of his parents.”

Grandma Toh slapped Aunty Seah on the thigh and warned, “Enough! Don’t make me regret telling you this.”

Aunty Seah did deliver on her promise. Gimme Lao grew up not knowing that he was born rich, yet robbed of his inheritance by true, defiant love.

The first thing that Gimme Lao did not know about himself occurred on the day he was born. That was the day half the population on the island was glued to the television. Not their personal set at home, for most of them could not afford one back in 1965. They were hanging around various community centres, where communal television sets were mounted on wooden pedestals, from which arched stone benches fanned out. Rumour was abuzz that the prime minister was going to announce a momentous piece of news at any moment.

The other half of the population was engaged in their quotidian affairs: clipping their nails, picking their teeth or scratching that persistent itch in their ass cracks. Positioned at the outer circle of the rippling shock wave, they received the terrible news an hour or two late. Some of them had the audacity to question the news bearers. Did they hear it right? Did the prime minister really mean something else? But the news bearers were indignant in their own defence. The prime minister choked and shed a tear on national television. There was no doubt about it.

The entire population on the island had been unceremoniously kicked out of their own country. They were no more a part of Malaysia. The Mother had disowned them.

For some strange reason, Gimme Lao the unborn baby must have experienced prenatal cognisance. He refused to be purged from his mother’s womb. For nine whole hours, his mother shrieked and howled, scratched his father till she left claw marks on his arm and at one point even punched the nurse who was screaming at her for making too much noise. Eventually, Gimme Lao had to exit. He emerged looking bewildered, unsure whether the world that awaited him was hostile or benign. But the nurse was mad at the mother and took revenge by giving the baby a merciless pinch on the thigh. That was the moment Gimme Lao recognised hostility and bawled.

Gimme Lao’s father was a soft man who shed tears easily. He whimpered with pain when his wife’s nails dug deep and drew blood on his arm. He snivelled with joy at the sight of his firstborn bawling his tiny lungs out. He would later choke up with emotion when he found out that the island would no longer be flying the Malaysian flag.

In the midst of all the excitement, Gimme Lao’s father did not realise that his was the first baby to be born in independent Singapore.

At that point in time, this significant little detail caught no one’s attention. Gimme Lao’s mother was too exhausted, his father too excited and the doctor who delivered him too caught up with the next three babies arriving on his shift.

Three days had passed before a journalist finally called up the hospital and wanted to know which baby was the first born past midnight on 9 August. The hospital administrator flipped through

the nurses' schedule and summoned the nurse who was on midnight shift. "Go check the records on your shift and let me have the name."

The nurse was annoyed to discover that according to the records, a Chinese baby named Lao Chee Hong was born one minute past midnight on 9 August to a mother named Lao Huang Rhoo. She was pretty certain that this was the woman who had punched her in the face.

Flipping to the next record sheet, the nurse saw that a baby girl was born six minutes past midnight. That was the moment the idea struck her. She extracted a Zebra-brand ballpoint pen from her pocket, tested to make sure the ink matched, and carefully added a horizontal stroke to the numerical one. Gimme Lao became the second baby to be born, seven minutes past midnight.

It was by this insidious horizontal stroke that Gimme Lao was robbed of his rightful title of the first baby to be born in independent Singapore.

No one ever found out the truth.

TWO

GIMME LAO DID not like Grandma Toh at all. He did not like the fact that she made him eat when he wasn't hungry, bathe when he wasn't ready and sleep when he still wanted to play. He hated it when Grandma Toh shovelled piping hot minced pork porridge into his mouth with an aluminium spoon so large it stretched his lips till the corners hurt. He disliked the brute strength Grandma Toh employed when she wrapped a hand towel round her palm, ran a damp bar of soap over it and scrubbed his skin with a total absence of mercy till it turned raw and red. And when it came around to the early afternoon soap opera on the radio, he would be made to drop his toys, lie on the sofa and rest his head on her lap. What he detested most was the suffocation he had to fight when Grandma Toh rocked and pressed her ample bosom onto his face. If he fussed, Grandma Toh would shush him fiercely. Nothing must disrupt the storyteller on the radio spinning yet another hypnotic, mesmerising yarn.

Gimme Lao was also keenly aware that it was Grandma Toh who tore him wailing and clawing from his mother's arms every morning before his parents disappeared down the corridor. The tearful ritual

used to drag on for five minutes or more in the beginning, when Grandma Toh and the young parents restricted their methods to gentle coaxing and persuasion. They soon realised that not only was this ineffective, it often left the mother's blouse stained with snot and tears. Grandma Toh then decided to employ drastic measures. She wrapped one arm around Gimme's waist and pinned his kicking legs to her stomach with the other. As Gimme continued to claw at his mother and wail hysterically, Grandma Toh leant close to his ears and whispered firmly that he ought to let go at the count of three. She then counted aloud. At the third count she secretly secured one of his toes and pinched it hard with the sharp ends of her nails. Gimme would scream, let go of his mother and swing around to pound his tormentor with his tiny fists. At this point, the young parents were free to scuttle down the corridor and make a run for the bus. Eventually, Gimme learnt to let go before the count of three to spare himself the physical agony. His parents never discovered Grandma Toh's clandestine tactic, and would in later years crow over her magical touch in taming the petulant toddler.

For the rest of the morning, Gimme Lao would be strapped to a squat bamboo contraption which served as an innocent box stool upright, but when flipped on its side, instantly morphed into its evil twin, a devious seat designed with holding bars that pinned down the toddler's legs and made it impossible to disentangle from without aid from an adult.

It was not that Grandma Toh derived pleasure from sadistic modes of infant care. She had to secure Gimme Lao safely in one corner of the kitchen while she worked. Grandma Toh cooked and sold sambal

chilli for a living. Her specialties were sambal belachan and sambal jeruk. The morning routine began noisily as she threw handfuls of red chilli into the mortar and, using a pestle, pounded them furiously till the skin broke and the seeds were crushed. Once the chilli had been ground into a flaming red paste, she added in a handful of garlic, half a large onion and her own secret recipe of belachan. This last ingredient Grandma Toh concocted once a month by steaming sun dried krill, mashing it into a paste and allowing it to ferment over several weeks. Her secret was to add in copious amounts of shallot paste and sugar right before she toasted the belachan to unleash the flavour. The spicy mix was then introduced into a pre-heated pan with a thin layer of vegetable oil. For the rest of the morning, Grandma Toh would patiently stir the belachan batch by batch until the mix absorbed the oil and morphed into a heavy paste that was both menacingly dark and alluringly red. For sambal jeruk, she added in kaffir lime to give it that tongue-teasing sting.

It took Gimme Lao many weeks to get accustomed to the oppressive aroma of the sambal that permeated the kitchen every morning. Eventually, he stopped crying and choking from the overpowering smell and continued playing with his toys nonchalantly even when the toasting was at its peak. Grandma Toh scheduled his toilet breaks in accordance with her own. She would disengage Gimme from the bamboo contraption, carry him to the toilet, remove both his diaper and her pants and position herself and him over the squat toilet. Strangely enough, Grandma Toh's pee cascading into the ceramic receptacle never failed to trigger a corresponding release from the toddler. Once, when Grandma Toh was in a cheeky mood, she

experimented by regulating her pee in tiny little squirts, and giggled herself silly when Gimme Lao copied her rhythm. It was a pity there was no one else around to share the comedy.

It would be past noon when Barber Bay came in for lunch. The barbershop occupied a corner unit on the ground floor of their apartment building. The shop used to belong to Grandma Toh's husband before he passed away. Barber Bay, who had graduated from apprenticeship to a business partnership with the husband, promised him he would help take care of Grandma Toh and their daughter Elizabeth. In exchange, he became co-owner of the shop space with the widow. Every day at noon, Barber Bay would pull down the shutters to the shop, climb the seven flights of stairs up the building and join Grandma Toh for lunch. There was a lift that served landings four, eight and twelve, but Barber Bay claimed he needed the exercise.

There was no doubt that Barber Bay was a hardworking man by nature. After Grandma Toh's husband died, Barber Bay terminated the services of the cleaning lady and took over the tasks himself. He arrived an hour early every morning to give the place a meticulous sweep and mop before the first customer sauntered in. After the last customer for the night left, he boiled water to soak and wash the face towels, and left them to dry overnight under the ceiling fan. He made use of the lull in between customers to go through the barbering tools with a toothbrush, removing hair and beard follicles from between the sharp metallic teeth. Once a week he also climbed onto a stool to dust the ceiling fan, and spray-wiped the mirrors with window cleaning detergent. In fact, the barbershop became cleaner and brighter after the cleaning lady stopped cleaning the place.

Grandma Toh prepared a simple lunch for the two of them that repeated itself every seven days. On Monday, it was steamed rice with crispy fried ikan bilis, roasted peanuts and a thin egg omelette. On Tuesday, it was Teochew porridge boiled to the consistency of glue, with a salted egg and pickled vegetables. Wednesday was the day Grandma Toh splurged a little and cooked minced pork porridge. Thursday saw a return to steamed rice, accompanied by stir-fried bean sprouts with salted fish. On Fridays and Saturdays, Grandma Toh permitted their palates a little variety by switching to bee hoon, served with fish ball soup one day and fried with sambal chilli the next. She made it a practice to cook excess on Saturday, so that she had leftovers for Sunday, when she ate alone. On Sundays, Barber Bay attended church together with her daughter Elizabeth.

