

SENGKANG SNOOPERS

THE MYSTERY OF THE HERMIT'S HUT

PETER TAN

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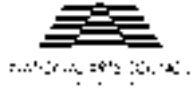
*To LC, Mĳ and MW
as always*

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A CHANGE OF HOLIDAY PLANS

“I am sorry, kids, but we are no longer going to Malaysia during the school holidays,” said Papa.

“But why? We always go, Papa!” exclaimed Su Lin, who was a tall girl with a determined face, and her hair usually tied in ponytails.

“But Papa, I want to go!” Su Yang almost shouted. He was Su Lin’s little brother, and was small and thin, with a round pleasant face.

“We all want to go!” Su Lin added, turning to her mother for her support. The three of them needed to be together in this because her father was well-known to be stubborn. Indeed, people had said that she took after her father in that respect, and they were mostly right.

Mrs Lee just smiled and waited for her husband to continue.

They were seated round the dining table in their flat in Sengkang. The setting sun washed the clouds in the sky with a brilliant red. The streetlights in the estate flickered on, one by one, 12 storeys below them. Lights were also coming on in the flats in the neighbouring blocks. The sounds of the clatter



of crockery and the sizzling whish of vegetables and meat being tossed into frying pans drifted towards their flat.

Twilight was everyone's favourite time of the day, especially Su Lin's.

The four of them were just settling down to one of the delicious dinners of steamed fish, tofu and bean sprouts prepared by their mother when their father delivered the news.

"My project at work is now at a very important stage," Mr Lee said gravely. "I cannot leave Singapore for the next few months."

His words sounded very final to Su Lin and Su Yang. What a disappointment! They could not imagine missing out on their yearly December holiday road trip to the Cameron Highlands, Malacca, Kuantan or other places in Malaysia. The two children and their parents had always tremendously enjoyed doing all sorts of things together as a family.

"But what are we going to do for the holidays besides going to the library, and to Punggol Waterway?" complained Su Lin, crestfallen. She and Su Yang loved spending their holidays at the newly-renovated Sengkang Public Library and beautiful park by the river in nearby Punggol, but she could not imagine being stuck in Singapore for the entire six weeks of the school vacation.

She did not care that some of their school friends went for expensive tours to Europe, the United States, Japan or Korea. That was because their family loved their Malaysian road trips. Even their father, who was always stressed by his job, would unwind after a few days and get into the spirit of their vacation.

"We will be so *bored!*" Su Yang exclaimed, trying to put on his most doleful face. A few minutes ago, he had been famished,

but now he no longer felt like having even one morsel.

“There are many other things to do in Singapore, children,” their mother said consolingly. “We could go to East Coast Park and the museums.” Their mother was a vice-principal at a primary school and always had great ideas about what to do during their weekends and vacations. Her suggestion sounded good, but how could anything beat going to Malaysia together?

“Don’t worry, children,” their father said. He didn’t seem to have lost his appetite at all. In fact, he was cheerful. He was munching happily on a big piece of tofu as he spoke. How mean of him!

“Mummy and I have another plan,” he said. His eyes twinkled as he wiped away some orangey sauce that had dripped out from the side of his mouth. Papa was almost always serious and it was rare for him to act so bright and jolly.

“What is it, Papa!?” Su Yang demanded impatiently. “Quick, tell us!” He was always in a hurry to know everything. His parents, and sometimes his sister, usually indulged him because he was the baby of the family.

“Have you heard of Pulau Ubin?”

“Pulau...Ubin?” Su Yang asked, scratching his head. What an exotic name.

“It’s an island,” Su Lin said, pleased that she knew. “Pulau means island in Malay.” Her English teacher had, a few weeks ago, asked her class to read an interesting newspaper article about two wild elephants that had swum from nearby Malaysia to Pulau Ubin. The animals had scared the wits out of some cyclists who were out for an afternoon of fun on the rustic isle. The elephants had been caught and sent to the Singapore Zoo. “Remember the story I told you about the elephants?”

“In fact, it is not far from here. We can see it from Punggol Waterway Park when we cycle there,” their mother said.

Su Yang nodded. “An island? How fun!”

“Yes, you’ll have to take a ferry to get there,” Su Lin said. “A ferry is a boat.”

“Are we really going by boat, Papa?” Su Yang asked. He loved cars and trains and aeroplanes and boats. He could hardly contain his excitement. This could be a better holiday than the Malaysia one they had originally planned!

“Of course,” their father replied.

“Unless we want to be like the elephants and swim across,” their mother said with a little wink.

“Mummy!” Su Yang protested, but he laughed good-naturedly along with them. Then he lifted his right arm like an elephant trunk taking in air above the water. “A swimming elephant,” he said, and they laughed again, even his father.

“Papa’s colleague grew up on Pulau Ubin and his parents lived there until recently,” said their mother, who obviously knew about their alternative plan too. No wonder she had said nothing when Su Lin had appealed for her support to go to Malaysia.

“Yes,” their father said. “His father used to work at the quarries there. You know, where they dig stones from the ground for making roads and buildings?”

“It’s like the countryside, and we will have lots of fun,” their mother promised.

Their father nodded. “My colleague is kind enough to let us stay at his parents’ house for two weeks,” he said. “This way, I can still work during the week and be with you guys on the weekends.” Mr Lee was an engineer who built and maintained

train tracks for the MRT. It was an important job, and he was always busy.

“My teacher said there are hills and forests and swamps on the island,” said Su Lin.

“That means there will be mosquitoes and flies and things?” Su Yang asked. He hated creepy crawlies and stinging bugs buzzing about. Maybe it wouldn’t be so fun after all.

“Don’t be a namby-pamby, *didi*,” said Su Lin. Su Yang kicked his sister under the table, but she only grinned at him. Su Lin never let her brother forget that he was younger than she was, and that he was a bit of a softie sometimes. Su Lin, on the other hand, was always game for new things, and did not mind one bit getting all sweaty and dirty. She had no fear of cockroaches or worms or flies. The only things that would get her screaming with fright were house lizards.

