

PLAYBOY

a novel



*"We are less equal because
we allow ourselves to be ..."*

JIM TAN

PAYOH

JIM TAN

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY MORGAN CHUA



Payoh
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To Carol, my intrepid partner in this journey called life

“The more you are in the right the more natural that everyone else should be bullied into thinking likewise.”

George Orwell (1903-50)
Lear, Tolstoy and the Fool
Polemic No. 7 (March 1947)

To the Reader

Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading *Payoh*. You may be interested to know that the first line of the original manuscript was written back in April, 2001. It was a difficult time in my life. I was unemployed and in debt. I rang up the Inland Revenue Department to ask if I could defer my income tax payment until I found another job. The officer replied that I could, but I would have to pay interest on any overdue amount.

Years later, when my publisher at Ethos Books asked me what inspired me to write *Payoh*, I dug into my memory, all I could remember was this particular incident, being told that I had to pay interest on my overdue income tax when I was in financial straits. The officer was polite. She was merely pointing out the rules and regulations. I did not argue. Instead I sat down and wrote a book.

As you can imagine, the original manuscript was bitter bile, but over the years I have aged and mellowed and when my editors, Ming Yen and Kah Gay suggested that I revise the story, I willingly did five revisions to make it more palatable. What I hope to convey in this book is that any form of extremism, even with the best and most noble intention, is a dangerous thing. Perfection is vanity.

Sincerely,

Jim KC Tan

January 2017



1

THE FOOD court, as expected, is packed with diners this time of the evening.

I do not like food courts, hawker centres, or for that matter, any crowded places. I prefer a quiet dinner at home. But it is the maid's day off and I am forced to visit eateries like these. Frankly, I often cannot tell the difference between one food court and another. Unlike the traditional hawker centres and coffee shops – which I find to have more colour and character – food courts in Singapore are uniformly bland and boring. They offer the same ambience and the same fare mass produced in the factories in Senoko, but are preferred by the younger generation for the air conditioned comfort. For pragmatic Singaporeans, economy of scale prevails and food courts have become a way of life. In today's Singapore, both husband and wife work long hours to bring in the bacon and it makes sense to farm out the domestic chores to the professionals.

The three of us stand at the entrance of the food court by the counter selling beverages, my wife surveying the various offerings in the establishment while my granddaughter and I seek out an available table.

“Look, Grandpa, there’s one over there.” She points and hurries towards a table in the middle of the hall where a group of young ladies are just about to leave. She has sharp eyes, this girl.

What can I say about Gemma? I love my eldest grandchild with a boundless unconditional love that only grandfathers understand. My wife and I have three grandchildren: Gemma, age fifteen, by our older son; two grandsons, Alan, age ten, and George, age twelve, by our second. My wife dotes on the boys, but I shower my love on Gemma. She and I have a special bond. Her parents know it and are happy to deposit her with us whenever both of them are overseas. This is one such time and we are here in West Mall because Gemma happens to have a meeting for a school project at Bukit Batok library.

We sit down quickly before someone else claims the table. My wife and Gemma look around and discuss what they fancy while I search for a cleaner. The previous occupants were messy eaters. I was famished earlier, but now I have nearly lost my appetite. I see a cleaner working at a table nearby. An old man, from the white of his wispy hair and the stoop of his shoulders. He clears the dirty crockery with the speed of a slow loris, ignoring the impatient glares of his patrons. Whether his slow movements are the result of sheer fatigue or a deliberate attempt to infuriate the customers, I cannot tell. One thing I can tell

though: this is hardly the ideal job for the frail and elderly. I look around for another cleaner, but he seems to be the only one on duty. I shake my head and let out a frustrated sigh.

“Why can’t they employ more cleaners? Bring in some able bodies, for goodness’ sake, and pay them well. Don’t these people understand even the basic principles of supply and demand?” I mutter.

“I think we should all clear our table when we are done eating. It helps to make the cleaner’s job easier,” suggests Gemma.

My wife ignores us, preoccupied with the difficult task of deciding what to eat. There is a plethora of dishes available, ranging from ubiquitous local staples to various delicacies brought in from other parts of Asia by recent migrants. Singapore is not known as a food paradise for nothing. It does not benefit me though. I am not adventurous with food. I refuse to queue for any more than ten minutes at any vendor even if it boasts a five-star review. I have already decided on what I want. I will have my usual bowl of fishball noodle soup, failing which I will patronise the store with the least business. I keep one eye on the elderly cleaner, ready to summon him as soon as he is done.