Barber Bay was an easy man to cook for. Though he did not like porridge in any form, and detested the taste of bean sprouts and salted fish, he was too much of a gentleman to risk upsetting Grandma Toh. So for three days a week, he humbly endured a lunch that did not please his palate. He quietly chewed his food and watched as Grandma Toh clamped Gimme Lao between her thighs and shovelled food into his mouth. Though he secretly winced when he saw the toddler struggle with the humongous portion per shovel, he was too polite to criticise Grandma Toh's judgement. What would a bachelor of 40 years and counting know of infant care?

After lunch, Barber Bay would pick up the twin sets of multi-tiered woven cane containers, within which Grandma Toh had packed labelled jars of sambal belachan and sambal jeruk. Balancing them using a bamboo pole resting on his shoulder, Barber Bay followed a

circular delivery route within a 20-block radius. There were a dozen hawkers selling laksa, fried rice and soup noodles who depended on Grandma Toh as their sole sambal chilli supplier. The consistency of her product and the reliability of Barber Bay's delivery schedule had secured their trust and loyalty for over a decade.

Unfortunately, Barber Bay's humble nature also encouraged devious hawkers to take advantage of him. The original agreement was to have them return the empty jars from the preceding day washed, dried and ready for refill. The laksa hawker tested the ground one day by presenting Barber Bay with unwashed jars, claiming that his wife sprained her wrist and could barely cope with the washing of the bowls and chopsticks. Being the benign and compassionate soul that he was, Barber Bay wished her a speedy recovery and accepted the jars in their dirty condition. But when the wrist in question failed to recover after a week, Grandma Toh balked. She gave specific instructions for Barber Bay not to accept any more unwashed jars from the laksa stall. A fresh batch of sambal chilli would only be delivered in exchange for washed and dried jars.

Barber Bay found himself caught in a dilemma. He was a foot soldier sent to the battlefield unarmed and unready for confrontation. When the laksa hawker waved away his fumbling threat and demanded a fresh batch of sambal chilli, he gave in very quickly. The mission having turned out a total fiasco, Barber Bay dreaded the imminent tongue lashing from Grandma Toh. In fact, he dreaded it so much he decided to stop by the barbershop and quickly wash and dry the incriminating jars himself. Grandma Toh was thus led to believe that the laksa hawker succumbed to her threat and the situation was back to normal.

But the situation got worse. When the chicken rice hawker and the fishball noodle hawker saw what was happening, they decided to ride on the recalcitrant's coattails. Horrified at the spreading mutiny, Barber Bay had to implement damage control. He quickly altered his circular delivery route and adopted a twisted butterfly pattern, such that the mutinying trio would be served last, and no one else could copy their insurrection.

Grandma Toh began to suspect something was amiss when Barber Bay returned from his delivery duty close to an hour late every day. She did not quite believe him when he told her that he volunteered to deliver lunch to the fishball noodle hawker's frail old mother in her home. So one fine day, she forewent her favourite radio soap opera and went downstairs to tail Barber Bay on his round. She was furious when she discovered the truth. Although Barber Bay was made miserable by the chiding, he was secretly glad Grandma Toh finally took control.

The following Saturday, Grandma Toh carried Gimme Lao in her arms and made her way to the market. Stopping at the laksa stall, she ordered six packets of laksa to go. She stared down the laksa hawker when he laid out his palm for payment. "I am the one collecting payment here," she growled. "These six packets are in lieu of the washing fees for your sambal jars. I will be back next Saturday for more."

As Grandma Toh predicted, the laksa hawker decided it was not worth the weekly harassment, and his wife's wrist instantly enjoyed full recovery. Grandma Toh celebrated her inspired suppression of the lead mutineer by inviting Aunty Seah and Gimme Lao's parents to

join herself and Barber Bay for a laksa treat. The last packet she kept for her daughter Elizabeth when she returned home that night. The next Saturday, they all had chicken rice. The last mutineer, however, surrendered before time and deprived them of their anticipated treat of fishball noodles.

Grandma Toh trusted Barber Bay to handle the barbershop accounts by himself. At the end of every month, she would wave him off when he tried to show her the account books after handing her an envelope containing her share of the earnings.

“Do you see me popping in to the shop every day to check on the customer flow? I don’t, because I trust you. So did my late husband. If we didn’t, we would offer you our daughter’s hand in marriage, so that we could make you part of our family and remove any reason for you to cheat. You understand?”

Barber Bay blushed and lowered his head to focus on his bowl of rice. He wondered if Grandma Toh was aware he had a crush on her daughter Elizabeth. She was only 13 when he first apprenticed for her father. Over the years, she had blossomed into a fine young lady. He looked forward to the evenings, when Grandma Toh made Elizabeth deliver his dinner to the barbershop on her way out. He would freeze in the midst of his occupation: and let the unfolded razor knife rest on the stubble, or the blending shears hover over the frizz, or the scoop end of the digger lean in against the ear canal—and watch silently as Elizabeth glided over to the far end, placed the dinner container next to the sink and glided out again just as gracefully.

Barber Bay sighed. He wished he knew what Elizabeth thought of him.

Back when Barber Bay was an apprentice under her father, Elizabeth was tasked to fetch their dinner. Her father made it a routine to grill the girl about her academic progress and the friends she mixed with. Listening in, Barber Bay became enmeshed in her school life. He knew she excelled in music and art, and frequently topped her class in English Language. He also knew she struggled hopelessly with mathematics, and found physics and chemistry lessons a torture. He knew the names of the two girls who were part of her clique in school, and was secretly glad she was too shy for boys.

Once, when Elizabeth mentioned that her music teacher had encouraged her to take up piano lessons, her father snorted. Where would they get the money to buy a piano? There were 168 families who occupied the single bedroom units in the apartment building they lived in. As far as he knew, none of the families owned a piano. An electric rice cooker was the luxury item every family was striving for. A television set might follow. But a piano was miles off the wish list.

Barber Bay lost sleep over the look of disappointment on Elizabeth’s face. But lying in bed one night and cooling himself with a straw fan, he was struck by a brilliant idea. Every Sunday morning he had to visit his brother, who was then serving a five-year sentence in Queenstown Remand Prison. There was a church near the prison, and he often heard the piano accompaniment as the congregation sang the hymns. Might not the church pastor be agreeable to let Elizabeth use their piano for practice on some afternoons?

The following Sunday, Barber Bay loitered near the church after his prison visit and waited till service was over. Though normally timid and reticent, Barber Bay stepped into the vestibule with

uncharacteristic boldness and asked to speak to the pastor. He was stumped, however, when the man in the cassock brought to him turned out to be Caucasian. Barber Bay spoke no English.

“Do you speak Hokkien?” There was a sparkle of mischief in his eyes. The pastor never failed to enjoy that look of astonishment when a local first heard him speak their dialect.

Relieved, Barber Bay made known his request. The pastor pondered for a minute, then looked up and smiled, “We might have agreed to the arrangement if the request came from our church member. Why don’t you bring the young lady to church next Sunday? Our service starts at eight thirty in the morning. I will see you both then.”

The next morning, Barber Bay intercepted Elizabeth on her way to school. As he unfurled his plan, her initial apprehension and confusion cartwheeled first into astonishment at his enthusiasm, then excitement at the resurrection of a lost hope and finally a deeply felt gratitude. She had no idea this apprentice working for her father was such a kind-hearted soul.

It went without saying that this ought to be kept a secret from her parents. Elizabeth told them that she had been roped in to the school choir, and had to attend weekend practice. On the following Sunday, she sneaked downstairs at sunrise to meet Barber Bay. He was waiting for her outside the barbershop, dressed in a freshly ironed Crocodile International branded shirt, his hair neatly parted at the left and glossed over with Brylcreem, and his hands holding on to a brand new bicycle he had bought two days ago.

“I thought we were going by bus?” Elizabeth blushed slightly as she balanced herself riding pillion.

“If we are going to take the bus every Sunday, it is going to add up. This bicycle will cost us less in the long run.”

It was a 45-minute cycle to the church. Elizabeth found it wobbly and frowned. Barber Bay cherished the intimacy of her hands on his waist and smiled. He imagined the warmth of her proximity next to him on the pew, and looked forward to the church service. In fact, he was already looking forward to the series of Sundays ahead with sweet anticipation.

Upon arrival at the church, they were led to the reception table at the vestibule. After registration, the woman behind the table asked for their preferred language. Barber Bay was slow to realise that the innocent question was pivotal in derailing his plan of church-based courtship.

“Not to worry, sir.” The woman looked at Barber Bay benevolently. “Although Pastor Clarence delivers his sermons in English, we have translators upstairs who do concurrent interpretations in Hokkien, Teochew and Cantonese. If you will just follow Brother Miak here, he will lead you upstairs to the Hokkien sector.”

Stunned, Barber Bay watched sorrowfully as another usher led Elizabeth down the main aisle. From where he was positioned upstairs, he was unable to see the larger congregation downstairs. Neither was he able to focus on the translator, who was earnestly interpreting the ongoing sermon. A sense of despair overcame Barber Bay. It was apparent that the God of this church had a very different plan for him.

Barber Bay was glad when the session finally ended after three tortuous hours. He rushed down the stairs and waited for Elizabeth.

His heart sank when he saw her emerge in the company of two other girls. They were Elizabeth's schoolmates, and she was going to take the bus home together with them.

Pastor Clarence was stationed at the door to greet the congregation on their way out. He was slightly alarmed when he saw the look of dejection Barber Bay wore. Barber Bay declined his invitation to stay back for a chat, and mentioned that he had to visit his brother in prison. A warm glow engulfed Pastor Clarence's chest. It was pure miracle. A love for music was planted in a girl's heart. A love for the girl brought this man to step into the church, in the hope that the girl could practise on the church piano. And the man had a brother in prison who awaited salvation. God always did have a plan.

