



*Cherry  
Days*  
DAVID LE O

“If growing up means it would be beneath my dignity to climb a tree, I’ll never grow up, never grow up, never grow up! Not me!”

—J. M. Barrie

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# 1

## Big Bear, Lion & Me: THE ROAD THAT LED TO NOWHERE

THE road led to nowhere. A road that I remember most vividly. But that road, *our* road, is no more. The physical landscape has changed drastically, traversed by new thoroughfares that are immeasurably wider. Our kampong has been eradicated, buried beneath a busy highway. No one will know that it ever existed, because our road had no name. Who needed a name anyway, when the mail always reached us? Of course, we were blissfully ignorant about any letter that might have gone astray. The postman, riding a bicycle, was a rare sight; oddly his oversized khaki topi seemed heavier than his brown canvas mailbag. My cousin, whose family had moved to Christmas Island, somewhere near Australia, said nobody on the island needed a house address but his or her name to receive mail. And that was talking about a whole island which, I imagined, must be larger than our little kampong. I would not have known about migratory crabs crawling uninvited into their home had we not received the photos she sent. Surely, if creatures can always find their way across the land, man can do a better job.

Perhaps our road was not meant to be a road, just an open space between two rows of terrace houses—seven on our side and six across. Occasionally a straying motorist brought

some excitement only to back away hastily from our awkward glares, the wheels of the cars stirring up dusty plumes as they screeched and scratched the gravel. Numbers made us intimidating, and we must have looked like hostile aliens on a different planet waiting to devour an unfortunate earthling intruder, whose encroachment only drew us closer together to protect our enclave and preserve our privacy.

*This is our place.*

And this, our road, that ended abruptly at the verge of a field of overgrown lallang where, we were warned, snakes lurked in the tall grass. On wet nights after the rain, when the air became suddenly still and the cool relief hung like soaked blankets on a sagging clothes line, we could hear the frogs croaking choruses of gratification. Frankly, I couldn't tell if they were frogs or toads. My brother Lion said toads were the poisonous ones, but that didn't help just by listening to their hoarse, throaty croaks. He also said toads had warts, but I never saw them close enough to notice the difference. It was amazing how they survived attacks from the snakes. I would feel the tension in the air, as if I were out there. Late into the night I stayed up listening to the monotone, held in the suspense of expecting a dramatic shift in the dicey state of play, wondering when those imaginary soaked blankets would break loose and stir the still air from its complacency. However, the croaking turned out to be strangely lulling, and I slept without knowing.

You could literally lie flat in the middle of our road and not worry about being run over by a vehicle 99.99 per cent of the time. You must be very suay if it happened. So few were the occasions when a vehicle came up the road with a purpose that I could count them on one hand plus a finger or two—the

day that Cousin Soon and then Wang Boo got married, thrice when an ambulance flashing a rotating blue light responded to an emergency, and that one most exciting time of all when a fire truck screamed its way to an abrupt halt at the dead end. The urgency sounded by the siren was enough to thrill. Unless he is stone deaf, no one ignores the wail of a fire truck. We spilled onto the road and raced alongside the truck. There was no blaze, only some grey rings of smoke dancing between the blades of grass, smouldering, rising and soon afterwards dissipating. The firemen in their distinguished bright yellow helmets stood around and puffed on Lucky Strike and 555 cigarettes. They were strangely composed, completely unruffled, while we gathered around and waited with them, as if half-wishing the fire would resuscitate. It would be a treat to see the rescuers raise the giant water hose and watch the gushing stream, though I couldn't be sure from where they would draw water. There wasn't any fire hydrant where our road ended, nor anywhere nearby. I was told the truck carried a tank of water. If so, it couldn't be much. If the lalang field were engulfed in fire, we would need many more trucks.

IN many ways, our hamlet was not a "real" kampong like the one to which my parents took me when we visited some relatives. Ours was too small; the real kampong that I knew commanded a larger area and had more than thirteen dwellings. The larger community could muster an impressive gotong royong, the communal spirit of helping each other that has become less prevalent, if not lost, in urban Singapore.

Our kampong was too neat, too structured according to plan; the real one was shaped by dwellings in haphazard plots of different sizes. Though ours was in a way secluded, it was

situated too close to the main thoroughfare, unlike the real kampong, hidden in some remote wooded area, a clearing in a forest with an abundance of coconut trees and other fruit-bearing trees that we don't see nowadays, trees such as the jambu ayer, chiku and duku. A tour of the vegetation was the highlight of any visit, but I had to be satisfied with picking only chillies and low-hanging guava. I often wondered about the hazard of a coconut falling on someone's head or breaking the thatched roof. Worse, if it were a thorny durian. But I was told it never happens. Those fruits have eyes; they see and know when and where to fall.

