



MONICA LIM
THE GOOD,
THE BAD,
and the PSLE
Trials of
an Almost
Kiasu
Mother

INSPIRED BY REAL EVENTS

“This is an honest and endearing story about the trials of a mum with primary school-going children. I finished it in one sitting because the book had me laughing out loud at so many points. It was as funny as it was touching. I enjoyed it thoroughly because I could see myself and my kids behaving in the exact same way.”

—Jane Ng, Correspondent, *The Sunday Times*

“This book should carry a warning: do not read where you cannot collapse in giggles! It is a hilarious first-hand account of competitive parenting in Singapore, full of laugh-out-loud moments; and animated by a mixture of exasperation, self-flagellation and tenderness that will resonate with parents, teachers and all who love and care for children. A delicious, delightful read.”

—Tisa Ho (Ng), Executive Director, Hong Kong Arts Festival and Board Member, Hong Kong International Literary Festival

“Quintessential Singapore experience told with humour, candour and no compunction. A delightful read, especially at night. You will go to bed knowing you are not alone.”

—Diana Ser, Managing Director, Diana Ser Communications

**THE GOOD,
THE BAD
AND
THE PSLE**



**Trials of an Almost
Kiasu Mother**

MONICA LIM



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

First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For my writing buddy,
my muse and my facilitator.
You know who you are
and I love you all
very much.

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YEAR

1



TERM 1

Prelude

I can't believe my baby is going to Primary One. As I helped Noah pack his school bag for the next day, I had a feeling of déjà vu. Didn't I just help him pack his bag for his first day of preschool? Seems like it was only yesterday.

Actually, he hasn't changed all that much. He's just a little taller, somewhat tougher and a whole lot rounder. I really need to break his fried food addiction.

I placed his pencil case, 1A textbooks and a couple of exercise books into his bag. That seemed like the bare minimum but the bag was already surprisingly heavy.

Then I remembered the water bottle, packet of tissue, file, notebook and school diary, by which time the Ben 10 bag looked bulkier than Noah and probably weighed as much. Maybe I should have bought him a trolley bag.

I mused out loud. “I wonder who your teacher will be.”

“Remember to find out how to go to the toilet.”

“Jie Jie got into the best Primary Four class. Isn’t your big sister clever? I wonder which class you’ll be in.”

“Isn’t this exciting?”

When I turned around from my monologue, I realised that Noah had been playing with his toy cars the whole time, not having heard a word I said. Big sister April was standing in the corner of the room, looking amused.

“Mummy, I think you’re more thrilled about primary school than he is,” she said.

“The first day of school is exciting!” I protested. “Noah, if you have any worries or questions about the school, just ask Jie Jie, okay? She can help you. She knows the place inside out. Is there anything you would like to know? About the teachers? The classrooms? The subjects?”

Noah looked up at April expectantly. “Does the canteen sell fried chicken?”

Square One

I am so thankful Noah has gotten a place in Somerset Primary School on account of having an older sibling there.

April’s teacher told me the school has become so popular that you now need to ballot during the Primary One registration exercise to get a place. Just because the school produced the top Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) student two years ago. Singaporeans are so kiasu! If there was an exam that measured our fear of losing out, I’m sure we’d score top marks as a nation.

It is reassuring to know the school can produce good results for the Primary Six national exams though. Even though Papa feels otherwise, academic results are very important in order to do well in Singapore. Hopefully, the environment at Somerset Primary School will nurture Noah’s interest in studying.

Noah will be taking the school bus to and from school, but just for today I took leave to drive him on this momentous occasion. I would have preferred it if he could have gone to school with April but this is one of those rare schools which still has morning and afternoon sessions. Primary Ones and Twos are in the afternoon session, the rest are in the morning.

Noah scrunched up his face when putting on his school uniform as the white shirt was still starchy in its newness. Mental note: use more softener. He did look smart in it, though. My baby’s all grown up!