Barber Bay, on the other hand, did not like the way God tampered with his plan. He wanted to spend time with Elizabeth every Sunday, but God had planted a hundred worshippers between them. He bought a bicycle so they could enjoy the morning breeze together riding to church, but God provided Elizabeth with companions for a bus ride. It was not till years later, when his heart was softened by God's grace and his mind enlightened by God's wisdom, that he was able to look back and realise that God was answering the bicycle seller's prayers.

Three Sundays later, Elizabeth became Elizabeth. She made Barber Bay continue to call her Toh Yee Wen at home, as she was not ready to reveal to her parents that she had accepted Christ. Pastor Clarence agreed to let her practise on the church piano two afternoons a week, so she was able to take up piano lessons in school. As far as her parents were concerned, she was engaged in choir practice.

In later years, Elizabeth would recall the Monday morning that Barber Bay intercepted her on her way to school and proposed the idea of playing on the church piano as the first instance of God's grace at work in her life. Why else would the taciturn apprentice at her father's barbershop behave in such an uncharacteristic manner? The young man had never caught her attention before, and after introducing her to church, again faded silently into the background. He was there to anchor the barbershop business when her father succumbed to cancer of the liver several years later. He took over the barbershop operations after her father passed on, and lent her mother a hand when she started cooking and selling sambal chilli for income. He was again there to smooth out the sour discord when her mother finally discovered that she had secretly accepted Christ. Deep in her heart, Elizabeth saw Barber Bay as the silent angel God had sent to look after her. That God's grace knew no bounds moved her deeply.

Elizabeth never did recover from the clash with her mother over her secret faith. Grandma Toh had a Goddess Kuan Yin altar in the kitchen, to which she offered joss sticks every morning to pray for health, wealth and safety. According to the Bible, any other form of idol worship was an abomination. Elizabeth felt guilty that she had to hide the shine of her faith that was true and beautiful. The gold chain with the cross pendant had to suffer the darkness in the purse till she left the house. She felt awful whenever Grandma Toh was busy and instructed her to offer the joss sticks at the altar, which she could not rightfully refuse. In a way, she was glad when Grandma Toh finally discovered her secret. The torrent of verbal abuse Grandma Toh bestowed upon her only served to justify her rebellion. She now

had permission to stand up and fight for her faith.

At dinner, Grandma Toh would rummage through her shallow chest of history and dish out grievances against western atrocities. It took her many weeks, but she eventually concocted a personal version of Chinese sufferings under the westerners that freely disregarded chronological order and accuracy. Prior to China's Boxer Rebellion at the turn of the century, the western powers introduced both opium to weaken the will and Christian missionary teachings to confuse the mind. When the Chinese decided to rise up in rebellion, eight imperialistic western nations ganged up and sent in their troops. That led to the Rape of Nanjing, where up to a million Chinese were beheaded, mutilated and sexually violated. Eventually, when the great Sun Yat Sen forced the bullies to the negotiating table to invalidate the unequal treaties imposed upon China, he was ruthlessly assassinated.

In the beginning, Elizabeth made a heroic effort to address Grandma Toh's historical inaccuracies and logical lapses. Opium and Christian teachings were not conspiring addictions, the Rape of Nanjing was committed by the Japanese in a totally different war decades apart and the great Sun Yat Sen was never assassinated. But when it became apparent that Grandma Toh was not malleable, Elizabeth learned to tune out and shut up.

At church, Elizabeth chose to confide in Pastor Clarence. She had expected the comfort of solace and encouragement. But Pastor Clarence surprised her.

"This is God's challenge for you. Bring your mother to church. Do not leave her to drown."

Elizabeth froze. She could not imagine her mother receiving grace

in the house of the Lord. In her mind, Grandma Toh belonged to the crass landscape of chilli pounding, neighbourly gossips and radio soap opera addiction. Elizabeth herself sought an escape from that landscape of unpolished manners and petty concerns. Why would she want to bring it along with her to church?

Elizabeth began to avoid Pastor Clarence. Whenever that was not possible, she pre-empted by asking Pastor Clarence for advice. How should she deal with the many challenges at work? She hinted at male superiors who cornered her with unwanted attention, female colleagues who ridiculed her for her repetitive wardrobe and the unreasonable workload piled on her by her bullying boss. It came to a point when Pastor Clarence was truly worried for the young lady. He spread the word among the congregation that Elizabeth needed help. Soon, help started to pour in.

Elizabeth found herself swathed in goodwill. A strong referral landed her a job selling Yamaha pianos near C K Tang Department Store along the new Orchard Road shopping belt. A timely connection linked her up with a British family who was looking for a piano teacher for their child. Church ladies passed her clothes they couldn't fit into anymore after childbirth. In fact, the flurry of camaraderie attesting to God's grace satisfied Pastor Clarence so much that the lone, unsaved soul of Grandma Toh buried under a mound of joss stick ash was all but forgotten.

For the first two years that Elizabeth worked at Yamaha, she was happy. Colleagues she worked with were civil, and the customers she served cultured. Her English became polished as she adopted the intonation of the many foreigners frequenting the showroom. She

enjoyed sitting down to play a tune and drawing customers to her like hummingbirds to nectar. She knew in her heart that some customers purchased the pianos because they dreamt of playing as gracefully as she did. That realisation made her proud.

During her breaks, she pretended to be a shopper and strolled along Orchard Road all the way till she reached Orchard Market. She tried on scarves and winter jackets as though she was planning for a holiday where there would be snow. She picked and examined cuff links and ties as though she was going to surprise a boyfriend. Once a fortnight she would splurge a little and pay to tease her palate with something new and alien at the Cold Storage Milk Bar. Peach slices encased in gelatine moulds. Pineapple upside down cakes. Mincemeat tarts and lemon meringue pies. There was so much delight to be had.

By the end of the second year, the realisation finally seeped in that there was no winter vacation to look forward to, and no boyfriend to pick cuff links for. The clothes she received from the church ladies were quickly out of style. The novelty of sitting alone at the Cold Storage Milk Bar savouring a new item was replaced by the painful awareness that she was pampering herself only because no one else in her life was doing so. On her scheduled rest days on Tuesdays, she hated awakening to the pounding of pestle against mortar, and the nauseating aroma of sambal chilli. And Sunday church had become a chore now that she had to rush off to the busiest shift of the week right after service. God's grace had all but disappeared from her life.

Elizabeth became secretly desperate. She was all of 25, and had never gone on a date before. There were simply no eligible candidates. She would not consider anyone with a lower education, or anyone

who did not speak good English. That practically ruled out all the young men within a mile. There were men at work who might be eligible, but they did not seem to pay her any attention. There were men in church who looked promising, but she did not know how to approach them. Her despondency sharpened when a young couple moved in next door. They were both two years her junior, and it irked her whenever she spotted them strolling leisurely through the night market, hand in hand. Her desperation peaked when the young couple gave birth to a baby boy. She suddenly realised that she might never have anyone to call her own; not a husband, not a child.

Elizabeth became bitter. If she had to end up alone, she would need money to take care of herself. She calculated and decided it was too slow to save up based on her meagre pay. She asked the British family whose child she was tutoring to recommend her. Once she had secured enough piano tutoring assignments, she quit her job selling pianos at Yamaha to become a full-time tutor. She took on students with a vengeance. She would tutor three students in the day, go home for dinner and then head out for yet another night lesson. She gave herself no rest day.

Within a year, Elizabeth was earning five times what she used to make at Yamaha. As her savings account grew, her bitterness ameliorated. She began to give herself a little treat in the afternoon between classes. She would spend a leisurely hour flipping through fashion or interior décor magazines at the MPH bookstore along Stamford Road, or munch on a peach tart and sip from a cup of milk tea, while seated comfortably in the cosy dimness inside Jack's Place Steakhouse or catch an afternoon matinee at Capitol Theatre. It was

during those afternoons of leisure that God's grace re-entered her life.

Elizabeth loved foreign movies. She caught *Mary Poppins* and *The Sound of Music*, and embraced Hollywood musicals as her personal antidote to counter the harshness of reality. She watched *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, and found herself identifying with the rebel in Sidney Poitier. When she learnt that Sidney Poitier had been the first black actor to win an Oscar, she passionately adopted him as an idol. In fact, she was so inspired she convinced the young couple next door to name their toddler, who was assigned to her mother's care, Sidney.

It was, however, a challenge to teach the toddler his new name. He was born Lao Chee Hong, which translated to Grand Ambition. When Elizabeth coaxed him to enunciate Sidney, the mumbled echo that emerged was Teenee. Further cajoling brought forth Heenee, then Nimee and finally Gimme, by which time Elizabeth lost patience and gave up. Grandma Toh, too, found the name Gimme much easier to master than Sidney, and so the name stuck. This was how Gimme Lao came to pioneer a new English name.

Elizabeth was not particularly fond of children. She tolerated Gimme Lao's presence in the house only because he occupied Grandma Toh and staved off her desire for a grandchild of her own. Elizabeth entertained a rather vague vision of herself as a mother. In contrast, the vision of herself as a wife was infinitely sharper. She knew exactly what kind of a wife she would make, how the furniture in her house would be arranged, down to the last detail of the curtain across the window and the cutlery on her dining table. She was only waiting for the right man to show up for dinner.

And then he came into her life. Sidney. Sidney McKellen.

She first heard his voice. She had just finished demonstrating a tune to a new student when she heard the door down the hall open and a booming voice announce itself, "Darling, I am home."

As footsteps approached, she turned to greet the person whom she imagined must be her new student's father. But her voice was caught in her throat. Instead, she gaped at the bluest pair of eyes she had ever come across. Fortunately, the new student, a plump girl of eight, hurled herself at her father and provided Elizabeth a window of several seconds to recover herself.