Their father reassured them. “It is not that bad.”

“And we could go cycling, or visit the Chek Jawa nature reserve where we can see wild boar, otters, anemones and starfish,” their mother suggested.

“Cool! I have only ever seen otters at the zoo. Can we have picnics at the beach, please?” Su Yang said. He loved picnics, as long as they had proper mats and sat in the shade. He didn’t mind mammals, as long they were a safe distance away. And anemones were fun to watch because they couldn’t jump on or run after anyone.

“That would be so fun!” said Su Lin. She, too, loved picnics, especially when they brought along their mother’s scrumptious homemade cakes, and rich and creamy soya milk.

“Of course,” their mother said. She was a marvellous cook and enjoyed seeing her children tucking into the delicious

food she prepared for them.

“As long as there are no mosquitoes and flies,” Su Yang repeated. “I don’t want to get bitten.”

Su Lin was about to say something but stopped when Su Yang glared at her. She stuck out her tongue at him and then grinned. Su Lin didn’t like mosquitoes and flies either, but would never admit that in front of her little brother. “Maybe we will find some elephants that have swum there!” she said instead.

“Wouldn’t that be an adventure!” Su Yang said, even though he couldn’t imagine what they would do if they came across one.

Mrs Lee laughed, pleased that the kids were looking forward to the new plan. She glanced happily at Mr Lee. They had been afraid the children would fuss about missing out on Malaysia, and were relieved that they were taking the change of plans in such good spirits.

The children now dug into their dinner, making appreciative noises as they ate. Su Yang’s appetite had suddenly returned.

That night, the two siblings could hardly sleep. They discussed what they would do and see on Pulau Ubin as they lay in their beds. When they finally fell asleep, way after their usual bedtime, it was while they were thinking of mosquitoes, country dirt roads, swamps, giant holes in the ground where the quarries were...and of elephants paddling across the sea with their trunks peeking above the rolling waves like periscopes on a submarine.

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A BOAT RIDE AND FLYING CREATURES

“Look! Over there!” Su Lin shouted, pointing to the sea to the right of the ferry.

Su Yang and their mother turned towards where she was excitedly pointing. They saw slivers of silver light dart out from beneath the surface of the green blue water. The flashes flitted and shimmered like arrows over the waves. Then, as quickly as they had appeared, they dived back into the deep.



“What are they?” Su Yang asked. The three of them pressed over the side of the wooden bumboat to have a better look, and so did the other excited passengers. “They look like little birds.”

“Birds don’t jump in and out of the water,” Su Lin said disdainfully. “They must be some kind of fish.” Su Yang was a year and a half younger than his sister, and usually did not mind when she talked down to him in a know-it-all tone. After all, she was often right—but not always.

“But they have wings! Didn’t you see them flapping?” Su Yang insisted. His sister could see that he was right. But how could fish have wings?

Just then, a little further in front of them, the group of little creatures shot out from the sea again. They skimmed and glided like little streaks of lightning just over the water. Sometimes they would touch the waves and bounce up again. Their long, slim bodies shimmered and glistened in the mid-afternoon sun. Then they were gone again. The other nine passengers, especially the children, were in a flutter, chattering to one another animatedly.

“You are right, *didi*,” Su Lin said grudgingly. “They do have wings!” She may not have liked to be outdone by her kid brother, but she was never afraid of admitting she was wrong.

“They are so pretty! Aren’t they, *jie*?” Su Yang said. “What are they?”

“Flying fish,” came a voice from their right. It belonged to a slim, pretty and cheerful girl in spectacles. She wore a beautiful green-and-blue headscarf, jeans and a long-sleeved tee-shirt. Earlier, they had seen her saying goodbye to her grandmother at Changi Point Ferry Terminal. The girl pushed

her black-rimmed spectacles up her nose. "They are running away from the big fish that is chasing them."

Su Lin and Su Yang turned to their mother, who nodded in agreement.

"Wow!" Su Yang exclaimed excitedly.

"How cool!" Su Lin added.

"My grandfather says they sometimes even fly onto boats," the girl said.

"How I wish one would land in ours!" Su Lin said wistfully.

"We could have it for dinner!" said Su Yang.

"*Didi!* Of course, we would have to throw it back into the water..."

"I hope the big fish never catches them, though... Aren't they the most beautiful things?" said the girl.

"And who might you be, little miss?" Mrs Lee asked the girl.

"Zizi, Auntie," she replied.

"Zizi... What a nice name," said Mrs Lee.

"Thank you, Auntie. It's my grandmother's name too," Zizi replied politely, smiling. Her headscarf fluttered prettily in the breeze.

"Hi, Zizi, I am Su Lin," said Su Lin, flashing the wide grin she reserved for people she liked a lot. "And this is—"

"—Su Yang!" he finished.

"The baby of our family!" teased his sister.

"*Jiel!*" He glared at Su Lin, who grinned and winked at Zizi.

Zizi smiled, amused by the exchange between the siblings.

"Don't you think it's a lovely day to visit Pulau Ubin?"

The rest couldn't agree more. It was indeed a beautiful sunny day. They looked up to the clear deep blue sky. There was not a single cloud to be seen. Over Pulau Ubin, a pair of

magnificent sea eagles wheeled gracefully round and round above the trees, slowly rising higher and higher.

"Look," Zizi said. She pointed to the distance above the mainland where they had come from.

They turned and saw a group of red, green and blue blotches over the dark green trees flying over the yachts in front of the Changi Sailing Club. It seemed to be heading towards them.

"Birds!" Su Yang said.

"Parrots," whispered Zizi.

Without a word, they watched the parrots until they passed over their heads. Su Yang counted eight of them.

"How beautiful!" Su Lin said.

"They're probably returning to their nests on Pulau Ubin," Zizi said. "I see them often."

"That means we will be able to see them too when we are there!" Su Yang said. He was really beginning to like the island now, and had totally forgotten about the mosquitoes and other bugs.

"Some are endangered species," Zizi said.