We arrived at school half an hour early. I wanted to be sure I could get a parking lot and my foresight paid off. The students were supposed to assemble at the canteen, so

I took Noah there and made sure he joined the line for the right class. Pretty soon, the canteen started to fill up as kids straggled in.

One girl stood in the middle of the courtyard with a florid pink Hello Kitty school bag, looking dazed. A teacher tried asking the girl her name and class but she remained unresponsive. A parent watching the situation nearby remarked, “No ring tone.”

In contrast, a couple of worldly-wise girls were already chatting with each other like they were the best of friends, comparing how much pocket money they had. I was sure the loser would use the information as a bargaining tool with her parents later.

Amid the chaos, order ensued. Experienced teachers, veterans of many first days of school, established queues of twos and led the children to their classrooms. I followed Noah to his, where he found a seat. There he was, in his crisp, oversized uniform, still clutching his Ben 10 school bag, looking slightly lost. His sister was so different. By the end of the first day of Primary One, she had been appointed class monitor and had helped the teacher hand out books. She even pretended not to see me when I waved at her through the classroom window, making me look like one of those silly eager beaver mums.

Noah, on the other hand, brightened when he saw me standing outside his classroom and kept waving enthusiastically. After a while, I realised that the distraction had

caused him to miss what his teacher had been saying for the last 30 minutes, so I beat a hasty retreat to the canteen.

I waited till it was time for recess and after scanning the sea of white uniforms that had streamed into the canteen, spotted Noah with his Primary Two buddy. They sat on a bench eating their snacks. After I saw the mob around the stalls, I was glad I had made Noah bring a lunchbox. The queues were held up by some trigger-happy parents who kept pointing their cameras at their clearly bewildered newbies, instructing, “Smile, darling! Hold up the chicken rice!”

Oh, the digital age, where we have to document every single moment of our lives! Actually, I brought a camera too but at least I only took photos of Noah getting out of the car, at assembly and in the classroom.

After recess had ended, I decided to spend the rest of the school day waiting in the canteen and used the time to reply to some emails from my editor. Thank goodness I had the presence of mind to bring my laptop. Not for the first time, I felt a deep sense of gratitude for being able to enjoy a flexible work arrangement, so I could juggle work and time with my kids. I had worked as a full-time journalist at *Realities*, a lifestyle magazine, for 10 years covering the travel beat, before I discovered that I was pregnant with April. Having read about the problems of latchkey kids, I was determined not to be an absentee parent and switched to a part-time position. My editor was fully supportive and gave me a pretty long leash, as long as I handed in my

articles on time. It was a near-perfect arrangement.

I managed to clear quite a bit of administrative work by 6.15pm, when the students came streaming out of their classrooms like swarms of ants. I walked towards the car park where I had told Noah to meet me. Soon enough, he appeared, dragging his school bag behind him. I knew it was too heavy.

“So how was your first day?” I asked as we got into the car.

“Okay.”

“What else?” I prodded as I started the car, impatient for more details. “Was your teacher nice? What did you do?”

Long pause. “I couldn’t find my class.”

I gripped the steering wheel. “What do you mean you couldn’t find your class? I saw you there!”

“After recess, my buddy brought me to the toilet. When I came out, he was gone.”

“Oh dear! What did you do then?”

“I stood at the staircase and cried until a teacher found me.”

Misadventure on the first day of school! That didn’t bode well. Trying to salvage the situation, I tried another tack.

“Did you make friends? I’m sure you made friends. Who’s your partner?”

“Her name is Summer. I don’t like her.”

“Why?”

“She kept pressing the light switch on my watch.”

Doh.

Common Cents

In December, before the school year started, Somerset Primary organised an orientation programme for children about to enter Primary One, as well as their parents. At the parents’ session, the Principal told us to teach our kids how to count money, so they could buy food at the canteen. I found it odd that counting money was in the Primary One Maths syllabus, yet the kids were expected to have mastered this skill before they started school.