"Good afternoon! You must be Doreen's new piano teacher. I am Sidney McKellen. Pleasure." The man said as he extended his right hand, a sparkling smile sprouting simultaneously on his lips and in his eyes.

"Captain Sidney McKellen, British Air Force!" Doreen announced giggling, her arms wrapped round his neck and hanging from it like an obese little chimpanzee.

Elizabeth smiled weakly as Captain Sidney McKellen gave her a firm handshake. She noticed instantly that he had a chiselled chin with a cleft, not unlike Sean Connery, whom she caught in the James Bond flick *You Only Live Twice* recently. Almost instinctively, she recalled the scene where the secret agent 007 enjoyed a shampoo and lather rubdown by three Japanese sirens in a large wooden tub. She felt knots in her stomach.

This was the man she had laid out her dinner table for.

She could distinctly see it in her mind. Captain Sidney McKellen seated at the table, his thick palm holding her silver fork and delivering a sliver of duck confit to his luscious lips angled at the

precise gradient of his cleft chin, the sky blue in his eyes reflected in the ocean blue of her table napkin. Even his tie was in a colour complementary to her curtains.

Elizabeth suddenly felt like shopping. Over the next few days, she bought herself three new dresses and tailored them for a better fit. She also bought two pairs of earrings, a necklace and a bottle of Chanel No 22. The following week, she showed up for Doreen's piano lesson in a sleeveless shift dress in striking indigo. Doreen's mother gasped and avowed that the item was most stunning. When Elizabeth agreed to share her tailor, Doreen's mother took to her immediately. But Captain Sidney McKellen did not show up that day.

When Captain Sidney McKellen failed to show up over the next few weeks, Elizabeth began to panic. She decided she needed to gather more information. After the piano lesson was over, she would stay behind and chat with Doreen's mother and fuss over her younger daughter Madeline, a toddler with eyes as blue as the Captain's.

It took Elizabeth two months' worth of investigative inter-rogation disguised as innocuous chatter to pin down the critical piece of information. Every Sunday morning, Doreen's mother took Doreen along with her to attend the weekly gathering of her gardening interest group. The Captain would be left alone to babysit Madeline. Elizabeth's heart pounded. She garnered her courage and casually mentioned that on Sunday mornings, she had to relieve her mother of her babysitting duty so that her mother could do her marketing. It was exhausting to look after a bouncy toddler all by oneself, for one simply could not afford anything less than full concentration.

In full glory of God's grace, Doreen's mother picked up on the

bright idea Elizabeth implanted in her mind and happily suggested Elizabeth bring her toddler over on Sundays as Madeline's playmate. That way, the two adults could take turns and not tire themselves out.

Elizabeth shopped again. This time round, she bought black lace panties.

Back home, Elizabeth stumbled when Gimme Lao's mother responded to her enthusiastic suggestion with a puzzled look. "That is very kind of you." Her tone was courteous, but cold. "But I work five and a half days a week, and Sunday is really the only time I get to see my child."

Elizabeth paled. She could have slapped herself. In her haste, she had forgotten what she had learnt at Yamaha. The way to sell an expensive piano was to sell the music.

"I just thought it would be a wonderful opportunity," Elizabeth spoke slowly, but thought quickly. "They have bought all these educational toys for their girl. She is the same age as Gimme, but she can already spell and read simple picture books. They even have an ingenious card game that teaches her how to count, add and subtract. If Gimme plays with her, he gets to learn all these too."

Gimme Lao's mother liked the sound of the music, and the piano was sold.

The following Sunday, Elizabeth skipped church for the first time in over a decade, and Gimme Lao met his playmate Madeline for the first time in his life. Captain Sidney McKellen served a chilled glass bowl of pineapple punch and a silver platter of assorted English biscuits. Elizabeth did not touch the biscuits for fear that the crumbs would wedge themselves in between her teeth and disfigure her smile.

Gimme Lao had no such concerns and grabbed one freely.

Madeline seemed to take an instant liking to her new playmate. She abided by the Captain's gentle persuasion to be generous and offered Gimme Lao a choice selection from the platter on an open palm. Gimme Lao spotted the offer, dropped the biscuit he held in his hand, rushed forward to seize the offering and effectively slammed Madeline off her feet. It was a good thing that that floor was heavily carpeted. Madeline simply looked dazed to find herself suddenly seated down.

Elizabeth howled. She threw herself on the carpet and hugged Madeline as though she was trying to protect her from a falling beam. The Captain laughed and remarked that it was perfectly all right for toddlers to play rough. He said to leave the kids alone and let them work out their dynamics. Elizabeth blushed to think she might have made a fool of herself. But she caught a glimpse of her black lace panties showing where her hemline had folded upon itself and decided the foolery of falling onto the carpet was worth it.

Over the next few Sundays, Gimme Lao and Madeline worked out their dynamics. Madeline took on a nurturing role, and expended tremendous effort trying to teach Gimme Lao the alphabet and simple arithmetic using her chest of educational toys. When her playmate did not display any measure of interest, Madeline turned to household appliances and demonstrated how to flush a toilet, or activate the garden hose, or climb onto a rattan chair to flick a switch and watch the garage door rumble downwards nosily. These lessons fascinated Gimme Lao. He especially loved switching on the garden tap, stepping onto the wriggling hose and wrestling with the

water spurt till the two of them were completely drenched. The water adventure often left the two giggling themselves silly, till Elizabeth stepped in to halt the fun and chide Gimme Lao for his mischief.

Gimme Lao did not like Elizabeth. She put a cap on the fun he was having, and never failed to step in just as the fun peaked. When he lost interest doodling in the colouring book and started applying the colour markers on Madeline's face, Elizabeth stopped him. When he picked up a piece of Lego brick and attempted to stuff it down Madeline's throat, Elizabeth stopped him. When Madeline reached out to wipe a crumb off his face and he defended his muffin from what he interpreted as an attempt to snatch it by biting Madeline on the finger, Elizabeth screamed and stopped him.

Gimme Lao finally figured it out. Madeline was the switch that triggered responses from Elizabeth, much like the switch that triggered the rumbling descent of the garage door. When Gimme Lao handed Madeline a soft toy, Elizabeth ruffled his hair as a sign of approval. When Gimme Lao hugged Madeline and planted a kiss on her cheek, Elizabeth cheered and applauded.

Once the cause and effect was established, Gimme Lao wised up. He would rush to the tart platter and pick one that he did not fancy to offer Madeline. While Madeline was distracted and Elizabeth fooled, he would return to collect the one with the strawberry topping he wanted for himself. The strategy was simple and effective.

Sometimes, when Elizabeth annoyed him by capping his fun, he would run across to Madeline and bite her on the shoulder. The ruckus of Madeline bawling, Elizabeth picking her up to cuddle and soothe, Madeline screaming for her father, the Captain embracing the

crying child and Elizabeth not letting go and leaning herself into the Captain's embrace tickled him. Gimme Lao learned from experience that Elizabeth would chide, but not physically punish him, when the Captain was around. Only in the Captain's absence would Elizabeth pinch or slap him.

Gimme Lao liked the Captain, if only because Elizabeth paid him less attention when the Captain was around. She would play the piano for the Captain, and laugh heartily when he applauded at the end of the performance. Then she began to insist that the Captain sit down so she could lean over his shoulder to teach him a tune. Sometimes they would sit side by side and attempt a duet. When the Captain fumbled, a giggling Elizabeth would slap his arm and grab his palms to position them. Soon, Gimme Lao witnessed the Captain retaliating by grabbing Elizabeth on the waist and tickling her till she turned blue. And then suddenly, they stopped playing the piano. They would disappear for long stretches on Sunday mornings and leave Gimme Lao and Madeline to their own devices.

For the several months that followed, Gimme Lao benefited from the perpetual cheerfulness that seemed to enwrap Elizabeth. She bought him toys of all shapes and make from the night market; a blue rubber float outlined like a flattened duck, a wooden rocking horse with a pink mane, a bolster in the shape of a giraffe with orange square dots and a plastic drinking cup sculpted like a kangaroo with a gigantic pouch. Gimme Lao's mother eventually had to urge Elizabeth to stop. She was pampering her boy unnecessarily.

Elizabeth did eventually stop. Not because the mother urged her to, but because her cheerfulness came to an abrupt end.

Gimme Lao had no inkling that fateful Sunday morning when the door down the hall unlocked itself softly, that his play dates with Madeline were officially over. Both of them looked up, startled, to see Madeline's mother step in, signal them to be quiet and tiptoe down the passageway. Pandemonium erupted almost instantly. The opening shrieks and screams were followed by an interminable stream of wrangling, until Elizabeth finally emerged from the bedroom in shameful tears. She grabbed Gimme Lao and her handbag, and stumbled out the door. The last thing Gimme Lao remembered was a glimpse of the tart with the strawberry topping, sitting untouched on the platter because he was saving it for later.

Gimme Lao noticed that Elizabeth began to spend more and more time with his mother. She would let herself in through the door shortly after dinner, and Gimme Lao's father would want to bring Gimme Lao for a stroll around the night market. Upon their return, they sometimes heard tiny sobs emerging from the bedroom. It would be close to midnight when Elizabeth emerged, her eyes often puffy and swollen.

At one point, Gimme Lao's father bought a roll-up mattress and told Gimme Lao that the two of them would have to sleep in the living room for a while. Elizabeth would be returning from the hospital and recuperating in the bedroom. When Gimme Lao asked if Elizabeth was ill, Gimme Lao's father said no. She had simply made a mistake, and needed the doctor at the hospital to help remove the mistake. That was also the reason Elizabeth wasn't sleeping next door. Grandma Toh was furious with her, and the two should not see too much of each other for the time being.