"I know what endangered means! It means there are very few of them left in the world," Su Yang said, pleased with himself. It was a good thing he had paid attention to his science teacher!

"People buy them as pets and then abandon them when they no longer like them," Zizi said, pushing her spectacles up her nose again. "Some are smuggled in from South America."

"You know a lot, Zizi!" their mother said admiringly.

"I learned this from Grandfather," she said. "And, of course, the Internet."

Su Lin had always thought of herself as knowledgeable, but she was very impressed by Zizi, and Mrs Lee was too. And the wonderful thing was that Zizi was not the least bit boastful or arrogant.

They watched the birds fly towards a forested hill.

“That hill is very near to our house,” said Zizi.

“How cool if you could see them from there,” said Su Yang.

“If you are staying on the island, you can come and visit me and we can go looking for them!” said Zizi.

“Really?” said both her new friends. “Mummy, may we?”

“Of course...but only if Zizi’s grandfather doesn’t mind,” Mrs Lee said.

“He won’t, Auntie,” Zizi said quickly. “He’s the nicest grandfather in the world.” She beamed.

“Yay!” Su Yang shouted. Everyone smiled. It was turning out to be a perfect day already!

It was almost at the end of the 20-minute crossing. The bumboat sputtered along towards a jetty where other boats were moored.

A dozen or so people were waiting for a boat back to the mainland. A few of them were carrying big sacks bulging with durians that had dropped from the trees during the night. There were many durian trees on the island, and the fruits that fell from them were free for the picking.

Next to the jetty was a little village of restaurants and bicycle rental shops. The shore on either side was fringed with coconut, sea almond and casuarina trees.

“I love the ferry!” said Su Yang.

“Don’t you love the flying fish too, *didit*?” asked Su Lin.

“They were marvellous, *jie!*”



“I am so glad we came here instead of Malaysia,” said Su Lin.

Mrs Lee smiled, pleased that the children were so happy.

The boat ride had already been a thrill for Su Lin and Su Yang. They had the feeling that more was in store for them on the island.

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AN UNEXPECTED DETOUR

“**W**hat a quaint old house!” said Su Lin when she saw their holiday home.

It was an old but well-kept village house with a zinc roof and wooden walls.

“When it rains, the roof will be drumming along,” said Mrs Lee, who had grown up in one of the last villages in Singapore. “I loved that pitter-patter-tum-tum sound when I was a child.”

The house stood behind a gravel garden in the front.

“There are all kinds of trees here. See the mango and guava trees at the corner? And the beautiful hibiscus and canna plants by the fence?”

“Look at those pretty yellow and black butterflies!” cried Su Lin. “And there are lots of mangoes and guavas on the trees!” She loved both kinds of fruit. “Can we pick them to eat later, Mummy?”

“Of course.”

“Yay!” said Su Yang, who especially liked mango.

Inside the house, there was the big living room with a sofa set and a TV. The corridor behind led to three bedrooms, the

dining room and the kitchen. A large oil painting of a sunset scene of a riverbank with some deer and elephants hung on one wall.

“We can even smell the flowers from inside here!” Su Lin said, as she took a slow deep breath.

This house was so different from their 12th-storey flat in Sengkang!

“This is where you’ll sleep,” their mother said as they entered a spacious bedroom with two beds and a wardrobe. “You kids settle down, unpack and come out when you are done.” Their mother left the room.

“What’s that?” asked Su Yang pointing to a fine white net draped over a round frame of cane hanging over each bed.

“To keep out the mosquitoes at night, duh,” Su Lin said. “You let it down over the bed when you’re sleeping.” She had seen old photographs of beds with these nets.

The big window looked out from the back of the house to a rocky cliff that was topped by some trees at the top of a hill.

“That looks like a quarry!” said Su Lin. The cliff was a mosaic of grey granite stone. Zizi had told them that Pulau Ubin meant Granite Island, and had been named after the quarries on it.

“There’s a little house on top of the hill. I wonder who lives there.”

“Probably no one, since the quarries have all closed down. Maybe we can climb up to it and see what it is like.”

“Yes...” Su Yang said doubtfully. The hill looked very tall, much taller than the apartment block where they lived. It would not be easy to get to the top. “There might be snakes and mosquitoes and other things.”

“Yes, but if we make a lot of noise we will scare off the animals. And we will use insect repellent for the mosquitoes.”

“Do you think Zizi would like to come too? Maybe she has been there before.”

“Yes... It could be our adventure!”

It turned out that Zizi’s house was just a little way down the gravel road from where they were staying. They didn’t need to go far to visit her. In fact, her grandfather, Mr Osman, had given them a lift from the jetty in his rickety old car. He was waiting under an old tamarind tree next to the jetty and greeted them warmly when Zizi introduced them. Su Lin and Su Yang took an instant liking to this thin old man with a kindly, lined and sunburnt face, and bright laughing eyes.

The three children were elated that they were staying practically next to one another. In the car, they had made plans to meet after lunch as Mrs Lee and Mr Osman chatted.

After unpacking, Su Lin and Su Yang wolfed down a simple but yummy lunch of egg and shrimp fried rice their mother had whipped up. She was a superb cook and was able to make a treat of any meal, however simple.

“Be careful now,” Mrs Lee said as they were leaving to meet Zizi. “Don’t go into the sea, *jie*. And look after *didi*, okay?”

“Of course, Mummy!” Su Lin said. Secretly, she thought that her brother was such a scaredy-cat that he wouldn’t do anything dangerous even if she made him. The two had planned to go to the Chek Jawa nature reserve with Zizi to look for starfish and sea anemones on the sand flats. Zizi’s grandfather had told them that they might even see some sea otters if they were lucky.

It was quite a few kilometres away, but Zizi had been there before and knew how to get there. Mrs Lee made them put sunblock on their faces, arms and the backs of their necks. Then she rubbed insect repellent on them.

“Wear your hats!” their mother shouted after the children as they left. “And watch out for cyclists!”

They skipped excitedly down the road to look for Zizi. She was waiting next to, but not directly under, a towering durian tree with green spiky fruit hanging from the high branches. Each durian was nearly the size of a football.