Dutifully, I tried to teach Noah, but it was harder than I thought. The dollars were easy but cents were confusing. It also took him a long time to apply the concept of 100 cents = \$1. When you’d only just learnt how to count to 100 and to mentally add single digits, working out change from up to \$2 was very complicated.

“If the chicken rice costs \$1.25 and you give the auntie \$2, how much change should she return you?”

Noah said slowly, “Wait, that means 200 minus 125...” He was deep in thought for a while. Finally he exclaimed, “I can’t do it in my head! Give me a piece of paper. I have to write it down.”

I didn’t think the tuck shop auntie would have that much patience.

A few sessions of playing shop with disastrous change-giving later, I gave up. In the end, it was the worldly-wise older sister who came up with a food-buying tip. “No need to know how much change you’ll get,” April told Noah.

“Just give the auntie a \$2 note. She’ll give you back the right change.”

After the first day of school, Noah declared that he wanted to buy his own food so I gave him pocket money and hoped he would be able to manage well enough not to go hungry. On the second day of school, relishing his new-found freedom, he marched up to the ice cream stall and told the stall keeper, “I want the colourful ice cream.”

Within the first week, he had bought French fries, crackers and nuggets, all the food I frown upon. He even managed to buy a can of 100Plus from the vending machine. That was an accident though. He bought it because it was the only available drink in a can and he thought it would be like Coca-Cola, which was forbidden fruit to him. He was so short he had to enlist his buddy’s help to put the coins in the machine for him. I laughed mercilessly at him when he told me it tasted funny.

My conclusion is: if your kid is a greedy gut, nothing will stop him from getting his snacks. Not being able to count money is but a minor inconvenience.

First Impressions

Noah has not taken to his form teacher, Miss Wee, which is a pity. Here is a boy who hates seatwork and has the attention span of a gnat. I was hoping he would get a fantastic, fun-loving teacher who could inspire him and encourage

him to take an interest in his studies.

No such luck. I’ve already gotten a note from her, gently asking if I could tell Noah to focus more in class. It doesn’t look good for the rest of the year.

His biggest pet peeve with her is that she is strict about talking in class. I can see how this would be a huge turn-off for Mr Personality. Asking him not to chat with a friend is like asking him not to breathe. Plus, I imagine talking helps him pass the time when he’s bored in class. For Noah, school is about friends and fun. Studies are merely a diversion.

I tried pleading with him. “I never got a single note from Jie Jie’s teacher in all her three years! It’s not even been two months and I’m getting a note from your teacher. Can you at least try harder to concentrate?”

He looked contrite but I know his flesh is weak. It doesn’t help that his memory is not a sponge but a sieve (it retains only the useless bits). When he gets dropped off by the school bus at home every day, I would greet him at the door and ask, “How was school?”

His usual reply: “Okay.”

“What did you do?”

He would look stumped as if I’d just asked him to recite the 12 times table. Finally he would give me an irrelevant fact like, “Summer was not feeling well. She vomited in class.”

I still recall after his school orientation before his entry into Primary One, I asked him what he had learnt. He thought about it for a while and said, “I cannot bring pets

to school like spiders.” That was all he could remember of the entire four-hour orientation programme.

The bright side about being Mr Personality is that he has already made lots of friends. His best buddy is Ming Hao and the two of them regularly run off to play soccer with a whole bunch of other boys during recess. When I asked Noah what Ming Hao was like, he replied, “Fat and funny. And he likes potato chips.”

Two peas in a pod.

Hello, Goodbye

Sometimes I marvel at how one set of parents can produce such different children. April is a thinker and planner. She is smart and strives to do well in school. Noah is clueless, hyperactive and lives for the moment.

Their contrasting personalities mean fights are almost inevitable. There are two phrases that I’ve grown thoroughly sick of hearing: “It’s not fair!” and “It’s not my fault!” When I can’t stand it anymore, I would just confiscate whatever they’re fighting over. Nobody wins and then they get to commiserate over a common enemy: mean old Mummy.

