

# 17A KEONG SAIK ROAD

*A  
Personal  
Story*

CHARMAINE  
LEUNG



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LEUNG

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Singapore

To Mummy,  
and all the amazing women in my life  
who gave me the courage to tell this story

# 1

AFTER MAKING SOME detours, I turned the corner and finally saw the old-school Cantonese family restaurant on Seng Poh Lane. Having left for Hong Kong for almost fifteen years now, everything in Singapore had changed.

There was a feeling that Singapore had arrived. When I left in 1997, Singapore had a population of only two-and-a-half million people. Setting foot on this island again, I returned to a country that had not only doubled in her population size, but whose make-up had also gone through a change.

I noticed people in Singapore walked, spoke, and ate a lot faster. The once slower-paced, sleepier vibe of Singapore had disappeared. Getting lost in the train interchanges was a common occurrence for me. The MRT system that once featured only the uncomplicated linear North-South and East-West lines in the 1990s now sprawled the entire island, and extended into suburban heartlands with names of places I did not know.

One in four people who resided here were foreigners. They lived and interacted with the local community, building their nests in this little city state they now call home. The country looked visibly different. Entire blocks—many of which I had

never seen—had sprung up on reclaimed land, featuring iconic architectural designs that formed Singapore’s new modern skyline along its marina. At times, as I navigated the streets of Singapore, I identified more with the tourist, feeling like a foreigner in my own country.

I had remembered feeling both apprehension and excitement when I was handed the boarding pass at the airport on the day I moved back to Singapore. *Am I ready for Singapore? What am I going back for?* I pondered these questions as I looked out at the layers of clouds in the horizon from my window seat on the plane. The uneven patches of white seemed to echo my unsettled feelings. Unlike most people who relocated for a job opportunity with an intent to eventually return to their home country, venturing to Hong Kong in 1997 was my way of walking away from my old life in search of a new one. I had not planned on returning. I neither consumed news on Singapore, nor kept up with what went on in the country. I simply left Singapore behind, and embraced living in another place. *Singapore must be so different now, will I be able to fit back in?*

I had returned at a time when Singapore had brilliantly moulded herself to welcome the future. It was a picture-perfect Singapore illustrating the advancement and achievements she had made over the years. The new Singapore was everything a person living in a modern city could ask for. I was impressed by all her developments—well-designed malls, luscious greenery in well-sculpted parks, art museums of high international standards, comprehensive transportation system—and enjoyed

the variety and conveniences they brought. Yet it was also a different Singapore.

It was about 7pm now. Business at the restaurant was surprisingly quiet for a Sunday evening. I had managed to get a reservation for a table in the air-conditioned section of the restaurant. When I stepped inside, the first thing that greeted me was the familiar savoury aroma of Chinese cooking, and it reminded me of home. The smell, accompanied by the sounds of food stir-frying in a wok, brought back memories of the delicious, mouth-watering home-cooked food I used to enjoy as a child, bringing a smile to my face. The nostalgic ambience of the restaurant was reminiscent of an old shophouse in Keong Saik Road—the home where I had grown up in.

It was easy to spot her. She was just as I had remembered her to be. Except for a few additional fine lines on her forehead, she had not changed at all. She still had that head of jet-black hair which framed her oval face, and those large eyes that could speak volumes. I felt a pang of remorse as I looked at her. *Why did I let those years pass and not get in touch? What was I thinking?* There, sitting at a table by the side of the small restaurant, beaming at me broadly, was my Je Je. A lady I had spent much of my childhood with, but had not seen at all in the last two decades. Je Je, which means elder sister in Cantonese, was exactly that to me.

“Je, how are you?” I started towards her shyly, and greeted her with the simplest of all greetings.

“I am very well. Come, sit down. How are you?” Je Je responded with a big smile.

“I am very well too.” Suddenly, I felt at a loss for words.

“What have you been up to all these years? It must have been at least fifteen years since we last met!”

“Almost twenty... And I was away in Hong Kong for about fifteen years. I only came back to Singapore three years ago,” I replied sheepishly, and added, “sorry, I did not get in touch until now.”

“Don’t be silly. It’s good you got in touch. I was so surprised to see a message from you on Facebook the other day. I could not believe it was you!”