“Hi, Zizi!” Su Lin and Su Yang said.

“Hi, guys!” Zizi said.

“Is that a durian tree?” Su Lin asked. Su Yang hated the smell of the fruit, but Su Lin and their parents could not get enough of it. Sometimes she ate so much that she got a sore throat.

“Yes,” said Zizi. “It belongs to us.”

“Wow, isn’t that the best thing in the world?” cried Su Lin. “Imagine having your personal endless supply of durians!”

Su Yang wrinkled his nose. He couldn’t imagine how anyone could like that foul-smelling fruit.

“Is it one of those D24 or Cat Mountain King varieties?”

“It’s just an ordinary kampong durian tree. But its fruits are super yummy! Unfortunately, they are not ripe yet. Even then, I make sure never to wait for anyone *under* a durian tree!”

Su Lin and Su Yang laughed. They shivered to think of the damage one of those giant fruits falling on someone’s head might cause.

“All ready? Sunblock? Repellent? Water?” Zizi asked.

“Yes, yes and yes! You sound like my mother,” grumbled

Su Yang, impatient to see the beach. "Let's go!"

They headed down the road, chatting among themselves. Bamboo, fishtail palms, big-leafed simpoh air plants, longalang grass with their sharp leaves that cut, and colourful red- and yellow-flowered ixora lined both sides of the road. Bulbuls, tailorbirds and other birds tweet-tweeted, chirp-chirped and trilled unseen in the trees.

Zizi said that her grandfather, Mr Osman, was a fisherman who had grown up on Pulau Ubin. Mrs Osman, Zizi's grandmother, after whom she had been named, grew vegetables and fruit such as soursop and starfruit in their garden. Their two elder sons had fished with him at first, but when the fish catches got smaller and smaller they went to the mainland to work, just like their other two brothers and two sisters had. Zizi's father was Mr and Mrs Osman's youngest son. He did well in school and became a doctor, and had married another doctor. Zizi was their only child.

"I wonder what it is like to not have a sister," asked Su Yang.

"It means that you don't have to share your things with your little brother. Or look after him," Su Lin said, teasing Su Yang.

"Or have your older sister boss you around," said Su Yang.

"Hey!" said Su Lin, cuffing her brother's head playfully.

The three of them laughed.

Zizi said, "I can't imagine what it is like to have to share things with someone. I have many cousins and also friends at school, but sometimes I wish I had someone I could talk to at home besides my parents. You know, someone to share secrets with."

"Well, Su Yang and I don't have any secrets to share with

each other," Su Lin said, "but it would be nice to have one, wouldn't it?"

"Yes," Su Yang said. "A secret all to ourselves..."

"...that the adults don't know about," added Zizi. She knew that it was not good to keep secrets from her parents and grandparents, but she felt a thrill thinking about a secret that she could share only with her two new friends.

Little did the three know how soon their wish would come true.

• • •

THE THRILL OF A SECRET

They came to a gap in the trees through which they could see the quarry and the top of the hill.

Su Lin asked, “Hey, guys, isn’t that the quarry?”

“Yes,” replied Zizi. They stopped to look at it. The cliff was a gigantic hollow dug into an entire side of the hill. It was very sheer, high and imposing. “It looks quite scary,” Su Yang whispered, awed by the sight. “I wonder what would happen if you fell from it...”

At the bottom of the cliff was a large lake. Its water was a pure green. A few old branches floated at one corner of the lake. Not a single breeze stirred the flat surface in that hot midday sun.

“Grandma said that the lake is very very deep. We are not supposed to go near it. Ever.”

“I wouldn’t want to!” said Su Lin, shivering. She could swim, but could not imagine doing so without being able to see the bottom of the lake.

“Me neither,” said Su Yang. He was thinking that the water looked like a perfect home for snakes and big scary fish.



“At first there was a big hole in the ground where they had dug up the stones.”

“Rain water must have filled it up,” Su Lin said. She wondered how long that had taken.

“See the hut on top of the hill? Grandfather said that a hermit used to live there,” Zizi told them. “He spoke to no one. His hair and beard were so long, they went down to his tummy. He resembled a wild animal.”

Su Lin said, “That looks like a good place to hide—far away from everything.”

“How exciting! I have never seen a real hermit before!” said Su Yang, feeling more afraid than excited. He shuddered.

They had both read about how hermits chose to live totally alone, at a great distance from other people. The hermits sometimes lived in caves or in the forest. The Lee siblings had not imagined that there were hermits in Singapore.

“I don’t know,” said Zizi. “I’ve always wondered why anyone would want to live alone, far from their family and friends. Wouldn’t they get lonely? Hermits must be weird!”

“Maybe they are running away from someone,” Su Yang said.

“Like a naughty brother,” Su Lin said.

Su Yang gave his sister a soft sideways kick. Su Lin grinned and tousled his hair. He hated that. “Hey, *jie*, that’s not funny!” He tried to kick his sister again, but she was too quick for him and nimbly sidestepped him.

“I was only kidding, *didi*,” Su Lin said. “I would never run away from you—no matter how irritating you might be.”

Zizi giggled. “You two are the funniest siblings I have ever met!”

They all laughed.

“I have an idea,” Su Lin said. She looked at them with a sparkle in her eyes. Like her mother, she was always full of new ideas and unusual plans, only hers were more reckless. “Why don’t we forget about the beach and climb this hill instead?” She looked at them as if daring them.

“Up to the hermit’s hut...” Zizi said in a whisper, as if she was afraid someone might hear her. The three of them stared up at the cliff to the hut. It suddenly looked very tall and so very far away.

“Have you been up there before?” Su Lin asked.

“No...” replied Zizi.

“But we don’t know the way up!” protested Su Yang. He didn’t like the idea at all and was hoping that Zizi did not either. Who knew what was up there in that strange place? Who knew if they could even climb that steep hill? Or if they could get down after that? His sister really came up with the worst ideas sometimes!

“See the fence going up along the edge of the quarry?” Su Lin said. “That must lead to the top.”

