

NOT  
THE  
SAME  
FAMILY

RUSS SOH

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## Preface

The title of this collection of stories is inspired by a quib from one of the characters from the popular American cartoon series which features a group of kids and a dog. In one particular strip, this perpetually grouchy girl was seen browbeating her feckless kid brother, by dismissing him with the line, “Brothers and sisters should not be in the same family!” That statement, to me, underscores the human dilemma that has entrapped families since time immemorial. For no matter how much one may wish not to be part of the family one is in, there is absolutely nothing anyone can do about it. It’s like that other advice to “make a better choice of your parents.” One can no more choose one’s parents than one can choose one’s siblings. They are who they are, and whom one has been given. All one can do is to live in the best way possible with what one has, because of them — or in spite of them.

In *Not The Same Family*, you'll come across different individuals from different families, each trying to find his or her way forward. Maybe you'll recognise one or more of the families. Perhaps you might even catch a glimpse of yourself and your own family in one or more of these stories! For in truth, while they might be “not the same family”, they could collectively be representative of one big family — the universal family.

*Russ Sob*

**T**o Chiew, who gave me licence to goof off from regular work, and indulge in my passions. To Lin, who egged me on, telling me that I had read enough about writing, and that it was time I started writing. And to Ming, who reminded me that writing is very much like making music — you can't just think about it; you have to actually do it.

## Visiting Brother

The hold on my hand tightened into a grip. I felt a twitch, then a tug, as I was almost yanked up from where we were both sitting side by side. My arm quivered in tandem with hers. As I rose, I stole a glance upwards at her face, and caught the beginning of a smile.

“There he is!”

“Where, Ma?”

“There! There! Opposite. In front of the shop. Walking. There, with Auntie Chong. Holding her hand.”

“I can’t see clearly. You sure that’s him, Ma?”

“Of course I’m sure! Don’t I know my own son?”

We had travelled for more than two hours to get to where we were. A long trek down the dusty dirt path from our rented hut deep in Lorong 27, a long wait for the ride in the tram-car from Geylang Road, and a transfer at Victoria Street to Rochor Road, to near the junction of Bukit Timah Road, and what is now Balmoral Road.

We had planned the visit days earlier. Or rather, Mum had. She had confided in me, and told me I could

skip school, just for the day, to accompany her. Sis, two years older than me, could not come along, as she had some test or other in school. Dad, I can't recall now whether he was on one of his sporadic work-trips as a labourer to Christmas Island, or was he just intentionally kept out of the expedition.

So there we were, at the bus stop, keeping an eye on the traditional Chinese medicine shop, on the opposite side of Bukit Timah Road, with its constant rush of traffic. Or rather, Mum was. I was simply sitting there on the bench, holding her hand, and trying to keep count of the number of lorries passing by. Until the appearance of the pair across the street, I had no real idea why we were sitting and waiting, instead of getting on with what we had come to do — visit my little brother.

“We have to wait,” she had said.

“Wait for what, Ma?”

“For Auntie Chong to bring him out for us to see.”

“When? How?”

“Soon, hopefully soon. She said she'll either carry him, or walk with him across the front of the shop.”

“But why like this, Ma? Why not just now when we were there?”

“Because...” she sighed, “because they don't want us there when they bring him out!”

“But why not? Isn't that what we came here for, to see him?”

“Yes. But Auntie Chong doesn't want him to see us.”

“Why not?”

“She’s afraid that he may not react well on seeing us — on seeing me.”

“What do you mean, Ma?”

“It’s difficult for you to understand, Kim Poh,” she was sniffing now, “I’ll try to explain it to you another time. Anyway, they are his parents now. And they can do what they like with him.”

As a six-year-old, it did strike me as odd that my brother would have a different set of parents. I had known, as Mum had explained to me earlier, that my brother, four years younger than me, had been “given away”. His new parents had their own business, and were in a much better position to take care of him and give him a better life. Plus, we needed the money. Or rather, “Your father said we needed the money,” she had added.

An hour earlier, we had been on the other side, at the medicine shop, chatting with the couple. Or rather, Mum was chatting with them, while I was perched on a high stool, arms folded atop the glass tabletop, surveying the array of herbs and medicine displayed below.

“How is he?” Mum had ventured tentatively, after the preliminary pleasantries.

“Oh, he is well, very well,” said the man, nodding. He appeared to be much older than my own father. Mum had instructed me to address him as “Uncle”. I figured he must be the “new father”, the Uncle Chong that Mum had told me about earlier.

“Is he eating well?”



“Yes, very well,” said the woman, who looked older — much, much older — than Mum, and plump, and nowhere near half as pretty. I was to address her as “Auntie”.

“And milk? Is he still drinking?”

“Yes, a lot.”

“And sleep. Is he sleeping well?”

“Everything very well!” the woman glared at Mum.

“Yes, yes, all very well. Not to worry,” echoed Uncle Chong, his head bobbing up and down, a grin on his face.

“Can I see him?”

There was silence.

Auntie Chong turned to look at Uncle Chong, and he looked back at her. Then they both moved to the back of the shop, where they appeared to be conferring. After a while, Uncle Chong came back to the front, and said something to Mum, which I either could not hear or did not comprehend. But I could see from Mum’s face that it was probably not what she had expected. She bit her lips. Her eyes started to redden. Where there had been a hint of a smile before, a sullenness had appeared, as she started to absorb the reality of what she had just been told.