After what seemed an eternity, the cleaner finally finishes cleaning up the table. He turns in slow motion as one debilitated by rheumatism would, and starts to push his heavily loaded cleaner’s trolley away. Instead of thanking the old man for his service, the diners at the table register their dissatisfaction by shaking their heads derisively.

“So slow,” one of them complains loudly behind the cleaner’s back as he moves away. The old man pretends not to hear and lumbers on, gripping the handle of his trolley as if it were a walking frame. I raise a hand to attract his attention, but he is facing the wrong direction.

“Excuse me, Uncle. If you don’t mind,” I call out loudly. Being a senior citizen myself, I am careful of who I call “Uncle” nowadays, but this chap is obviously way older than I am. He hears me, hesitates, undecided whether he should respond or ignore. After some thought, he turns around reluctantly.

A tired man, much older than his actual age, worn down by the tides of time. A sad threadbare man, just like the crumpled rag he holds in his spotted and wrinkled hand. He looks different, but I recognise him immediately. There is no mistake. The slightly bucked incisors, the small but protruding ears, the beady eyes, each by itself not overtly unattractive, but combining to lend the appearance of a rodent. It is a subtle image, not immediately noticeable, but once someone points it out to you, you will never forget it. I know this man. Yes, I know him well.

He, on the other hand, shows no signs of having ever met me. He sees right through me. With an expressionless face, he starts to pick up the bowls and plates with the same lethargy and tedium as he did for the previous table. His seasoned maroon-colored T-shirt that says ‘First World Steward’ smells faintly of sweat and swill.

“Mr Goh!” Almost shouting, I stand up and reach out with my right hand, something I instinctively do with people I like.

He is startled, and drops the melamine plate with a loud clatter. Some surrounding diners turn to look. There is a confused look in his eyes. Who on earth greets a food court cleaner like a man greeting his favourite Member of Parliament?



“I – I’m sorry,” he stammers and shows me his hands, both palms wrapped in cheap disposable plastic gloves.

“Dirty,” he explains. I acknowledge politely and lower my hand.

“Alphonsus Goh. How have you been?”

He stares blankly at me. Instead of the glee of meeting an old friend, a wave of panic sweeps over his face. He appears disoriented. He wants to flee, but is paralysed like a deer caught in a lorry’s headlights.

I grab his arm. “J.G. Chan, writers’ workshop.”

2

“PROF CHAN?”

“Guilty as charged,” I reply, and would have regretted my flippancy if a bright smile had not broken out on his face.

“My god! I swear I couldn’t recognise you. You look totally different,” declares Alphonsus in his crisp Straits-accented English that only a Baba can carry. He studies me from head to toe. The earlier gloom in his demeanour is gone. Even the stoop of his shoulders seems to have straightened out.

“That’s why!” he points dramatically at the top of my head. “And, may I say you look dashing.”

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For years before I retired, I hid my obvious bald pate with a flimsy comb over in a vain attempt to look young. The wind was my nemesis. Nobody dared to point out my folly, not even my brave wife. Everyone is entitled to his idiosyncrasies. Then one morning as I was standing before the mirror in the bathroom

of the cardiology ward of the National University Hospital, washing my hands after struggling the short distance from my bed just to have a pee, I saw the man I truly was. Fifty-nine years old, overweight, exhausted, sickly, recovering or dying I could not tell. For once, I did not bother about my hair. After you have experienced a pain in the chest so excruciating you are sure you're going to die, a pain so unbearable that you pass out in front of thirty students in the lecture hall – when you have been pulled from the brink of oblivion with still so much to live for, there are other priorities. Hospitals do not have room for vanity.

After four months of medical leave, I was eager to return to the university and reclaim my desk in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. When I was in intensive care, all I could think of were my loved ones. Now that I was no longer in mortal danger, all I could think of was my career. I vowed to change my lifestyle, improve my dietary habits, exercise more often, adopt an optimistic spirit, reduce my stress level, and take my medication diligently – all the steps necessary to prevent a relapse. I wanted to prove to one and all that I was a fighter, an overcomer, a survivor. I had at least another five years of earning power left and as a professor, I was making good money.