“I think we should ask Grandfather first,” said Zizi. “He would know.”

“But he might not. And he might not allow us to go,” said Su Lin. She was now fired up for an adventure.

“He said there are probably ghosts around... Spirits of the workers who were killed when they were working in the quarry.”

“Ghosstss!” exclaimed Su Yang. “I am not going!”

“Chicken!” scoffed Su Lin. “I don’t believe in ghosts.”

“Really?” said Zizi, very surprised.

“Nah...” said Su Lin dismissively. Her parents had told them that ghosts and things that went bump in the night were just people’s imaginations. In fact, the Lee family had watched a documentary that showed how so-called ghosts could be caused by other perfectly explainable things.

“I don’t think I do either,” said Su Yang. “But we shouldn’t take the risk—just in case, you know...”

“Anyway it’s daytime, so the ghosts are probably sleeping,” laughed Su Lin. “I say we go!”

Zizi was not sure if ghosts existed, and she sure did not want to find out! But it was daylight, as Su Lin had said. And the hill was just behind their house. Also, she was not going alone, but in a group. They would be safe together.

Zizi nodded. She looked up the hill, swallowed nervously, and said, “There is probably a path along the fence. We could follow it.”

“Let’s try it then,” Su Lin said. Even she sounded like she was not totally sure it was a good idea.

“But we told Mummy that we were going to the beach.” Su Yang was still hoping that Zizi and his sister would change their minds.

“We can go later,” said Su Lin. “We didn’t say we weren’t going up the hill.”

“I suppose,” said Su Yang grudgingly.

“We can go to the beach after we climb the hill,” Su Lin said. “Okay?”

“Okay...” Su Yang agreed reluctantly. He didn’t want to disobey his parents. He didn’t like the hill and its long-ago hermit who was like a wild animal, and he didn’t like the story about the ghosts. But it was better than being left at the lake,

or in the house, all alone with nothing to do.

“This will be our little secret,” Su Lin said.

“Then let’s swear to secrecy!” Zizi blurted out. Now she had a secret to share with someone!

Su Lin held up the pinkie of her left hand. Su Yang and Zizi hooked their pinkies onto it.

Su Lin chanted: “**Swear to secrecy, now and eternally.**”

“**Swear to secrecy, now and eternally.**” repeated Zizi and Su Yang.

“Let’s go,” said Su Lin. She led the way, walking through the gap in the trees. Su Yang followed her, and Zizi took up the rear. They turned to look back at the safe road behind them one more time before they plunged into the forest of ferns.

• • •

ANOTHER NEW FRIEND

Fortunately for Su Lin, Su Yang and Zizi, the flat ground was hard rock and with only some ferns, grass and small bushes growing on it. It was easy to walk on.

Soon they came to a slope and a high fence. The mesh wire was rusted dark brown, topped by a coil of nasty-looking barbed wire.

“Danger. Steep cliff and deep water. **DO NOT ENTER!**” read a sign tied to the fence. The children looked at one another. The fence snaked up along the slope of the hill and the edge of the quarry. On one side was the path they were on, and on the other the cliff plunged to the lake a long way below. The children shivered with fear, glad for the fence.

From where they were, they could not see the top of the hill.

“The lake is beautiful!” exclaimed Su Lin.

Its water appeared greener from here than from the house. The children could just about make out some water weeds growing under the tranquil surface. A few small plants clung tightly to the sheer wall of rock.

“Do you think there are fish in there?” asked Su Yang.

“I am not going to try to find out!” said Su Lin. “Where do we go now?”

Zizi said, “It should be okay if we keep next to the fence.”

“Yes, it doesn’t look too hard,” said Su Lin. Then she turned to Su Yang and asked, “*Didi*, are you okay?”

Su Yang nodded. Su Lin then looked at Zizi, who also nodded.

They started climbing the trail. It was quite steep.

“Good thing there aren’t many loose rocks,” said Zizi.

“Yes, we wouldn’t want to sprain anything,” said Su Lin. They had to be careful not to injure themselves or they would have some explaining to do. “Careful now, *didi*.”

“Yes, *jie*.”

At the more difficult parts of the path, they helped one another. Su Yang was the slowest, but he tried to not show the strain. Su Lin and Zizi made sure they gave him enough time to catch his breath. At one point, he sat down to rest next to a mound of soil that was almost his height. When he was about put his hand on the mound to push himself up, Zizi shouted, “Don’t touch that, Su Yang—it’s a termite’s nest!” Su Yang quickly drew back his hand. “No one warned me about termites!” he pouted, as the other two laughed.

“And look at those markings on the ground, like some animal has been digging and turning up the soil,” Zizi said. “Those were made by wild boar digging for roots to eat.”

“Wild boar?” Su Yang exclaimed. “Aren’t they dangerous?”

“Not if we keep out of their way,” assured Zizi.

“I am certainly not going near one!” said Su Yang. He reminded himself to keep his eyes and ears peeled from now on!

They continued climbing, leaving the lake further and further below. The path steepened. It was tough going, and hot, even though the trees provided some shade. Very soon they were panting. Sweat poured down their faces. Their hats were wet where they rested on their heads.

Suddenly, they heard the shriek of some birds. They looked up and saw a rush of colours overhead.

“It’s the parrots!” exclaimed Su Lin excitedly.

“The same ones that we saw earlier,” said Zizi.

“They are heading to the top of the hill,” said Su Yang.

“Maybe we will see them there!” said Su Lin.

“Perhaps that’s where they are nesting,” said Zizi.

“We will be able to see them up close then!” said Su Yang.

He was suddenly energised. “Let’s go before they fly off.”

After about 15 minutes, the children had made their way up about a third of the way to the top. Suddenly Su Yang stopped and said, “Look!” Zizi nearly bumped into him, but paused just in time. Su Yang pointed to a fat man who was also climbing the trail.

“Do you think that is the hermit?” Su Yang asked.

“Nah... Grandfather said the hermit left many years ago,” Zizi replied.