Even Gimme Lao could tell that Grandma Toh was in a consistently foul mood. He did not quite understand the tirade Grandma Toh launched in the presence of Elizabeth, nor her bemoaning in the company of Aunty Seah. He kept hearing the term ‘Red-Haired Ape’ mentioned repeatedly, and so learnt to mumble it under his breath until he mastered the intonation and started spitting it out vehemently in the manner of Grandma Toh. Aunty Seah shushed him fiercely. When he did not stop, Grandma Toh grabbed him by the arm and pinched him hard with the sharp end of her nails. Through the confusion of his howling and weeping, he thought he heard Grandma Toh threaten to drown him in the water barrel along with the blue-eyed baby Elizabeth was carrying.

THREE

WHEN GIMME LAO was six, he fell in love with his kindergarten teacher. Her name was Foo Swee Peng, and she told the entire class she thought Gimme was the best student she had ever taught. Before the year was over, Miss Foo secretly wished she hadn't.

It all started when a nursing officer from the Ministry of Health came down to the kindergarten to conduct an outreach programme. The children were made to sit on the straw mat in front of a chalkboard, and all were allowed to pick a toothbrush of their choice from a mug that was being passed around. Gimme Lao picked an orange one.

“Children, a show of hands please. How many of you brush your teeth at home on a daily basis?”

Of the 26 students in the class, six hands sprouted upwards. Gimme Lao was one of the six.

“Very good,” the nursing officer said. “I shall now invite these six children to do a demonstration.”

Miss Foo and the nursing officer lined up the six children in a row and swivelled them to face the crowd. Of the six, a girl in a ponytail found the 20 pairs of eyes staring up at her too intimidating

and grimaced as though she was about to cry. Miss Foo quickly approached to allay her fear. In her effort to hold back her tears, the girl lost control of her bladder and her pee streamed down her legs. The cleaning lady had to be summoned to bring the bundle of frayed nerves to the toilet to salvage what remained of her pride.

“Next, I am going to pass this tube of Colgate toothpaste around and you will show your friends how to squeeze a little bit of it onto your toothbrush. Can you do that for me?”

As it turned out, two of the five could not. Apparently their mothers took charge of the squeezing procedure back home. The pair of discredited demonstrators were asked to join the 20 uninitiated children on the straw mat.

“Now we shall watch how the three of them get ready to brush their teeth.” The nursing officer beamed.

Both Gimme Lao and the girl next to him managed to dispense the requisite glob of toothpaste onto the bristles. The last boy, however, squeezed too hard and the toothpaste streamed down onto the floor. The audience broke out into a paroxysm of giggles.

“I use Darkie toothpaste at home,” the boy proclaimed loudly, in defence of his botched demonstration.

“It doesn’t matter,” the nursing officer said. “You need to control your strength so that you do not squeeze too hard. Look how the other two did it.”

The Darkie user felt insulted and crossed his arms to adopt a sulking posture. Unfortunately, the tube of Colgate toothpaste was pinned between his arm and his chest and the content squirted out onto his shirt. Half of the audience spotted it and broke out

into riotous laughter. The other half was infected and laughed too, despite not knowing what exactly it was that they were laughing about. Miss Foo had to summon the cleaning lady again to execute damage containment.

“Tell the class your names,” the nursing officer prompted the two who remained standing. Gimme Lao thus came to be introduced to Janice Ong, his only worthy opponent in the class of dentally challenged children.

“Now Janice and Gimme will demonstrate the correct method of brushing their teeth,” the nursing officer announced.

Gimme Lao kept his eyes on Janice, while Janice kept her eyes on the audience. Both of them started brushing on the front-facing surface. When Gimme Lao moved on to the back of the teeth, Janice was still rotating her bristles in the front. By the time Gimme Lao was brushing horizontally across the chewing surface of his molars, he knew he was teeth-brushing champion. Janice Ong never moved beyond the front.

The nursing officer made the pair rinse their mouths and promoted Gimme Lao to class monitor for the upcoming public health programme. The children were issued a plastic mug each, and the brushing of teeth would become a daily class routine. Janice Ong was tasked to assist Gimme Lao as his deputy.

Gimme Lao couldn’t wait to get to school every morning. After Miss Foo led them through the Singapore national anthem, he would station himself at the cabinet and distribute the mugs and toothbrushes to the children. Janice Ong then led them to the toilet in a wiggly line. After the first dozen took up their positions in front

of the elongated trough, Gimme and Janice would start from opposite ends and assist to dispense the requisite glob of toothpaste onto the bristles of the multi-coloured toothbrushes. Both would supervise the collective brushing and rinsing, and then repeat the process with the second lineup of children. Only when everyone was done would Gimme and Janice brush their own teeth.

Miss Foo was impressed with Gimme Lao. Unlike Janice Ong, who stood and watched and made no comments even when some of the children did it the wrong way, Gimme Lao was hawk-like in the standards of precision he demanded. If a child thought he could get away with one or two cursory swipes across the back of the teeth, Gimme Lao made him do it again. If a pair giggled and teased one another with their mouths full of foam, Gimme Lao shushed them harshly. If they ignored him, Gimme would reposition the two in the lineup so that they would be separated by other serious tooth brushers. Miss Foo did not have to lift a finger to discipline the rowdy children.

When the same nursing officer came down two months later to promote a second health campaign, Miss Foo did not hesitate to reappoint Gimme Lao as the class monitor. She told the nursing officer, in front of all the children, that she thought Gimme Lao was the best student she had ever taught. That was the moment Gimme Lao fell in love with Miss Foo Swee Peng. It became clear to him that he was right when he demanded proper behaviour from the other children. He must not fail Miss Foo's expectations.

The nursing officer showed them several posters to illustrate where germs lurked. The children strained their necks and gaped. They had not known that purple and green discs with malicious eyes and evil

grins danced on toilet flush handles and doorknobs. The nursing officer explained that if people who prepared food did not have the habit of washing their hands after using the toilet, these germs would hitch a convenient ride onto the food and into the victim's stomach. That was how people fell ill.

What the nursing officer wanted the children to do was to wash their hands regularly. Gimme Lao as the reappointed monitor, would assist Miss Foo and help the class cultivate the habit.

His new duty required Gimme Lao to station himself at the washing trough after the collective toilet break to supervise the washing of hands. By the third day, he came up to Miss Foo wearing a look of serious concern and declared that there appeared to be a problem.

"When Janice flushed the toilet, the germs got onto her hands," Gimme Lao explained to Miss Foo. "When she turned on the tap, some of the germs got onto the tap. After she washed the germs off her hands, she turned off the tap. Wouldn't the germs on the tap then get onto her hands again?"

Miss Foo stared at her star student with wonderment. She now believed there was no limit to how far this boy could go in life! She sat down with Gimme and devised a solution. It was eventually decided that Gimme would take on the added duty to turn off the taps for all the children. When it came time for Gimme himself to wash his hands, Miss Foo would do the honour of turning off the tap with her hand wrapped in her handkerchief. The problem was thus solved.

Two months later, the nursing officer visited again. This time round, she brought along posters depicting a leaking tap and explained that it was important not to waste water. Singapore did not

have enough water for its people to drink and use. The country was dependent on its neighbour, Malaysia, to supply water. This was why it was launching a national campaign to save water. Every precious drop must be fully utilised.

Miss Foo's new instruction for the longest serving class monitor was to ensure that all taps at the washing trough were securely turned off. But Gimme Lao again surprised her. After studying the washing pattern for three days, Gimme Lao approached Miss Foo and proclaimed that they were wasting too much water. All the children must use only one tap.

"But that would not change the volume of water used," Miss Foo explained patiently. "It would simply mean the class would take much, much longer to finish washing their hands."

Gimme Lao shook his head and asked to do a demonstration. He made Janice Ong pretend to wash her hands under an imaginary tap. Gimme himself used an invisible bar of soap to lather his hands, then placed them directly under Janice's pair of hands. He then nudged Janice out of the picture, moved his hands higher up, continued the washing motion, and asked a third child to place his supposedly lathered hands underneath his. Miss Foo's eyes almost popped out of their sockets.

The following week, a reporter from the tabloids was invited to visit the kindergarten. Miss Foo was proud to showcase an innovative approach to saving water. The children lined up in three columns in front of the washing trough. They had one week to practise, and were generally confident when they demonstrated the tiered method of sequential hand washing pioneered by Gimme Lao. The reporter was highly impressed.

When the article appeared in the tabloids, Gimme Lao's parents and their neighbours went wild. His father bought five copies of the tabloids, four of which he allowed the neighbours to circulate. The last copy he wrapped in plastic and sealed airtight using Scotch tape. He intended it to become part of the family treasure to pass on to future generations. Gimme Lao's mother asked Aunty Seah for some discarded fabric from the factory she worked in. She copied the tagline from the campaign poster so that she could embroider the words 'Water is precious. Save every drop' onto a new cotton blanket she was going to sew for Gimme. Unfortunately, Gimme Lao's mother did not speak or write English, and her scribbled letterings on a piece of paper left much to be desired. The initial embroidery read 'Wateri spreious. Saveery drop'. Elizabeth from next door had to make her remove the stitches and do it again.

Grandma Toh was especially proud of Gimme Lao. She hijacked one of four copies of the tabloids in circulation, and toted it on her round of the neighbourhood gossip circuit. She told the provision shop owner that Gimme must have benefitted from all the afternoons keeping her company while she listened to radio soap operas. There was so much life wisdom for the picking in storytelling. She shared her suspicions with the fishmonger that early exposure as a toddler to the stimulation of toasted sambal chilli might even have triggered brain development in the child. It paralleled the theory that pregnant women listening to soft music awakened the cognitive intelligence of their unborn baby. By the time she reached the incense shop seven blocks away, Grandma Toh had elevated herself to become a talent developer extraordinaire of gifted children.