But things did not work out as planned. Despite my best efforts, my health failed to improve. I tired easily, suffered from shortness of breath and frequent dizzy spells. My legs swelled with water retention and I could not remain standing for long. I could not keep up with my working schedule. My students were short-changed. Barely three months back in the campus, I threw

in the towel at my doctor's advice. Armed with a checkered bill of health and the sincerest of regrets, I tendered my application for early retirement. My bosses were sympathetic, plying me with generous references, and had even organised a sumptuous retirement party in my honour at Marina Bay Sands the weekend before my sixtieth birthday. Every well-wisher had a commendation which felt more like a eulogy. Even the Dean showed up to bid me farewell. As he shook my hand for the first and last time, he assured me that I was welcome to come back anytime when my health improved, though both he and I knew there was little chance of my availing of his hospitality.

A newly minted retiree, I celebrated the first day of my golden years by treating myself to a haircut. I needed to submit a fresh photograph for my new Senior Citizen Transport Concession Card. Towkay or pauper, statesman or servant, every citizen sixty years old and above enjoys the same concessionary fare when he rides the public bus or MRT in Singapore. I think that is quite equitable.

“Trust me, Abang. You will look more handsome. You have a nice round head. You shouldn't hide it.” the Malay barber cajoled. I was very self-conscious when I exited the barber shop expecting everyone to stare at my clean shaven head. No one batted an eyelid.

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I introduce Alphonsus to my wife and granddaughter. He says hello and proclaims me as one of the finest men he has ever

known. My wife is unimpressed, but Gemma breaks into a giggle. They know my flaws.

“Are you still with NUS?” Alphonsus asks as he continues with the task of cleaning our table. He seems to have gained a new vigour in his movements.

“Retired. I hung up my gloves almost two years ago.”

“Ah, Professor Emeritus.” He makes no attempt to probe my early retirement.

“Just JG or Chan if you don’t mind. All retirees are equal.”

“Some are more equal than others.”

“Animal Farm by George Orwell,” I grin.

“I still have the copy you gave me. Treasure it like an heirloom.”

“Yes. So don’t forget, we are less equal only because we allow ourselves to be.”

Alphonsus does not reply. Instead, he studies the plate in his hand. There is an awkward silence between us. His lower lip begins to tremble. He bites hard on it. His eyes start to brim over. “You know what, Prof? You were the only one who treated me with a modicum of respect in Changi,” he chokes.

Alphonsus composes himself, sucks back his running nose and wipes the tear off his cheek with his sleeve. He is embarrassed and concentrates on cleaning the table.

“Old Goh!” There is an angry shout from one end of the hall. Alphonsus raises a hand to acknowledge, but does not turn. He is almost done. He wipes the table with a soggy rag that leaves behind a veneer of grease. Then, unexpectedly, he

reaches into the bowels of his trolley, fishes out a brand new 'Good Morning' towel and wipes the table one last time leaving it dry and spotless.

"Nothing like a clean slate to start anew, eh," he winks at Gemma and arrows his eyes to the top of my head.

"Thank you, Uncle Alphonsus," Gemma giggles again. She likes it when someone teases her grandpa.

"You're welcome," Alphonsus replies and makes a show of hurrying towards the man who is obviously his supervisor.

"Catch up with you later, my friend," I call out.

As I stand in line to order chicken rice for all three of us, I see at the corner of my eyes Alphonsus standing humbly before his finger-wagging supervisor, head bowed low, both hands limp by his side like an errant schoolboy.

Before I can take the first bite of my dinner, Gemma bursts out with a thousand questions, all concerning Uncle Alphonsus. She seems to be fascinated by the man. I do not blame her. Alphonsus Goh is unique.

12 years have passed since I last saw Alphonsus Goh. The unexpected meeting with him triggers my memory and I am transported back to the year 2003. It was a bad year for Singapore's economy – there was an outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) – but a good year for me, career-wise that is. I remember it in every detail, even as I cannot recall what I had for lunch yesterday. A sign of old age?