It’s not just over belongings that they quarrel about. When they were younger, it was over things like who got to press the lift button, who got to use the bathroom first, who got to hold my right hand (what’s wrong with the left one?)

Once, after overhearing another meaningless round of bickering, I said in exasperation, “You two are like a cat and a dog!”

Noah perked up. “Who’s the dog?” he asked.

April: “I want to be the dog.”

Noah: “HAHHH, not fair! I want to be the doooooog!” (Several rounds of “I’m the dog!” and “No, I’m the dog!”)

April (finally): “Okay, then I’m the cat and I will SCRATCH you!”

Noah: “MUUMMMYYYYYYYYYYYY!!!!!!”

Having said that, I suspect that deep down, they are fond of each other in their own way. Even though April thinks her brother is a nuisance, I have seen her defend him when he was being bullied at the playground.

Noah, despite his insistence that all girls are annoying, secretly admires his sister for having skills like knowing how to make a Lego house and sewing a busted seam on his teddy. In fact, until recently, he thought he was going to marry April when he grew up. When I told him he couldn’t marry his sister, he protested, “But Grandma said ‘next time when you two get married’...”

“She didn’t mean to each other lah!” Haiz...

You should have seen April’s expression. I’m sure she was thinking, who in their right mind would want to marry Noah?

I have a dream that one day the two of them will be the best of friends. I hope this is not one of those pipe dreams.

学华语 (or “How to Learn the World’s Most Complicated Language”)

April has had Chinese tuition since she was in Primary Two and I started Noah on it a few weeks ago, much to his chagrin. I didn’t have a choice; his Chinese is atrocious. Since Papa and I are not particularly fluent in Mandarin ourselves, we couldn’t provide our children with a good foundation in the language when they were younger, so they grew up with little exposure to it.

When Noah was in preschool, he had problems understanding what the Chinese teacher was saying. Rather than clarify his doubts however, he channelled his survival skills and simply nodded intelligently to everything she said. The truth finally dawned on her and she told me, “Mrs Tan, Noah has been copying his friend’s work.”

“How can you be sure that he copied the work?” I asked a little defensively.

“Because he even copied his friend’s name.”

Noah’s Chinese hasn’t improved much since then. He can barely recognise basic words and he speaks Mandarin like an ang moh. In fact, I’m sure a Caucasian would get more tones right than Noah. His intonation is seemingly random even for the simplest words and phrases.

For instance, instead of “吃鱼” (eat fish), he would say “吃雨” (eat rain). “喝水” (drink water) becomes “河水” (river water) and “飞机” (aeroplane) becomes “肥鸡” (fat chicken). I make both kids watch the Chinese TV drama

书包太重 but Noah habitually says “树包” instead of “书包” (school bag), prompting me to ask, “What? You carry a tree bag?”

When he writes his Chinese characters, it’s as if the squares in the exercise book don’t exist. They are there for decorative purposes only. His words flow languidly across the borders, encroaching on other characters’ spaces.

Noah scored only 7/10 for his first two 听写, which I told him was unacceptable for Primary One. A parent’s signature was required for all Chinese spelling exercises so I threatened, “If you don’t get 10/10, I won’t sign your book.” After a while, I realised that he had not let me sign his 听写 book for a couple of weeks. When I asked him about it, he replied matter-of-factly, “You said if I don’t get 10/10, you won’t sign my book so I signed it myself.”

Needless to say, I went into a lengthy sermon on how forging your parent’s signature was one deep, dark step into a moral abyss.

The Chinese tutor is a very patient lady but I sometimes hear an edge creep into her voice. It’s hard to motivate someone who has zero interest in the subject. During lessons, I’ve seen Noah place his head on the table like he’s totally weary or stare gloomily at his book. I’ve also overheard him trying to negotiate with the tutor, “So much work! I can’t do it. Can I do half?”

Last week, he told me that his legs sometimes hurt.

“When?” I asked, concerned, wondering if he had in-

jured himself playing soccer.

“When I sit down during tuition.”