“I was trying my luck, thankfully I managed to find you, otherwise I wouldn’t know how to locate you. I’ve only got your old pager number! That must belong in a museum now.”

“Hahaha... yes. I think I still have your pager number too.” We laughed at my mention of those old pagers we used to be so proud to own. Je Je added, “I tried to call you some years back, but your home number was no longer in use.”

“We moved and changed our number. Shortly after that, I moved to Hong Kong.”

“How is your mum? She must be in her seventies by now, right? Did she move with you?”

“Yes, she is seventy-seven this year. She is healthy and well, thank you for asking. She visited me in Hong Kong a lot, but never moved there.”

“Wow, fifteen years in Hong Kong! You must have really

enjoyed your time there. I remember how much you liked Hong Kong when you were a kid, you always wanted to go there.” Je Je recalled.

“Je, that was just for holidays! I did not expect to end up working in Hong Kong eventually, and never thought I would live there for so many years. It was not planned, it just happened.”

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I moved to Hong Kong two days before my father’s seventh death anniversary in February 1997. The opportunity to work overseas provided me the excuse to leave Singapore, but deep down inside, it was my restless quest for something more that prompted my departure. I settled in easily, and began my new life with the excitement of a little girl who had just walked into a candy shop. At twenty-four, everything about Hong Kong invigorated me. I was entranced by the energy of Hong Kong. It was even better than I had imagined it to be. Gone was the child who had to listen to the instructions of my parents, I was now a spirited young lady in control of my own life. I was free to decide what was best for me. Although it was the first time I lived on my own, I experienced no anxiety about taking care of myself or being on my own. My newfound independence was liberating, and I thrived on the buzz of Hong Kong’s fast-paced life.

It was an interesting time to be in Hong Kong. The mood was electrifying. Worried Hongkongers who were anxious about Hong Kong’s handover to China and could afford to emigrate had left. Those who remained, either by choice or circumstance, were



generally counting down to the handover with cautious optimism. As a foreigner who had arrived at this timely turn of history, I enjoyed the many perks brought on by the winds of change due to the transition. Many days of public holidays unique to 1997—English holidays before July, and Chinese holidays after July—were added to the work calendar of that year. There was an overall jubilant and celebratory atmosphere in the air with everyone in expectant cheer.

Work was exciting. I travelled to many countries, and met many people from diverse cultures. These work trips vastly broadened my once-myopic view of the world, allowing me to experience a whole dimension of endless novel adventures. I was having the time of my life. I savoured the exhilaration that new experiences in an unknown country brought, and relished in meeting other kindred spirits in my ‘new-to-Hong Kong’ journey, building lasting friendships that stood the test of time.

My relationship with my mother became more amicable. I would pick up the telephone and call her just to ask about the ingredients needed to make a soup. I genuinely missed her and spoke to her because I wanted to hear her voice.

Two years went by. Then, it was five. Before I knew it, I was celebrating a ‘Decade-nce’ party in Hong Kong. There were many parties to go to, and numerous friends to meet up with. My life was extremely busy and fun-filled, and envied by many of my less outgoing friends.

There was no doubt it was in the years which I spent living and working in Hong Kong that many positive changes happened

in my life. But after the parties and the fun, in the quiet of the night, I continued to experience a void. It was an indescribable, unspeakable hollowness that gnawed at my insides. Some days, when I was on my own, it was more evident. Other days, when I was with people, or sucked into the busyness of everyday living, it became masked by the bustling distractions around me. But inadvertently, it was always at times when I was at my peaks of happiness and success—being surrounded by my close friends, or after a hard-earned big promotion—that I found myself experiencing a deep sense of emptiness. It was that same emptiness and sadness I had felt so many years ago when I was alone in my walled city, back in Keong Saik Road.

Back in that shophouse when I was five. I was a little child constantly yearning for my mother, and wanting nothing but her love. The sense of desolation and helplessness was real and unmistakable, heightened further by my fear of the dark. When nightfall came, I would not go close to the corridor that led to the wall that separated me from my mother because I was paranoid about imaginary monsters lurking in the dark. Light only came through that corridor if there was a light in the kitchen or the adjacent room. My mother was always on the other side. Always at 17A Keong Saik Road where she ran a brothel business. Standing at the kitchen window directly opposite from 15A where I lived with a nanny, my mother would hear my pleas for her to come put me to bed. But she seldom made it over, and I would be disappointed again and again.