She started to gesticulate, and murmured something. Uncle Chong, looking a little ill at ease, turned to look at Auntie Chong. Arms akimbo, she glowered at him. He turned back to Mum, shaking his head, mumbled something, and then moved to the back of the shop, as though he had suddenly remembered something he needed to attend to.

Mum turned her eyes away from the back of Uncle Chong, to look for Auntie Chong, but all she could see was her receding back.

She stood there transfixed, her shoulders drooping. Her head turned from the back of Auntie Chong to Uncle Chong's, then back in the direction of Auntie Chong, and back again. Unable to engage either one of them, she turned and found me with her eyes. Those eyes, which only a short while ago had carried in each a hint of a sparkle, were now red, and seemed to be begging me to tell her what to do next.

I got down from my perch, walked the few steps to Mum, reached out for one of her hands, looked up at her face that now seemed lost and frightened, and said to her the only words I knew how, "Ma, are you alright? Are you alright?"

She looked down at me, started to utter something, but then seemed to change her mind. After a while, she patted my head with one hand, and with the other still clasped in mine, she steered us out of the shop, across the road, to the bus stop. Where we had been for the last hour or so.

After another quarter hour or so, it seemed all that waiting had not been in vain. A small child was now being paraded in front of the shop, ambling hand in hand with a fat woman. I could not make out the face, but Mum seemed to know instantly who it was. She rushed to the front of the bus-stop, as though she was going to cross the road again, leaving me behind. But she stopped at the edge, held on to the railings, and leaned forward, as

though trying to get a closer look. At the same time, a series of muffled mewls started to issue from the front of the bus-stop.

Across the street, the woman and the child reached the end of the footpath in front of the row of shophouses. They turned around, strolled across in the opposite direction, reached the other end, and then turned back. Reaching the centre of the row, they entered the medicine shop and disappeared into the back of the shop.

The visit was over, as soon as it had begun.

But Mum lingered, holding on to the railings, her back to me. I did not understand why, after the pair had disappeared for what seemed like a long time, she was still at her post. The whimpers continued, now a bit louder, and with shorter intervals. Then her whole body shook, her shoulders slumped, and the whimpering turned into one long continuous wail.

I rushed to her, barely succeeding to wrap my arms around her waist, and planted one side of my head on her quivering back. She raised an arm up to her face, let it drop down by her side, and then did the same with the other. I could see that both sleeves of her grey cotton *samfoo* top were wet in patches. She moved both arms to the front again, and I could feel the shuddering of her arms slowly subside. I heard the sound of a nose being blown, hard. Then she turned around, looked down at me, patted me on the head again, and said, “Okay, let’s go home.”

She did not utter another word all the way home.

A few months later, I found myself bundled with Mum and Sis into a taxi headed for what I was told was called Batu Pahat, in the state of Johore, in what was then Malaya. It was a long journey, much longer than what the earlier visit took. The taxi, like others at that time, had no air-conditioning, and it was stopped frequently at police checkpoints. We travelled through the night and arrived in the morning at the kampong house of our aunt, a real blood-related aunt, I was told. Sis and I were exhausted.

But not Mum. She was a bundle of energy. First one out of the taxi, she rushed towards the small group gathered to receive us, knelt and put her arms around a boy, much smaller and younger looking than me. He looked vaguely familiar to me. As Mum hugged him, and planted kisses on each side of his cheeks, he looked bewildered and uncomfortable. He looked like he was going to cry or trying to break loose. But Mum was beside herself, much too engrossed to notice. In between raining smooches on him, she was cooing with delight and apparent satisfaction, “Kim Chye, Kim Chye.”

The days following that morning were glorious ones. Sis and I did not have to go to school. We had our cousins, all older than us, to play with, and a vast kampong compound to stage games in. Aunt Sung was a great cook and a generous host. At every meal, there were the heavenly-smelling, bouncy and tasty beef balls made by, I was told by my cousins, their father, the best beef ball chef in Batu Pahat.

And Mum never looked happier. She busied herself with Kim Chye, almost to the point of neglecting Sis and me — not that we were complaining. He seemed to have gradually lost his initial shyness and discomfort with each passing day. And he even joined our cousins, Sis and me in some of our games.

The appearance of my little brother in this faraway place after that strange visit did seem a bit magical, but I did not dwell on the thought for long. I was having fun, and was happy to see Mum looking happy. I still could not forget that forlorn looking face back at Bukit Timah Road.

Nor did it occur to me then to ask why Dad was not with us. I was used to Dad having to be away for work, “to earn some money to feed us.”

One evening, while Mum and her three kids were ensconced, ostensibly asleep, in the bedroom set aside for us, I could hear muffled voices coming from the adjoining bedroom. I was only half asleep. Through the gaps in the plank walls, I could barely make out snippets of the conversation going on next door. I thought I heard someone say, “Kim Chye will have to be returned to his foster parents, now that the money is paid.” I heard another voice saying, “But hasn’t it been paid before?” “Yes,” I could recognise Auntie’s voice now, even though it was low, “but this is for this round.”

Two days after this overheard conversation, Mum, Sis and I returned to our home in Singapore. When I asked Mum about Kim Chye, all she could tell me, in a very dejected tone, was that it was time for him to go back to Uncle and Auntie Chong.

Several weeks later, Mum and I made another trip to Bukit Timah Road. On arrival at the row of shophouses, we found the Chinese medicine shop all shuttered up. Our rapping on the shutters and our shouts for Mr and Mrs Chong met with dead silence. A check with the neighbours revealed that the Chongs had moved away suddenly, “in a hurry”, a few weeks earlier, leaving behind no forwarding address.

We never saw my brother again. And I had never seen Mum smile again since.