Who could also be climbing to the top? How strange! The person was making much slower progress than they were. He stopped every few steps to catch his breath.

“He’s not a man... He’s a boy!” said Su Lin. “A very large boy...”

“You are right!” Zizi exclaimed.

“He is **BIG**,” agreed Su Yang.

“Hey there!” Zizi shouted, cupping her hands round her

mouth to direct her voice.

“Hey there, hey there, hey there...” Her voice echoed back from the cliff on the other side of the quarry.

“There’s an echo!” said Su Yang.

The boy stopped in midstep. He slowly turned round and squinted against the sunlight. When he spotted them, he waved.

“Hello!” he said with a deep booming voice.

“Hello, hello, hello...” the cliff boomed back.

“Wait for us!” Su Yang shouted.



“Wait for us, wait for us, wait for us...” the quarry answered.

Su Yang rushed up, almost running, to where the boy waited. Even though he was tired, the sight of the boy had given him a rush of new energy. The girls scrambled after him as quickly as they could.

“Hi,” said Su Yang when he reached the boy. He panted fast and hard, bending down slightly to catch his breath.

“Hi there,” the boy said. The girls caught up and they exchanged greetings.

All four of them were panting. Sweat streamed down the new boy’s face. He was hiding in the shade of a tall African violet tree whose large brilliant purple flowers were in full bloom.

The boy had a cheerful and slightly mischievous face. He was the same height as Su Lin, who was tall for her age—but three times wider than she was.

Up close, he was even bigger than he had appeared from a distance. He was munching noisily from a packet of prawn crackers that he held in one hand.

“Want some?” he offered them.

The other three declined. They could hardly catch their breath, much less eat.

“Are you going to the top of the hill too?” Su Lin asked.

“Yes. I am going to see if I can see my house from up there.”

“On the mainland?”

“Yes,” said the boy. “I ‘borrowed’ these from my uncle.” He indicated a pair of plastic binoculars hanging from his neck. “Only, he doesn’t know!” He laughed heartily. Then he added solemnly, “I would get a good beating if he found out.”

How awful for the boy! The three didn’t know of adults who beat children.

“I am Su Lin,” Su Lin said. She pointed to her companions.

“This is our friend Zizi and my baby brother Su Yang.”

“Hey!” Su Yang protested. Zizi and Su Lin laughed.

“You are too big to be a baby, and I am too big to be a boy!” he laughed again. “Anyway, I am Basulingam son of Chandrasamy. My mother calls me Basu. My friends call me Bus.”

“As in ‘taxi, MRT or bus?’” asked Zizi. What a strange but cute nickname!

“Yes, a *double-decker* bus,” he laughed some more. He held his arms wide at his side to make himself even wider and added, “You can see why.”

The other three chuckled along with him. What a strange—but nice—boy!

“Let’s go,” said Bus. “But slowly, please!” He turned towards the top again and started walking. The three followed. *How wonderful to have made so many friends in one day*, thought Zizi. She had expected the usual quiet stay with Grandfather. Little had she foreseen having a secret adventure with three people she had only just met!

• • •

BUS'S STORY

The going started to get easier as the slope became less steep near the top of the hill. The four children paused and looked back. The slope below looked steeper from up here than it had when they were at the bottom of the hill. How far they had climbed!

Now that they were no longer so out of breath, they could chat a little.

"My uncle is a security guard at the holiday resort," Bus told them.

"The one near our house?" asked Su Lin.

"Yes. He stays there for six days, then goes home for a day. My mother is visiting my grandmother in Kuala Lumpur. My older brother and two older sisters are busy at work, and because it's the school holidays, my mother asked my uncle if I could stay with him on Pulau Ubin for a few days." He said he didn't like his uncle or being all alone when his uncle was at work.

Bus wore an old but clean tee-shirt with a faded photograph of the Brazilian football star Ronaldo and a pair of rather

worn-out shorts. A rolled-up copy of the football magazine *Score!* stuck out from his back pocket. His running shoes were mud-stained and a big toe was peeking through his left shoe.

For every 20 steps Bus took, he would rest for half a minute. He would then reward himself with a cracker or two.

Finally, they reached the top of the hill.

"Yay!" they all shouted and high-fived one another.

"I thought we would never make it," said Su Yang, gasping for breath.

There was a flat clearing at the summit of the hill. Swifts with forked tails criss-crossed back and forth above them, flying so effortlessly they hardly beat their wings.

At one end of the clearing, four or five trees stood at one corner over the hut they had seen from below. Otherwise, the view was clear in all the other directions.

"What a great view," said Su Lin.

"Don't you think it was worth the climb, Su Yang?" asked Zizi.

"It sure was!"

To one side of the clearing, there was a rough wooden railing. Four or five steps beyond it, the cliff plunged straight down to the turquoise lake.

Su Yang said, "I feel giddy just looking down!" The girls felt their knees go wobbly. They clung tightly to the rickety railing as they peered over the lip of the cliff.

"Don't lean too far out," Su Lin warned, not that anyone was going to do that. It was a long, scary drop to the glistening water far below.

Only Bus stood away from the railing.

"Bus, are you okay?" Zizi asked.

“I can’t stand heights!” Bus explained. “I feel much safer looking from here, thank you!”



“**DANGER!** Do not go beyond the railing!” warned an old battered sign hanging at an awkward angle. The four of them—especially Bus—were not going to ignore it.

“Hey, that’s where we are staying!” Su Lin said excitedly. She pointed to a small cluster of houses crowned by brown roofs of rusty zinc. “I can even see our windows!”

“And that’s Grandpa’s house,” said Zizi.

“That’s the resort where my uncle works,” Bus said, pointing to a cluster of red-roofed yellow buildings round a lake where some people were canoeing. He peered into his binoculars. “He’s not at the security hut at the entrance though. He must be doing his rounds now.”

Further off, they could see the long sausage shape of the green tree-covered island. It spread out below them to the east and west. The island was in the middle of a band of sea, which was almost like a very long lake. Floating fish farms dotted the water.

Boats of all types and sizes were busily moving in and out of the straits at both sides of the island. There was even a giant tanker heading out to the open sea.