I was invited by the Singapore Prison Service to look into the feasibility of introducing a writing workshop for inmates

in Changi Prison. My faculty head, who had taken me under his wing and was grooming me as a possible successor, instructed that I give them my fullest cooperation. I was happy to oblige. I told myself that the best way to find out was to conduct the first series myself. In fact, I wrote the manual for all subsequent volunteer teachers. As far as I am aware, the Prison Writing Workshop is still an ongoing programme.

There were fifteen students in the pioneer batch, no doubt all personally selected by the warden himself. They were of a wide range of ages and educational backgrounds, came from all walks of life, and had committed different crimes. As advised, I kept my professional distance and asked no personal questions. I spared them the literary mumbo jumbo I fed my undergraduate students, and started with the KISS (keep it short and simple) principle. After an hour or so of motivational talk and anecdotes, I sent my bright-eyed students to their personal computers with the instruction to churn out a three-to-five-hundred-word short story each. They had two hours.

As expected, the submissions were stereotypically enthusiastic first attempts. I was off to a good start, flipping through the compositions leisurely; I had another thirty minutes to kill before I was released from Changi Prison. Meanwhile, my students chatted quietly among themselves. That was when I was surprised, not by a short story as I requested, but the opening chapter of what I suspected to be a tall and twisted tale. That was *Payoh*, by Alphonsus Goh.



Before I left, I assigned the students their 'homework' for the next two weeks. As part of the writing workshop project, the selected participants were allowed two hours a day in the air-conditioned comfort of the computer room away from their mind-numbing chores of hospital laundry, bread-baking and basket-weaving. They should have no problem completing their assignments.

Lucky Cockatoo

I HAVE a divine gift.

It is a gift that enables me to traverse two worlds, the world of the humans and that of the birds. As far as I am aware, I am the first winged creature to be endowed with this gift. I can speak the human language, not mimic, like those pretentious hill mynas. I can understand the language and communicate with humans. With concentration, I can even read and write simple sentences. Yes, there is another bird who can talk to the humans, but he is not half as good, nor can he read and write. I know, because I taught him. It is a gift I wish I never had though. An unwanted gift is a curse, I suppose.

How is that so? To answer, I must begin with my early history. I was kidnapped as a naked nestling even before my eyes were open, and smuggled across land and air from my birthplace in Australia to a tiny equatorial country called Singapore. I spent the first fifteen years of my life as a pet to a human whom I shall not name for my own safety. Soon after he acquired me (he used

the term ‘adopted’) he was promoted to the second highest office of the land, one rung short of supremacy. A superstitious and insecure man, he believed I was responsible for his good fortune, named me Lucky, kept me in a gilded cage in his spacious study room and treated me kindly, making sure that his housekeeper fed and watered me well. I grew up thinking that that was the natural way of life for a sulphur-crested cockatoo.

My master was a melancholic man who masked his doubts and fears with a contrived smile and a false bravado. Having grown up poor, his father struggled as a third-rate fortune teller and he wore his humble background both as a badge of honour as well as an armour of protection. Any attack on him was an attack on the under-privileged and the disadvantaged. He had a small nose and a paper thin upper lip which accentuated the largeness of his philtrum, resembling the upper beak of a sea turtle. His only redeeming asset was his height. In the beginning he tried to coax me into mimicking his speech by repeating to me phrases like “Hello, my name is Lucky” and “How do you do”, but I found it most condescending and resolutely refused to cooperate. I am not one who would make a fool of himself for the sake of food and lodging. After a while, he gave up his antics and treated me with the respect that I deserved.

Despite his many visitors who came to pay their tributes and seek his advice, my master was a miserable and lonely man. Whenever there was no one else around, he would talk to me, spilling his woes and condemning his foes. He told me that he had no one he could trust and that politics made strange

bedfellows. I would nod my head, flap my wings, shuffle my feet, occasionally let out a squawk and display my crest to humour him. All the while, I was unconsciously learning, absorbing and digesting the vocabulary and nuances of human language. After some time, I discovered that I could understand what my master said. It was easy, almost like second nature. Soon, I was able to eavesdrop on all the plotting and scheming taking place in the study between my master and his allies. I came to the conclusion that humans are intrinsically selfish and conniving.

When I reached my sexual maturity around five or so, my behaviour took a turn for the worse. I became irritable, threw frequent tantrums and squawked in frustration all day long. I attacked the housekeeper when he tried to replenish my feed and drew blood more than once. I tore at the cage door and tried to escape. I had no patience for my master's sob stories and screamed at him to leave me alone. My wild instinct was kicking in.