\* \* \*

Sitting there, Je Je and I looked like two friends, meeting up and having a casual chat with each other over dinner. Onlookers could not have imagined this was a reunion of two sisters after two decades of separation, reliving the adventures of our childhood, and filling in the gaps of those years when we were apart. This lady sitting in front of me now was such an integral part of my earlier life. Without her, I would have been a much sadder child fending for myself in an adult's world.

Like a sweeping wind, twenty years had fled by without us realising. We had lost so much precious time that we could have spent with each other. *I am so glad we reconnected, I do not want to lose you again.* I thought to myself as I sat there with my Je Je reminiscing the years in Keong Saik.



## Author's Note

FROM THE FIRST moment when I thought of writing a book about my family as an angsty teenager, it has taken me three decades to bring this project to fruition. Sharing this story took a lot of courage, especially when my entire childhood and adolescence had been shrouded in shame. Yet, I felt compelled to do so. This is not just my story, or my family's story. I feel it is a people's story. I hope readers will find in this book interesting bits that they did not know about Singapore and the people who had gone before us. Then, I would have given a voice to the things, and the people, who may have long been forgotten, or left unknown in the past. This book would not have been possible without the support and help of many people. I am unable to list every one of them, but I would like to thank especially:

Suki Lie, my best friend—for her continuing love and belief in me, and for always having my back; the team at Ethos for their great support, especially Fong Hoe Fang and Ng Kah Gay, my publishers—for having faith in my story and me, and Kum Suning, my editor—for taking me on this extraordinary ride, and her great passion and dedication to this project; Chan Hwei Ling—for reading my manuscript; Jessica Kusuma—for understanding

my story and creating an awesome book cover design ([www.theprojecteur.com](http://www.theprojecteur.com)); Edwin Koo—for capturing me at my best ([www.captured.com.sg](http://www.captured.com.sg)); Tan Lee Song—for the beautiful sketches in the book; Shirlene Noordin—for her friendship and advice on matters relating to marketing communications; Lee Kok Leong—for sharing with me his knowledge on Ma Je; and Carmen Chau—for connecting me to a wonderful publisher. And, to all the amazing people whom I have met in my life's journey for teaching me about life and living.

This memoir is based on my memories, and my interpretations of the experiences I had, as well as the memories of the people who are featured in this book. Some names of individuals have been changed to protect their privacy. For conciseness, I have in some cases condensed the series of events; in others, I have created a character based on the lives of two persons I knew. Where non-English words are not transliterations from Mandarin, Malay, or Hokkien pronunciations, their spellings have been derived from Cantonese pronunciations.

I have drawn heavily from the oral accounts of the Yim Hong character and my mother for information on the Pei Pa Zai and Dai Gu Liang, and the brothel trade in Keong Saik Road in general, and also used Chan Kwee Sung's *One More Story To Tell: Memories of Singapore, 1930s~1980s*, and Lee Kok Leong's 《广东妈姐》 (*Guangdong Ma Jie*) for fact references on Ma Je and life in Singapore before the 1980s.

Charmaine Leung  
May 2017

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# 17A KEONG SAIK ROAD

*Mummy, why do you always have to leave for 17A...*

*17A Keong Saik Road* recounts Charmaine Leung's growing-up years on Keong Saik Road in the 1970s when it was a prominent red-light precinct in Chinatown in Singapore. An interweaving of past and present narratives, *17A Keong Saik Road* tells of her mother's journey as a young child put up for sale to becoming the madame of a brothel in Keong Saik. Unfolding her story as the daughter of a brothel operator and witnessing these changes to her family, Charmaine traces the transformation of the Keong Saik area from the 1930s to the present, and through writing, finds reconciliation.

A beautiful dedication to the past, to memory, and to the people who have gone before us, *17A Keong Saik Road* tells the rich stories of the Ma Je, the Pei Pa Zai, and the Dai Gu Liong—marginalised, forgotten women of the past, who despite their difficulties, persevered in working towards the hope of a better future.



ISBN 978-981-11-3066-3



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