There were lots more creatures roaming about freely in a real kampong—dogs, cats, geese, ducks, chickens, turkeys, goats and even cows. Some villagers also reared pigs, which were usually kept in enclosures. The villagers never had to buy eggs, but sold them at the market instead. They were early risers, waking to the crow of the rooster, not the startling and irritating sound of the alarm clock that we have grown accustomed to and learnt to ignore. But the roosters in our kampong had lost their sense of timing: I had heard them cock-a-doodling at four in the afternoon.

Living in a real kampong meant getting used to being bitten by pestering mosquitoes and wearing the bites on your limbs like birthmarks as large as a ten-cent coin. Fortunately our kampong was not that badly infested.

The real kampong had no paved roads like the one we had, and the ground easily became all soggy and muddy on wet days. The villagers dwelt in huts built of wood with thatched roofs that were covered with dried attap leaves, but some houses had zinc roofs that beat like drums in the rain. The huts were raised on stilts in case incessant rain brought the flood. Getting from one place to another was a matter of



habit and familiarity with the spaces between the trees and the huts, and an intricate pattern of nooks and corners. If someone should drive a vehicle, he would go wherever the open space permitted him, manoeuvring between sauntering human beings, wandering animals and all kinds of obstructing inanimate objects.

We were therefore more fortunate residing in a modern environment, where there were fewer mosquitoes, less chance of a flood when it poured, and a paved road. Nevertheless we were a kampong in spirit, the essence of a community bonded like one big family imbued with the enthusiasm of gotong royong. There was no stranger in our midst, though all too often we had indiscreetly, perhaps unwittingly, looked upon everyone else's business as our own.

IN our kampong, only Han Bo the dentist who lived on the opposite row owned a car, an old Morris Minor which had been repainted from its original black to a neutral blue. His wife would have preferred red for good luck. Han Bo parked the vehicle in a vacant strip behind his house adjacent to the trunk road whose name, Tank Road, became our legal address. We seldom saw Han Bo because he used a back door to get to his car.

Tank Road conjured up images of heavy armoured vehicles rolling towards the official residence of the British Governor, known as Government House during the Japanese occupation. During the war, the opulent ground was occupied by Japanese commanders whose names were synonymous with tyranny, torture and terror.

I imagined the Japanese victors shouting *Banzai* and waving their flags as they paraded towards the seat of power. Thankfully the harsh picture of terror was tempered by a ring

of majestic traveller's palms that decorated the roundabout where Tank Road met Orchard Road, their leaves fanning out in a show of unity and harmony like the fingers of a hand, as if it had been so arranged by design.

Government House was the epitome of grandeur that never failed to arouse my childhood curiosity about what lay behind the formidable gate and its wall. It was a world of its own. I saw no spire or turret, just huge bushes and trees, the deep space inside and beyond shrouded in mystery. The vast land was said to be once part of a nutmeg plantation that lined Orchard Road, whose name suggests beautiful floral and luxuriant fruit gardens. In fact, our road was more accurately an offshoot of Orchard Road, but any hint of an arboretum was clearly a misnomer for our corner of subsistence, which seemed to have been forgotten by the city planners. No matter, for this was a place where we felt safe; our main doors were seldom shut in the day. If indeed we were being bypassed by the bustling that enveloped the world outside, we never felt prejudiced, deprived or abandoned.

It was our oyster, a stone's throw from the seat of power. We were as far from and as near to grandeur as we chose. Westward, Orchard Road was lined with fashionable shops, popular eateries and modern buildings such as Hotel Singapura. The road continued eastwards to where Cathay cinema loomed and the famed Rendezvous restaurant (that served spicy local Malay nasi padang cuisine) flourished. Further away on Stamford Road stood the YMCA, which became a Kempeitai operations centre during the war. Here, some of the most atrocious war crimes were reportedly committed. Heading in a different direction, we could enjoy a walk up Tank Road to King George V Park whose main attraction for me was the mammoth floral clock on its slope.

This beautiful stretch of greenery had earned the unfortunate moniker of “mosquito-bites-leg” park.

Our road became our playground, an open space where we ran, skipped and screamed; where we played improvised football long before street soccer was recognised as an urban sport; and where the girls jumped hopscotch and the boys fought. It was where in moments of creativity when we couldn't think of something more boisterous to do we exhibited our artistic skills, using only white chalk since the coloured ones were too expensive. During the Chinese New Year festivity, the road turned scarlet with a litter of spent firecrackers. Then on the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month when we celebrated the Mid-Autumn Festival, it was a mystifying trail of lights as the children held a parade of multi-hued paper lanterns to amuse the adults while they sat in the verandahs, sipping tea and eating mooncakes stuffed with lotus paste. This road was where residents from opposite sides met halfway for chit-chats, and where they shouted greetings from an upstairs window to someone below. It was where chickens roamed, pecking between loose gravel for grubs, and where the household cats and dogs, along with the strays, stretched out lazily on the warm sun-baked asphalt ground, in perfect harmony.