Privately, I feel sorry for him. I know how difficult it is for children from English-speaking households to learn Chinese. Even April, who is so hardworking, finds it tough going sometimes. The Chinese tutor makes her memorise lists of good phrases so that she can do well in her Chinese composition and so far, this has worked. Never mind that it is not the most creative or original way to write a composition. Based on how compositions are marked, it is the easiest way to score points.

“Chinese is so difficult,” April lamented, as she prepared to memorise the latest list of 好词好句 given by the Chinese tutor.

But we don't have a choice, right? The government says we have to be bilingual and if you're Chinese, you need to learn Mandarin. And from what I hear, if you're bad at it, it's going to completely pull down your PSLE score. I have to make sure both of them keep up or I'll have bigger problems later on.

This Used to Be My Playground

Every fortnight, I take April and Noah to the library. This is April's playground. For her, every book is an adventure, a passage into the unknown, something to be discovered. She devours books with an insatiable appetite. Her quota

of six books on her library card is never sufficient so she always asks to borrow my card.

I'm gratified to see that her level of reading has been steadily rising. All the children's classics that I recommended to her—*Charlotte's Web*, *The Secret Garden*, *The Wizard of Oz*—she finished during the December holidays. One afternoon, I saw her wholly absorbed in *Animal Farm* and was amazed by how advanced she was. At this rate, her command of the language is sure to improve exponentially.

In this respect, April is exactly like me when I was young. I practically camped out at the library when I was growing up and even bought exercise books to copy out passages from my favourite library books. I guess it's no surprise that I became a journalist.

The library is also Noah's playground but in a more literal sense. Take today, for instance. After I had told him to pick six books, he wandered around listlessly before coming back with six picture books! Three were on fire engines, one was a Dr Seuss book and the other two were *Tintin* comics.

I told him he wasn't a baby anymore and tried showing him Beverly Cleary's *Henry Huggins*. He wrinkled his nose and said it looked boring, so I went off to search for more options. When I returned with an armful of books, Noah wasn't where he was supposed to be. Looking around, I spotted him weaving in and out of the bookshelves in the Adult Fiction section, hiding behind chairs, aiming an imaginary pistol at covert villains and dodging invisible bullets.

Ohhhhhh! This boy will be the death of me. As I muttered, “God, give me strength,” and took a step towards him, the inevitable happened. Noah’s fantasy came to an abrupt end as he crashed into a librarian’s cart and a shower of books fell on the ground. A commotion followed, whereby the librarian made disapproving noises and told him off reproachfully. Several library users looked up from their books and stared at me. I know when I’m being judged.

I hurried over, whispered hasty apologies to the librarian and grabbed Noah’s arm. Together with April, we left in a flurry. All the way to the car park, I berated Noah on the importance of behaving well in public and not being an embarrassment to his longsuffering mother. It was only when we were about to get into the car that April exclaimed, “Mummy, we forgot the books!”

I’ll just have to find another library where I can show my face.

To succeed in life, you must top your class, get Band One for school tests, and obtain four A*s for the PSLE.

Or at least, that is the world according to Ling, a typical Singaporean mum who has made it her goal in life to help her children do well in school. Ling's older daughter, April, has all the makings of a model student and looks set to ace the Primary Six national exams. In the meantime, Ling's younger son, Noah, is free-spirited and more interested in canteen food than what goes on in class.

This (almost) kiasu mum records her journey diary-style, describing hilarious episodes involving crazy worksheets, assessment book overload and jittery parent-teacher meetings. Ling's humorous take on surviving Singapore schools will have you laughing and give you serious food for thought, all at the same time!

“Honest and endearing. The book had me laughing out loud at so many points. As funny as it was touching.”

—Jane Ng, Correspondent,
The Sunday Times



MONICA LIM

writes for a living and has a blog where many of the stories in this book first appeared. She lives in a typical Singaporean neighbourhood with

her two teenage children, one husband, his mother and no dog. Her son has a pet snail that is slimy and disgusting. This is her first work of fiction.

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