Barber Bay asked to be given a copy of the tabloid so that he could cut it out and paste it onto the space between two of the mirrors in the barbershop. He positioned it directly underneath an old newspaper clipping of Pastor Clarence giving a sermon in church. In that article, Pastor Clarence was featured as an oddity because he was a Caucasian pastor who spoke good Hokkien. When a regular customer remarked that the eyesore of a yellowing clipping ought to be taken down and retired to the dustbin, Barber Bay smiled wryly but said nothing. Nobody else but Barber Bay could spot it, a tiny dot over the pastor's right shoulder, the back view of Elizabeth playing the piano.

Gimme Lao experienced the spoils of fame for the first time. At the night market, the toy hawker recognised him and allowed him to pick one of the Matchbox collectibles for free. Gimme Lao felt the tingling of excitement as he examined the extensive range of tiny automobiles neatly packed in four-inch boxes and finally picked a red truck sitting on an imposing set of military tank wheels. Neither the toy hawker nor Gimme Lao's parents could figure out the strange configuration. Gimme Lao's father urged him to pick some other recognisable automobile, but Gimme Lao shook his head determinedly. He didn't know what it was, but he knew he wanted it.

The mystery was solved the following Sunday when Elizabeth brought him to the MPH bookstore along Stamford Road, and guided him through a *Children's Encyclopaedia of Automobiles* as thick as a fist. Gimme Lao had picked a Snow Trac for himself. For an entire hour, Gimme sat on the carpeted floor and flipped through the pages, enthralled. There were more than a hundred pictures depicting strange automobiles set against alien backdrops of snow, boulders

and rivers. When Elizabeth returned from the Romance section to pick him up, Gimme was reluctant to go. Elizabeth decided to give them another half an hour to indulge. An hour soon passed. When Elizabeth eventually conceded that the child's love for automobiles and their steely mechanics far exceeded her love for gorgeous men on book covers and their steely muscles, she decided to buy him a gift. Thus Gimme Lao returned home triumphant, with the *Children's Encyclopaedia of Automobiles* that was to keep him entertained for many weeks to come.

Back in the kindergarten, Gimme Lao encountered a problem. He had brought along his Snow Trac in his school bag, and was itching to show it to his friends. Problem was, Gimme Lao had no friends. None of the children liked him. Kindergarten life was generally fun except for the segments Gimme Lao took charge of. On their scheduled toilet breaks, Gimme Lao desired a straight line-up marching to the washroom. Whenever the line wiggled, Gimme Lao barked at them. If the recalcitrant ignored him, Gimme Lao would rush forward and stomp on his shoes. At the washing trough, the mischievous among the children would giggle as they engaged in stealthy flicks of water to catch one another unaware. When that happened, Gimme Lao would step forward to switch off the tap, stare down the child's dwindling grin, and supervise as the child learned to take the washing of hands seriously. Gimme Lao had no patience for buffoonery.

Miss Foo Swee Peng found herself caught in a dilemma. She was aware that her star student adored her, and performed his monitor duties as a tribute to her. On her part, she had rewarded him with public commendations and private pats on the back. In retrospect,

she realised that these acknowledgements had probably reinforced his drive to one word. By the time the standards of discipline he demanded had calcified to a near-military benchmark, it was too late for her to interfere without hurting his feelings. Miss Foo simply averted her eyes and prayed that no child would get hurt.

When Gimme Lao realised that none of the children would be interested to hear him discuss his Snow Trac, he approached Miss Foo instead. Once again, Miss Foo was impressed. It had never crossed her mind to implement a Show and Tell module, believing it was beyond the capacity of kindergarten children. But she was willing to give it a try for her star student.

The next day, Gimme Lao was ready to impress the class. He brought along his *Children's Encyclopaedia of Automobiles* and his matchbox collectible Snow Trac. He explained how a very smart man in a snow country wanted to go fishing in winter, and so designed and built a truck that ran on tracked wheels, like those of a tank. And because the tracked wheels ran so well over soft snow, it was made and sold to many other snow countries. Subsequently, it was discovered that the tracked wheels also ran well over sand, so it was made and sold to sand countries as well. Eventually, soldiers realised that Snow Tracs were lighter than tanks and they could operate a machine gun on top. So they also used it in war countries. Unfortunately, Singapore was a country with no snow, no sand and no war, which meant the class would never get to see a real Snow Trac. The end.

Miss Foo asked if the class had any questions for Gimme Lao. None had. She then led the class through an appreciative round of applause and thanked Gimme Lao for sharing his knowledge. She was

about to switch back to the original curriculum, when Gimme Lao asked when he could next present. There were 117 types of vehicles featured in the *Children's Encyclopaedia of Automobiles*, and he could do one a day.

Miss Foo secretly sighed. She glanced over the other 25 children and asked with despondence if anyone would like to have a go at Show and Tell next week. None would. Miss Foo ignored Gimme's outstretched hand and turned to ask Janice Ong if she had any hobbies, or pets, or favourite cartoon programmes on television or anything at all worth presenting. Mercifully, Janice Ong kept some goldfish in an aquarium at home. It was settled then. The children would all learn about goldfish the following week.

The class was delighted when Janice Ong's mother arranged for their domestic help to bring along a pair of goldfish in a portable plastic tank. Miss Foo allowed the children to approach the exhibit in groups of five to examine it at close range. After everyone had a chance to gawk and giggle, Miss Foo signalled for Janice Ong to begin.

Janice Ong had six goldfish. They all lived happily in a big fish tank. Sometimes, Janice Ong's father lifted her onto a bar stool so that she could break crumbs from a loaf of bread to feed the goldfish. When the water became murky, Janice Ong's father would order the domestic help to clean the aquarium. Janice herself would transport the goldfish one by one into a pail of water using a net. After the aquarium was clean again, Janice reintroduced the goldfish and they swam happily in the new, fresh water. The end.

When Miss Foo invited questions from the audience, Gimme Lao's hand shot up. "Why are goldfishes called goldfishes?"

Several hands shot up from among the audience in a frenzied attempt to steal the question from Janice Ong. The once-disgraced Darkie user flouted the rules by shouting out the answer before Miss Foo had time to pick anyone. “Because they are golden in colour!”

“That is not true,” Gimme Lao insisted. “There is a stall at the night market that sells aquarium fishes, and they have goldfishes in black.”

Some of the audience began to giggle at the idea of a black goldfish. The Darkie user had an epiphany and shouted, “Maybe it is an Indian goldfish!” That triggered riotous laughter from the rest of the class. Janice Ong interpreted it as a favourable reception of her presentation and beamed happily.

“Actually, I do remember seeing some goldfish in black too.” Miss Foo waited till the class calmed down before she did her sharing. “My guess is all goldfish were once golden in colour. But after hundreds of years, some of them take on a different colour. They are like roses. There are red roses, yellow roses, white roses, but all are called roses.”

None of the children could understand the mysterious link between goldfish and roses, but decided collectively to give their teacher the benefit of the doubt and did not ask her to clarify. Gimme Lao however directed a second question at Janice Ong. “Where do goldfishes come from?”

Janice Ong quickly recalled a picture book she owned that showed many different types of fish coexisting in a very big blue sea. Without hesitation, she ventured to educate Gimme Lao, “Goldfishes come from the sea.”

Miss Foo bit her lip and attempted to soften the blow, “Actually,

goldfish do not come from the sea. Only salt-water fish live in the sea. Goldfish are fresh-water fish, so they can only live in lakes and ponds.”

Some of the audience snickered. Janice Ong hung her head in shame. Gimme Lao raised his hand to ask a third question but Miss Foo announced abruptly that the presentation was over and that everyone should give Janice Ong a round of applause for a good presentation.

“But she didn't give a good presentation,” Gimme Lao protested. “She only answered one question and she gave a wrong answer.”

The Darkie user was struck by another bolt of inspiration and started chanting very loudly, “Janice Ong. Always wrong. Janice Ong. Always wrong...” The other children burst out laughing and quickly joined in the chant. Horrified, Miss Foo moved in and wrapped her arm around Janice Ong to protect the poor girl from the lynchmob. The domestic help standing at the back of the classroom gasped, but it was too late to warn Miss Foo. She could only watch helplessly as Janice Ong, as always when she became upset, grabbed the nearest limb and bit hard. Miss Foo shrieked in pain and flung her arm back, inadvertently upsetting the portable plastic tank and sending the pair of goldfish flying out of their fresh-water abode onto the straw mat laid out on the floor.

The children started screaming and hopping around madly. The Darkie user valorously approached the floundering pair of goldfish and tried to kick them back into the tank. His sweeping foot caught one on the third attempt and sent it flying in an arc towards Miss Foo, who shrieked and instinctively tried to hop out of the way. Unfortunately, the goldfish landed and flipped itself right under one of her heels. The collective shriek that followed was so shrill, the

cleaning lady heard it all the way at the back of the building and thought to herself that Miss Foo really ought to tone down the games for the children.

The same evening, when Gimme Lao's father asked about his day in school, Gimme crinkled his nose and reported that Janice Ong did not do her homework well. If she did, she would have answered all the questions correctly, no one would be screaming and hopping about, and her goldfish would still be alive.