“That’s mainland Singapore,” said Zizi pointing south across the water. “See those white blocks of flats to the right? That’s Punggol. And those blocks even further behind that we can only see the tops of are in Sengkang. That’s where I live.”

“Hey, what a coincidence. That’s where we live too!” Su Yang said. “Can we see our flat?”

“No, it’s too far, *di*,” said Su Lin.

“Yes, it’s all hidden behind the houses in Punggol anyway.”

Further along the coastline, they could see the red and white banded tower of the Senoko power station next to the sea.

“And that’s Malaysia,” Zizi said, turning north towards Singapore’s neighbouring country across the sea on the other side. The hill they were on sloped off to the north in a forest. The trees went right up to the shore way below them.

“Chek Jawa is over there,” said Zizi. She pointed in another direction, to the east end of the island where a sand bank lay exposed at low tide. The children were supposed to be there instead of on the hill. “And there are some people there!” she added.

“Everything’s so small from here,” Su Yang marvelled. “The people look like ants.” Tiny specks moved on the beach that were probably people looking at sea creatures left by the tide.

“I see the jetty!” said Su Yang, looking to the south. A boat with several following in its white wake was coming in as another was setting off.

Far beyond the jetty, the red radar tower of the nearby airport could be seen turning round and round.

“Look, a plane is landing!” said Su Yang. A few kilometres away, a large passenger plane was gliding like a graceful eagle towards an unseen runway. Its engines rumbled to them from the distance. Su Yang was disappointed that it was too far for him to make out the logo. He could identify the logo of every airline in the world.

“Bus, can you see your house?” Su Lin asked, looking towards mainland Singapore. Zizi pointed to the apartment blocks of Pasir Ris housing estate.



“Is your house there?” asked Zizi.

But Bus was looking through his binoculars at the opposite side of the island. He was looking *away* from Singapore. He was looking at Malaysia!

“I think I can roughly spot it,” he said, still peering through the binoculars. “Let me see...”

Su Lin, Zizi and Su Yang looked at one another in astonishment. Malaysia was across the sea. It was only slightly further than mainland Singapore on other side of Ubin, and its shore could be clearly seen from where they were. It was quite close, in fact, and the strip of water separating Ubin from Malaysia was narrow enough for elephants to swim across. It was close, but it was another country from Singapore.

“Bus, are you are not from Singapore?” Su Lin asked.

“What gave you the idea I was?” Bus said, finally putting down the binoculars.

“But you never said you were Malaysian!” Zizi exclaimed.

“Because you never asked!” said Bus. “Does that mean you don’t want to be friends with me?” He laughed his big booming laugh.

“Of course we still want to be friends!” Su Yang said quickly. He knew how sad he would feel if no one wanted to be his friend.

Zizi added, “We are all friends now, aren’t we?”

“Yes,” Su Lin said, holding up her left little finger. “Friends forever and ever!”

Zizi hooked hers onto Su Lin’s, then Su Yang followed, and finally Bus. His pinky was almost as big as the three of theirs combined!

“Friends forever and ever!” they chanted. They were all

happy to have found one another.

“So, where’s your house?” Su Lin asked, squinting against the sunlight.

“Somewhere over there...” Bus pointed vaguely in the direction of what looked like a village across the strait. A cluster of big boats was moored in a shipyard not far from the village. A few fish farms floated on the other side of it.

Su Lin could make out the houses in the village, but she was not sure if she could see any people.

“Let me try,” she said, taking the binoculars from Bus.

Now that she could see the houses more clearly, she could vaguely detect roofs and doors. But it was still hard to make out whether there were people there, much less what they were doing.

She shook her head at Bus.

“My friend Cheng said he would wait at the beach and wave to me,” Bus said, kicking at a stone unhappily.

“Let me try! Let me!” said Su Yang. He put the instrument to his eyes. “I don’t see anything...”

Su Lin took the binoculars and turned them the other way round. “Silly boy!” she said. Su Yang had the best eyesight among them, but he was looking through the wrong end! The other three laughed.

Su Yang peered through the binoculars again. “I see some fishing boats. And a police boat!”

Su Lin rolled her eyes.

“*Jie!*” he protested. “Your turn, Zizi.”

Zizi tried using the binoculars with her spectacles on. It didn’t work. She tried again without her spectacles. It worked better, but she also could not make out anyone. “Sorry, Bus.”

She felt bad for her new friend.

“It’s no use... It’s too far,” said Bus dejectedly. He sat down on the ground. By now he was down to his last cracker. He looked at it lovingly before popping it into his mouth. He turned the bag upside down over his palm but only some tiny crumbs fell out. He licked his hand clean, and then threw the bag onto the ground.

“Bus!” Su Lin scolded, and picked it up. She folded it and put it in her pocket. Bus looked puzzled, wondering why she had done that.

Then suddenly he stood up and exclaimed, “Hey, let’s explore the hut!” In an instant, he had forgotten his disappointment.

The kids turned to the ramshackle hut under the trees. Paint had long ago peeled off from its wooden the walls. The corrugated metal roof was badly rusted. Could anything have looked more run-down? The wooden windows on either side of the door were shuttered. They stared out like big eyes looking out for intruders. The big angšana trees round it with their drooping branches also seemed to stand guard against trespassers. The whole place looked unfriendly, and a little scary.

Bus led the way, followed by Su Lin and Zizi. Su Yang brought up the rear reluctantly. He had a bad feeling about what they were doing, and made sure he kept close to the three in front.

• • •

C H A P T E R 7

AN ENCOUNTER WITH A HERMIT

They crossed the clearing towards the hut. Everything was quiet.

Su Lin, Zizi and Bus walked abreast of each other. Su Yang was a step behind.

“**Yeeyakkkkk!**” something shrieked when they were just short of the door.

The children nearly jumped out of their skins. The blood-curdling cry had come from above them, from one of the trees.

“What’s that!?” Su Yang asked.