It was the most peaceful place on earth.

The lallang field was an extended playground for the boys, who were unafraid of snakes in the grass and unbothered by the nuisance of pestering insects. It was where we caught fighting spiders and kept them in matchboxes with a hibiscus leaf for food. Only one spider was to be housed in each box, punctured with tiny holes for air. Glossy ones with red eyes and long steady legs that could raise their rears above their heads were the prized pursuits. It was there in the lallang field

where, after a spell of tropical rain, in the huge longkang on the farther side of the large expanse we caught little guppies with our bare hands if we didn't have a milk tin to scoop them up. The fish were beautiful, streaked with the colours of a rainbow. The dining table became that much more interesting with them swimming in a food jar, but sadly they seldom survived for more than a couple of days though we were generous with the bread crumbs that we continually popped into the bottle until the water became cloudy. Who had ever heard that too much food could kill? It was a sad moment each time one of the guppies turned belly-up, and we waited fervently for the next tropical storm to arrive.

The highlight of the lallang field was a huge cherry tree which bore tiny fruit no bigger than a cat's eye. The tree was tall and shady, shaped like an umbrella. It was our tree of boyish delight, the tree of our growing up. The fruit turned from green to mustard and finally crimson when ripe, and tasted sweet and musky. No one really ate the cherries, except the birds, bats and boys from our kampong. My brothers, Big Bear and Lion, were adept at climbing the tree and harvesting the crop. For the smaller boys who could not climb high enough, it was a treat to tail the bigger boys. We ate the cherries as they were picked, unwashed, and spat out the minute yellow seeds. And no one ever complained about a stomachache.

Out in the field, we were the musketeers, comrades-in-arms and friends forever. One for all, and all for one. If someone spotted impending danger in the shape of a policeman, he would screech "Mata!" The boys would then scurry down the tree or jump off the branches and run like the wind home. We weren't sure if climbing trees was a public offence, but we were taking fruits and we didn't know if they belonged to anyone. We had seen policemen on their beat, attired in grey flannel

shirts and stiff khaki shorts, brandishing their truncheons. All they needed to do was growl to get us scampering.



BIG Bear fell off the cherry tree once and broke his arm. Mother was disconcerted, almost hysterical. Outwardly, she seemed more angered by the mischief than concerned about the injury, but I knew she was worried deep down. She had enough on her plate with my father out at sea most of the days of our lives. He worked on board a ship that sometimes took a couple of months or more before he returned to shore for only a few hours or at most a day or two. If he stayed longer than that, it meant he had lost his job and was waiting for a new assignment. We soon became accustomed to his absence.

Big Bear tried to hide the pain behind his grimace; he had always been brave about everything. He was the kampong boys' hero, and I had never seen him cry. Mother worried endlessly about him getting into trouble, mixing with bad company and running away from home. But by his defiance, he picked up many skills, like learning to swim in spite of my mother's exhortation that forbade him to go anywhere near a pool even if he insisted there was always a lifeguard on duty. Better be safe than saved. The monsoon drain nearer home could be more hazardous after a tropical storm, but my mother never knew when we would be out there fishing. Yet could it be *that* perilous if adults brought little kids there to float paper boats? I suppose being nearer home had an assumed safety valve that provided some comfort. But Big Bear was determined to venture farther afield, and brought Lion along with him to the River Valley Swimming Pool. Mother only discovered his derring-do when Nenek who lived in the same house gave the game away, drawing Mother's attention

to the skimpy swimming trunks hanging on the line in the courtyard. Big Bear had himself to blame, as the blazing red trunks were dripping wet when he hung them to dry, and that annoyed Nenek when she noticed water streaming across the floor. Mother went berserk, and reiterated her objection to Big Bear swimming, although she knew he would do it again.

I never had the chance to go along with Big Bear and Lion to the pool. I badly wanted to learn to swim, but they made it clear it would be difficult to look after me, and I might drown. It was not worth the risk and it would break my mother's heart. Yet Big Bear would always challenge me to be brave.

It is a boy's thing to be brave.

But first, learn to climb the cherry tree.

I was afraid to go above the first branch, too scared to look down and know how far up I had climbed. I feared the branch would break under me although I was too skinny to be asserting any discernible weight on it. There were other hazards. What if I encountered a snake up there? Snakes climb trees, don't they? Perhaps I should spare a thought for the birds competing with us for the fruit. I worried most about the mata approaching and not being able to get down in time. And I was constantly mindful of my mother's remonstrance about getting into mischief. Three rebellious boys might be stretching her patience and anxiety to the limits.