Janice Ong did not turn up for school for the next two days. The class, however, spotted her domestic help, who arrived with an important-looking man in a dark suit, and waited outside the classroom while the man held a prolonged conversation with Miss Foo. The children did not understand terms like 'traumatised' and 'scarred', but they caught and understood 'crying all night'. They also observed that Miss Foo looked pallid and kept apologising. Before the visitors left, Gimme Lao thought he saw the domestic help point her finger at him surreptitiously. He also thought the man threw him a parting glare that was none too friendly.

The following week, the children were pleasantly surprised when Miss Foo announced that the class was going on an excursion. All of them were given a cap and a plastic water bottle with a strap they could sling over their shoulders. On the bus journey, Miss Foo explained that they were going to visit Van Kleef Aquarium, where they would get to see myriad marine creatures. She also highlighted that the excursion was made possible by the generosity of Janice Ong's father, who had sponsored the aquarium entrance tickets, the bus, the caps, as well as the water bottles.

Janice Ong was waiting for the class at the entrance to the aquarium with her mother. She was initially shy, but the children had practised their collective greeting on the bus, and upon Miss Foo's signal, waved their hands and shouted merrily, "Good afternoon Janice, we missed you!" Janice grinned with delight and was happy to rejoin her class.

The Van Kleef Aquarium was an amazing place. The children gawked at a gigantic clay sculpture over the entrance, that of a blue turtle carrying a yellow seahorse and an intertwined pair of fish on its back. Once they streamed past the hanging curtains, they entered the chilled interior of what resembled a stone cave. Along the walls were huge tanks illuminated from within, where marine creatures of all shapes and sizes swam languorously. There were fish that sat unmoving like brown rocks, seahorses with kangaroo pouches that entwined their tails gracefully with swaying stems, sea snakes that wiggled from one end of the tank to the other and undulating jellyfish so thin the children could almost see through them. What took their breaths away was the crocodile that squatted on a rock and bared its teeth in a menacing snarl. Some of the more imaginative children could even hear their own bones crunch and snap.

When the children were assembled and waiting for the bus, Miss Foo made them thank Janice's mother, Mrs Ong, collectively. Mrs Ong beamed and told the children that Janice had a wading pool and a trampoline in her garden, and that she had given Janice permission to invite some of the classmates over for play dates. Especially well-behaved children who were nice to her. In time to come, Janice's father might even organise another outing to someplace interesting. The brand new Jurong Bird Park that just opened in January, for

instance. Wouldn't the children like to visit the largest aviary in the whole wide world?

Back in the kindergarten, Miss Foo implemented some changes. Gimme Lao, the longest serving class monitor, would be relieved of his duties. Instead, monitor duties would be divvied up and rotated on a daily basis. On any given day, an appointed monitor would be tasked to distribute mugs and toothbrushes, a second monitor dispense toothpaste, a third monitor turn off the taps and yet a fourth ensure all toilets were flushed. Every single child, regardless of capability or inclination, would get his turn to perform monitor duty.

Gimme Lao could not explain the sense of loss he felt. He watched miserably as lenient monitors permitted foolery and laughter during teeth brushing sessions. He bit his tongue when he spotted giggling boys cross swords using their arcs of urine. He bristled with irritation when mugs were returned to the cabinet in nothing that resembled tidy rows. But worst of all was the wait.

Every child was waiting for an invitation from Janice Ong.

The invitation came every Wednesday. Janice Ong picked three or four at a time. If their parents agreed, her father would dispatch his driver to ferry them after class on Friday to his house, which, according to the first few batches invited, was almost as huge as the Van Kleeft Aquarium. Not only was there a wading pool and trampoline as promised, there were dogs! A Pekingese that was short and dumb, and a Golden Retriever that was tall and smart. When the children changed into their swimming costumes and jumped into the wading pool, the Golden Retriever would hop in and burrow his muzzle into the children's crotches, tickling them into bursts of

guffaws. The Pekingese would waddle near and look around in a puzzled way for invisible raindrops when the children teased it with flicks of water. Mrs Ong arranged for the domestic help to clean the aquarium on Fridays so that Janice's guests could take turns to scoop out the goldfish with the tiny net. There would be ice cream served at three, and a selection of board games in the playroom followed. By five, Mrs Ong would pack the children into the car and dispatch them home right up to their doorsteps. All the children who went asked to go again.

Gimme Lao kept count. As the weeks went by, the pool of children who were not invited shrunk. Some of those who were invited became bitterly disappointed when their parents refused to grant permission. They could only watch with envy as Janice transferred their invitations to repeat guests who were blessed with benign and understanding parents. Eventually, only two were left. Gimme Lao, and Mei Mei, the girl who missed Gimme's inaugural demonstration of teeth brushing because she had been brought to the washroom to clean up after peeing in her panties.

Janice Ong did not hold any grievance against Mei Mei. She simply forgot about her. Mei Mei's mother did not braid her hair and pin on hairclips decorated with yellow butterflies or red strawberries. Mei Mei kept quiet and did not raise her hand like the others when Miss Foo threw the class a question. In any game they played, Mei Mei preferred to stand on the sidelines and watch, while the rest went berserk on the play mat. In other words, there was no reason for the children to pay her any attention at all.

Miss Foo, too, noticed that the pair had been left out. So when

one of the invited boys returned on Thursday with a sour face and announced that his parents wouldn't let him go because they had a family gathering. Miss Foo gently reminded Janice Ong that Gimme Lao and Mei Mei had yet to be invited. Janice Ong took one apprehensive glance at Gimme Lao and immediately handed Mei Mei the invitation card. Gimme Lao bit his lip hard to hide the quiver.

Gimme Lao's mother was quick to notice that the boy was not himself at dinner. He held his chopsticks like an ice pick and poked at his favourite barbecued pork slices with disinterest. When she asked him about his day at school, she was alarmed to see him shake his head with melancholy. She kept pressing, until Gimme finally relented and spilled the beans. He was no more the star student in class. Miss Foo had relieved him of all his earlier duties. The other children snickered and said horrible things about him behind his back. They said he was too arrogant and stringent as a monitor. They even came up with a nickname for him—Pretend Teacher. Worst of all, Janice Ong would not extend the play date invitation to him. He had heard so many magical accounts from the other children and really wanted to go!

Gimme Lao's mother felt her heart shatter. She had simply assumed that her boy was both the star student and the adored role model of a monitor in class. It did not cross her mind that petty jealousy existed among kindergarten students too. When she reported for work at the pharmacy the next day, she asked to take the afternoon off. She was going to surprise Gimme by turning up unannounced and whisking him off downtown for ice cream and a visit to his favourite MPH bookstore. She was even prepared to buy him another one of those children's encyclopaedias he seemed to love so much.

There were still 10 more minutes before the dismissal bell rang when Gimme Lao's mother arrived. She stood outside the classroom and watched as Miss Foo made her final announcements. Three little girls were summoned to the front and asked to lay out the contents of their school bags for inspection. When Gimme Lao's mother spotted the tiny swimming costumes, she understood that these were Janice Ong's invited guests for the week.

Miss Foo was satisfied with the layout and asked the girls if they were excited. Mei Mei watched with a blank expression as the other two girls nodded vigorously. Both started chatting excitedly about their last visit, and how much they enjoyed the wading pool and the Golden Retriever doing the hilarious nose shovel. Miss Foo crinkled her nose and asked what exactly did they mean by the term 'nose shovel'. The entire class erupted into a brouhaha trying to explain to the uninformed teacher what the girls were referring to. Miss Foo had to shout for the class to silence itself before she turned to the two girls and suggested they do a demonstration.

The first girl was quick as she bundled her fists into a make-believe muzzle and announced that she was going to play the Golden Retriever. The second girl screamed and started running round the table while the fisted muzzle chased after her. The children burst out into riotous laughter. Miss Foo was still confused and asked at the top of her voice what did it all mean. The first girl suddenly decided that the stationary Mei Mei would make a better target, and so turned abruptly and jammed her fisted muzzle into Mei Mei's crotch. Mei Mei let out a shrill shriek of terror. The first girl was delighted at the response and continued to imitate the Golden Retriever's persistency as

she intensified the assault. By the time Miss Foo physically intervened and pulled the enthusiastic pantomimist away, Mei Mei was wailing hysterically and had once again wetted her panties.

The pandemonium took a while to die down. By the time Mei Mei was led away by the cleaning lady and the class was quiet again, several parents had arrived to pick up their children. Miss Foo spotted Janice Ong's mother, and quickly explained that there had been an accident and thus one of the girls on the guest list would not be going. Mrs Ong beamed and said it was quite all right, and turned to ask the rest of the children if anyone would like to take her place. Several hands shot up. Gimme Lao was desperate as he jumped onto his feet and shouted at the top of his voice, "Take me! Please! I really want to go!"

Mrs Ong was tickled by Gimme Lao's display of desperation and asked with a smile if his parent was around to give approval. Gimme Lao pointed at his mother, who waved amiably and nodded to indicate her consent. Mrs Ong was about to extend the invitation when Janice Ong tugged at her hemline and whispered softly. Mrs Ong bent down to hear her daughter out. When she next straightened up, there was a cold look of dismissal on her countenance. In a clear voice so everyone could hear, she remarked, "So, this is that very rude boy who made fun of you. Why would we want to invite him, indeed? We shall only invite your friends."

Miss Foo was alarmed and decided she had better intervene before the situation got ugly. She chuckled dryly and told Mrs Ong that squabbles between children were quite common and really shouldn't be taken too seriously. Mrs Ong arched her brow and turned to ask her daughter what were the exact words Gimme Lao used when he

teased her. Janice Ong hung her head and replied very softly, "Janice Ong. Always wrong."

Miss Foo and Gimme Lao quickly recovered from their surprise and wasted no time redressing the accusation. Miss Foo readily vouched for Gimme Lao that he made no such comment. Gimme Lao simply pointed a finger at the Darkie user.