My master consulted the vet who advised him to get me a mate if he wanted peace again in the house. Instead, my master had a better idea. He wanted to appease me, but could not stand the thought of having another noisy cockatoo around. He struck a deal with his gardener who kept a small flock of domestic chickens in a shed at one corner of the garden. That was how I lost my virginity and gained a partiality for domestic chickens.

Ever since then, whenever he sensed that I was more moody than usual, he would bring me to the chicken shed and

after I had released the tension, doused me with the garden hose to cleanse me of my filth before returning me to my cage.

Was what I did a sin? My conscience tells me it was, but my flesh insists otherwise. It is a perennial tug of war with no clear winner. It was during these frequent trips that I discovered the wonders of freedom. I saw the beauty of nature and all its marvels. I saw the open sky and its splendours. I saw the free birds and wished to God that I was one of them.

As time went by, I began to despise my master for depriving me of my freedom. I hated him for inducting me into the unsavoury practice of sexual exploitation and slavery. As much as I liked to think otherwise, I knew the chickens were hardly consenting partners. Each time I visited the shed at the corner of the garden, I felt like a pervert and lecher, but I was trapped in my addiction. To make matters worse, my master would often hang around to watch and cheer while I forced myself upon my unwilling harem. I was his performing monkey who provided him his routine dose of salacious entertainment. There were also countless heartbreaks. Each time I was attracted to a certain chicken, I would return the next round only to discover that she had been slaughtered and eaten by the gardener.

Of all of them, I miss Alice the most, Alice with her feathers white as mine, her bright crimson comb, her vivacious eyes, her wittiness and her infectious laughter. Unlike the others who were preoccupied only with food and tattle, Alice was curious and intelligent and had a strong thirst for life. I was besotted by her, even though she was the only one among the

chickens who stood up to me and rebuked me for forcing my will on them.

“Just because you have been conferred authority and power over us doesn’t mean you can treat us willy-nilly to satisfy your urges. We too have our pride and integrity. You, Lucky, are a prisoner like us and should know better than to behave in such a beastly manner. If you continue to do so, don’t be surprised that one day you find yourself faced with a bigger bully than you are. For every bully out there, there is a bigger bully.”

When I was with Alice, I had no eyes for the other chickens. I treated her like a lady. I courted her and eventually was able to win over her affection. We used to talk about what it was like if we were free.

“If you and I were free,” she said, “I’ll learn to fly and accompany you to the ends of the earth. We will ride the four strong winds and ply the seven seas together until our plumage turned grey and your sulphur crest is bleached and frayed. Then I’ll return with you to your home, the land of cockatoos.”

A part of me died when she too was taken away. But Alice kept her word. She still flits in and out of my dreams, and sometimes when I am alone all by myself on a sunlit mountain top or in the valley of shadows, she silently alights by my side.

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About the Author



Born in 1951, Jim KC Tan is a retired specialist contractor. *Payoh* is his first book. Jim spends his retirement in quiet contentment, enjoying short trips and long rambles, admiring old classic buildings in and around Singapore. He keeps the preferred company of sincere friends, chitchatting over a simple meal, learning to live and let live. His grandchildren are the joy of his golden years.

One shortcoming of retirement, laments Jim, is that the days pass by too quickly.

About the Illustrator

Morgan Chua began drawing for the *Singapore Herald* in 1970. He spent 24 years in *Far East Economic Review* (FEER), where he rose from editorial artist to creative director. Morgan left FEER in 1997 and is currently based in Tanjong Pinang. Some of his recent works include *My Singapore* (2000, 2008), *In Memory of Madam Kwa Geok Choo* (2011) and *LKY: Political Cartoons* (2015).

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In a writing workshop at Changi Prison, retired professor JG Chan encounters a story written by inmate Alphonsus Goh. 'Payoh' tells the adventures of a sulphur-crested cockatoo named Lucky who finds his way to a protected bird sanctuary.

Conflict soon ensues, and the sanctuary birds decide it's time to gain autonomy from their human-watchers. They must form a small team of leaders to govern their newly independent sanctuary.

However, skeptics and detractors also exist within ...