Big Bear held his broken arm with the good hand as Mother studied the injury. She knew at once he needed help. "What shall we do now?" she cried. "You know, your father isn't home!"

But she was far from being helpless. It just didn't seem fair she should be shouldering total responsibility for our mischief. She always knew precisely what to do even under the most

demanding circumstances. She took Big Bear to the physician who lived a few doors away. That was the fortuitous beauty of living in our kampong. When you needed emergency advice from a dentist, you could go see Han Bo, who would give you an aspirin, then advise you to drop in at his clinic located in some other part of the island. Han Bo was the father of Four Eyes, who could read English if anyone needed a document from some government department interpreted. Or help write one in response. Almost always there was someone with a special skill in times of need, from mending a shoe that had lost its sole to fixing a broken chair or bicycle. In those days you never threw away stuff. That was why when you bought a Raleigh, you intended to keep it for life. And now that we needed someone to mend Big Bear's broken arm, Mr Ma, who was not really a doctor but a Chinese *sinseh*, would do the job. He was a stern-looking old man with a wispy beard, and he used to operate a small Chinese medicine counter in Chinatown but had retired from the business although he still dispensed herbs from his home. According to Mr Ma, all ailments were the outcome of the body being "too heaty or too cool." It was the yin and yang of Chinese healing. People came to consult him through word of mouth, but he also hung on his window a sign in bold Chinese characters about his special capability to mend broken bones. Beneath the Chinese words was the English translation provided by Four Eyes: Bone manipulator. Impressive words, so oddly out of place in a kampong.

Lion and I trailed Mother and Big Bear to Mr Ma's home clinic, amidst the gazes of inquisitive neighbours. That was the kind of excitement our kampong thrived on: everybody got involved in some way or another when something happened, even as silent bystanders. Parents reminded their children to learn from the "bad" example of Big Bear. "That's

what happens to naughty boys!” But Big Bear remained his playmates’ hero. He might have fallen from a tree, but the unfortunate experience actually raised his status and he was still their best climber. Soon every child had a story to tell of his personal adventure, the near misses and how he too nearly fell and broke his arm as if there was this uncanny wish to be similarly celebrated.

Lion and I stood quietly outside Mr Ma’s house. Mother and Big Bear were inside for a long time, and then I heard my eldest brother groaning in pain. It must be excruciating, or he would not have uttered a sound. I thought I felt it too. I looked at Lion. He might have felt it too. For a brief moment, I was relieved to be distracted by his handsome features. He was blessed with a rich head of hair that he groomed with pride, the tuft perpetually gleaming with Brylcreem, and I was convinced it must be why my parents decided to name him Lion.

Lion placed a comforting hand on my shoulder. We waited in silence for Mother and Big Bear to reappear. It was getting late. I imagined the ghosts would soon be flying about in the haunted house situated at the end of our row. Everyone in the kampong had heard a macabre tale or two about the deserted, dilapidated and “unclean” house. Yet for the years that we had lived in the kampong, no one had reported any encounter with a *real* ghost.

I wondered too if the dogs would soon be howling, but was comforted to see only a faint sliver of the moon in the sky. We were told that dogs howl when the moon is full. Big Bear had stopped whining. In a short while, he emerged ahead of Mother, wearing a bandage, a sling and a grin. That was how brave he was. Mother followed with a bottle of ointment, which was a pungent herbal concoction, some of which had



been applied around Big Bear's broken arm. I could see the dark greenish tint in the bandage. As soon as he saw Lion, Big Bear swung his other arm to punch him playfully. Mother came between them immediately.

“We've had enough trouble for the day!”

Big Bear laughed. There was no trace of regret for what had happened. He was not one to submit easily to fear, and before long, he would be back up on the cherry tree.



THE road that led to nowhere had been our road to growing up as boys. It had opened up a world of adventures, from trapping belligerent spiders hiding on the underside of hibiscus leaves to playing Tarzan on the cherry tree to bottling colourful guppies in the longkang. There, in the open grassland, danger was a word we were apt to forget. Our childhood would not have been complete if we had not taken the challenge to step beyond where the unnamed road ended abruptly. You might say it *did* lead somewhere. The lallang field was nature's gift to the poor boys of the kampong, and we had never felt the deprivation of toys for diversion. Those were the days when we embraced all that nature had to offer and invented our own games.

That evening, as we walked home, I could see fireflies in the distance. I believed they were dancing for us, tiny balls of flame making intricate patterns across the descending darkness. And we forgot about the snakes lurking in the grass. Thankfully there was no sound of hissing to remind us of their presence. No croaking of frogs or toads either. No chirping of crickets. The lallang field was all quiet, its dark silhouettes a picture of serenity in the dimming light, as imposing as its defined outlines in the bright sunlight during the day when it was a picture of unbridled delight. This was our home, our happy home. I had no desire to live anywhere else.