More cries shot out of the trees. “**Shrieeekkkk! Screeeeech!**”

“The parrots!” said Zizi. The children had totally forgotten about the birds.

“Let’s look for them later after we check out the hut,” said Su Lin. She was the bravest one, so she was first to go up to the door. There was a bracket for a padlock, but no lock on it. She pushed the door. It did not budge.

“It is closed,” she whispered, not knowing why she had lowered her voice. What was she expecting to find inside—

the long-lost hermit?

“The latch looks new,” Zizi whispered. “And the wood on the door around it looks like it has been recently scratched.”

“Maybe there’s someone inside there still?” Bus also whispered as softly as he could. Even then, he was louder than both the girls combined.

“Then I think we’d better leave. He wouldn’t like us barging in on him!”

“And if he’s out, he won’t like us snooping inside,” added Su Yang.

“We are already here,” Su Lin said. “We might as well take a peek.” The hut might have been a little creepy, but it was only a hut, she reasoned.

She turned the knob on the door, which squeaked loudly. Everyone held their breaths, expecting someone to jump out from behind the door. Su Lin turned it fully, looked back at the rest, and pushed. The door slowly swung open.

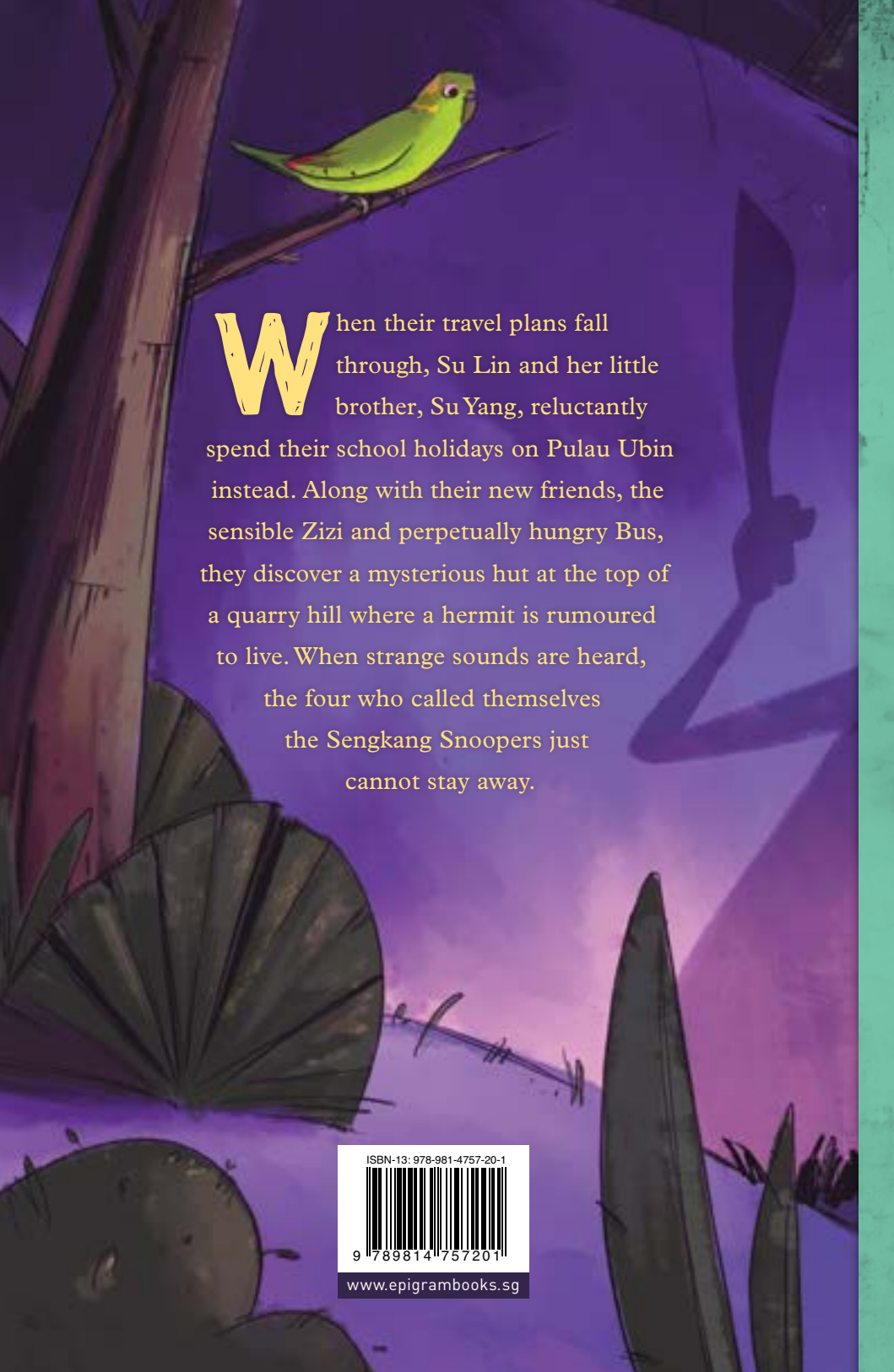
Su Lin stepped inside. The others followed.

The hut was just one big room. The concrete floor was dusty. Against the left wall they could make out a small bed. Two shirts, a pair of trousers and a pair of shorts hung from a clothesline drawn across the corner near it.

“Someone lives here!” said Zizi.

“And cooks here too,” said Su Lin. She indicated the right side of the room. Against that wall, there was a stove and a sink. A big wok and other cooking utensils filled the sink. Some vegetables, canned food and noodles were piled haphazardly next to the sink. The room smelt of smoke and cooking. In the middle of the hut, there were a small square foldable table and two stools. A few plates, cups, forks and spoons were scattered





When their travel plans fall through, Su Lin and her little brother, Su Yang, reluctantly spend their school holidays on Pulau Ubin instead. Along with their new friends, the sensible Zizi and perpetually hungry Bus, they discover a mysterious hut at the top of a quarry hill where a hermit is rumoured to live. When strange sounds are heard, the four who called themselves the Senggang Snoopers just cannot stay away.

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