Mrs Ong was slightly perplexed as she recognised the Darkie user from the play date two weeks ago. Janice Ong herself was confused. After all, memories of the episode of major embarrassment several weeks ago had begun to recede. She was pretty certain that Gimme Lao was the one who triggered the onslaught of mass teasing, but couldn't say for sure if he contributed that horrible rhyming tease. Unable to ascertain, Janice Ong looked up at her mother for help.

If only Gimme Lao's mother could have given Janice Ong's mother a moment to consider, things might have developed differently. But she didn't. She was quick to grasp that her son had been wrongly accused, and an instantaneous fury engulfed her. She stepped forward and spoke to Mrs Ong in a severe tone, in Mandarin, "Do you know my son felt miserable because your daughter invited everybody but him for the play date? And now she is accusing him of something he did not do. You really ought to teach your daughter better behaviour!"

The burning flush on Mrs Ong's face was indication that she understood the outburst coming from Gimme Lao's mother, but for some reason she turned to Miss Foo and asked haughtily, still speaking in English, "Who is this lady? Can you tell her that I do not tolerate rudeness from anyone?"

Before Miss Foo could respond, Gimme Lao's mother cut in again. "I may not understand every English word you say, but I understand your attitude. And now I am beginning to understand how your daughter got to behave so badly. Children copy their parents. Period."

Miss Foo trembled as the two mothers exchanged looks of daggers. She had been trained as an educator to handle and counsel children if they fought. Her training did not prepare her for the current scenario. Fortunately, Mrs Ong decided to stick to her original strategy of non-direct confrontation and turned to address Miss Foo again.

"My husband was generous enough to sponsor a school excursion to the Van Kleeef Aquarium. I myself opened up my house to host play dates for the children. And what do I get in return? Disrespect and insults from a fellow parent. Do you think this is fair, Miss Foo?"

Miss Foo hunched herself and mumbled an apology. She said she was sorry for what was happening but she was sure the matter could be amicably resolved by all parties involved.

Mrs Ong arched her brow and said, "I accept your apology. I would like an apology from the other parent too. Otherwise, I will advise my husband not to go ahead with the school excursion to Jurong Bird Park he was thinking of sponsoring for the year-end holidays. I myself will also put an end to the weekly play dates."

The entire class understood the terms and gasped. Some of the girls began to whimper. The Darkie user glared at Gimme Lao and hissed fiercely, "This is all your mother's fault!" All the children who heard it turned and focused their collective glares of hatred on Gimme Lao. His cheeks burning, Gimme Lao stood up and walked towards his mother. There was an ambivalent look in his eyes as he asked his

mother in a whispery voice, "Do you want to apologise?"

Gimme Lao's mother's eyes were red with anger, but her tone was firm and decisive when she said, "No, we should not apologise." Gimme Lao bit his lip and nodded in silence. There was a flash of understanding between mother and son as they held hands and strolled out of the classroom. They could hear muffled comments and discussions behind their backs, and knew the remarks would not be friendly. But it didn't matter. What mattered was that they stood their ground.

The two of them took a bus down to Cold Storage Milk Bar at Orchard Road and had ice cream. They shared a banana split, taking turns to scoop from the three balls of vanilla, chocolate and strawberry flavours. Lost in their respective thoughts, neither spoke. Afterwards, they strolled over to the MPH bookstore at Stamford Road. Gimme Lao found a *Children's Encyclopaedia of Birds*, and spent an hour browsing through with melancholy. When Gimme Lao's mother asked if that was the book he wanted, Gimme nodded. He would have to be content with the illustrations now that there would not be any school excursion to the Jurong Bird Park. Not quite the real thing, but they would have to do.

Gimme Lao's mother saw her boy looking downcast and fury surged in her chest again. This time, the anger was no longer directed at the snobbish woman who thought she could dictate which child would get to have fun and which child would not. Truth was, she could. That woman could effectively ostracise her boy and deprive him of what he craved for. And Gimme Lao's mother was furious that she herself was unable to protect her child from the pain and the hurt.

That very moment, Gimme Lao's mother made a momentous

decision. She would find the money to sponsor the school excursion to Jurong Bird Park herself.

Gimme Lao's mother was under no illusion about their financial standing. Her husband worked as a clerk in an insurance company, and brought home a fixed pay of 180 dollars a month. She herself earned 120 dollars a month at the pharmacy. They could afford the house mortgage, but not a car. They could bring their boy for a day trip to the zoo, but an overseas holiday was out of the question. To pay for entrance tickets for 26 children and a teacher to the Jurong Bird Park, hire a bus to ferry them to and fro and possibly buy them lunch, could easily add up to their combined take-home pay for the month. There was no way she was going to dip into the family savings.

The money would have to be additional earnings.

Three days later, Gimme Lao's mother deposited Gimme at Grandma Toh's place after dinner. Her husband was surprised to see her putting on lipstick.

"Where are you going?" he asked, while getting ready to leave for his weekly session of Chinese chess. Despite the fact that he wasn't very good at it, Gimme Lao's father was a fanatic. When they first got married, he engaged his wife in the game two to three nights a week. Over time Gimme Lao's mother lost interest; her husband's moves were tediously slow and his strategies embarrassingly transparent. She was glad when he met a fellow chess enthusiast of similar calibre at his workplace, a sales manager called Harrison Pua who lived six bus stops away. The pair had stuck to their weekly matches for several years now.

"I need to talk to Harrison," she remarked. "I know he is constantly recruiting new sales staff."

"But we have discussed this before," Gimme Lao's father was unable to hide the whine in his voice. "I can't do sales. I know Harrison says anybody can be trained but...I am just not ready."

"I am."

Harrison Pua was indeed on the constant lookout for new talent, and he immediately spotted the steely resolve in the woman's eyes. Although Harrison Pua had occasionally suggested Gimme Lao's father join his sales team, it had never progressed beyond a mere suggestion. Harrison knew his chess mate well. The man was gentle and amiable, but lacked drive. The only time he could summon aggression was in their game of Chinese chess.

The wife was a different creature altogether. When Harrison explained that it took six weeks to undergo training and sit for the certification examination, the woman frowned and asked why should it take so long?

Harrison veiled his grin with a look of concern as he enquired cautiously, "Are you in urgent need of money? I can always give you a loan first, to tide things over."

"I need money to organise a school excursion for my son." Gimme Lao's mother saw the look of worry on her husband's face and decided to be frank about her intentions. "Thank you for your offer, but I want to do this myself. Just sign me up for the training, Harrison."

Two months later, Barber Bay was surprised to see Gimme Lao's mother walk into his shop in the evening. He allowed the unfolded razor to laze against a lathered chin as he gave her a visual frisk and tried to determine what it was that looked unfamiliar. It wasn't the wavy perm in her hair, nor the bold crimson on her lips, although he

was seeing these for the first time. It was the look in her eyes. There was a focused shine in them.

If her unannounced visit merely surprised him, her behaviour shocked him. After greeting him amicably, Gimme Lao's mother sat on an adjacent chair and introduced herself to the customer whose chin he was shaving. For the remaining 20 minutes while the man was trapped, Gimme Lao's mother chatted about the unpredictability of life, discussed the responsibility of a man to his family, emphasised the importance of life insurance coverage and asked for an appointment to show the man what her company had to offer. Sustained by a tiny flask of herbal chrysanthemum tea she brought herself, Gimme Lao's mother engaged the next five customers while they remained immobilised in the barber chair. By the time the last customer left, she had secured two follow-up appointments for herself.

One month later, Gimme Lao's mother received her first commission check from the insurance company. The next day, Gimme Lao was proud to submit a note to Miss Foo Swee Peng. The note stated that his mother would be glad to sponsor a school excursion to Jurong Bird Park for the entire class.

Including Janice Ong.

PHOTO BY: ALLAN SIEW



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sebastian Sim grew up in a two-room HDB flat with parents who were part of the pioneer generation of independent Singapore. Not one to shy away from the road less taken, he has tried his hand in different industries and travelled around the world to soak up different experiences and cultures. He was variously a bartender at Boat Quay, an assistant outlet manager at McDonald's, an insurance salesman, a prison officer in a maximum security prison and a croupier in a casino. *Let's Give It Up for Gimme Lao!* is Sebastian's first English novel.

Also by Sebastian Sim: (writing as 岳观铭)

《天厨记》

《蝠泣录》

《欢乐咒》



The Epigram Books Fiction Prize promotes contemporary Singapore creative writing and rewards excellence in Singapore literature. The richest literary prize in Singapore is awarded to the Singaporean, permanent resident or Singapore-born author for the best manuscript of a full-length, original and unpublished novel written in the English language.

The closing date for submission to this year's prize is 1 September 2016. The winner will be announced in December and have his or her novel published by Epigram Books.

For more information, please visit **EBFP.EPIGRAMBOOKS.SG**

FINALIST FOR THE 2015
EPIGRAM BOOKS FICTION PRIZE

BORN ON THE NIGHT OF SINGAPORE'S INDEPENDENCE, GIMME LAO IS CHEATED OF THE HONOUR OF BECOMING THE NATION'S FIRSTBORN BY A VINDICTIVE NURSE. THIS WAS THE FIRST OF THREE THINGS HE WOULD NEVER KNOW ABOUT HIMSELF. THE SECOND WAS THE CIRCUMSTANCES SURROUNDING HIS PARENTS' MARRIAGE AND THE THIRD WAS THE PROFOUND, BUT OFTEN UNINTENTIONAL, IMPACT HE HAD ON OTHER PEOPLE'S LIVES.



ISBN-13: 978-981-4757-32-4



WWW.EPIGRAMBOOKS.SG