

# Tales from the ECP

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## Autumn In The Park

SHE SPOTTED ME FIRST. According to her, she had seen me trudging through that stretch of the park on many a previous afternoon. Not wishing to disrupt my apparent exercise regime, she had opted to leave me to “do your thing”. But that day, she changed her mind. Maybe it was because of something in the air.

It was one of those rare few days which come around once, or, at most, twice a year at the park. Those days are almost always preceded by a dry spell. During this season, many of the leaves of many of the seemingly evergreen trees—like the sea almond and the *pong pong*—would turn into shades of yellow, or red, or orange, and eventually brown. That is, if they remain perched on the branches long enough. Many would simply fall to the ground, to be followed suit later by others. The park grounds would be carpeted with layers of wilting or already dry leaves in almost every square inch of the park, except in patches where they have been raked and bagged by the park attendants. While normally efficient, these park workers find the task overwhelming this time of the year.

Although the sight is nowhere near as spectacular as the fall foliage in the US, one cannot be faulted for entertaining the thought that autumn has come to the East Coast Park. The older ones among us may also be led into

contemplating the transience of human life, and how it is a one-act play. Unlike the trees which can sprout new leaves, in an ongoing cycle of regeneration, for us humans, there are no second acts.

Rapt in such thoughts, I was oblivious to whatever else that was going on around me, other than the leaves which continued to glide down, and some of their fallen comrades prancing around on the ground, until my reverie was shattered by a sound sharply inconsonant with the swishing and crackling of the leaves underfoot. It sounded like a human voice calling out for someone. I stopped in my tracks, the better to listen. It was indeed a name being called, and it took a while before it dawned on me that it was my name. I looked up, and around, and out of the corners of my eyes caught sight of a figure. It was standing next to a car parked by the side of the service road next to the cycling cum roller-blading track, running parallel to the concrete footpath I was on. Waving and beckoning, the figure seemed to be the one who had been and was continuously calling out my name. I recognised not so much the voice, but more the tone. It had a timbre of authority, like that of a senior summoning a junior. It'd been a long time since I last heard my name being uttered in that fashion.

I stood rooted to my tracks, to register the scene, and establish the identity of the caller, before crossing over, and mounting the slight incline to where the silver-grey Honda Odyssey was parked. It was whom I thought it might be. In her yellow and black floral long-sleeved blouse and black pants, she still cut an imposing figure with her ramrod straight posture. She had always been tall, but used to be slimmer. Otherwise, she seemed to have aged well—much better than I.

“Hi!” She smiled faintly and uttered my name again, “Where’s Choo Peng?” It was amazing how after all those years she still managed to get our names right, without hesitation, nor did she get the pairing confused. Choo and I were only in our late teens then, and there were about forty of us, and more than a few couples in the A-Levels class of which she was the form teacher.

I greeted her, in the same manner as I had done so very many years ago—respectfully. “Choo doesn’t like the sun, so she walks in the evenings.”

“Ah, that’s why I always see you walking alone, never with her.”

“You’ve spotted me before?”

“Sure, many times, round about this time, when the sun is out like this.”

“So you are here every day?”

“Most days. When it’s not raining.”

“And what are you doing here, if I may ask?”

“Take him out,” she nodded at the figure in the front passenger seat, “to give him some sun and fresh air.”

Until then, I had not noticed there was a person in the car, even though the door on the front passenger side was opened wide. Later I would notice that all the window panes of the car were wound down. Through the front windscreen I could see a figure in a white polo shirt, slouched back in the front passenger seat. The face looked familiar. It was that of a very high profile public personality, who in recent years had not been much in the news.

“Ok if I go say hello to him?” I was still seeking permission after all these years. But it was more a habit borne out of taking nothing for granted and respecting the privacy of others.

“Sure. I think he might like that.”

So I moved over to the side of the car where the door was opened, bent my body forward toward the person, neatly attired in the polo shirt and well-pressed khaki pants, strapped by the safety belt to the seat inclined backwards. It was a motion aimed at getting closer to the person, but it might also have been an unconscious gesture of respect to him. He looked leaner than the person I remembered from the news. I addressed him by his public name, preceded by the “Doctor” honorific, introduced myself, and asked him how he was doing (which in retrospect, was not the smartest thing to do, but I couldn’t think of anything else to say at the time.) He didn’t utter a word, nor extend a hand for me to shake, nor make any movement, other than with his eyes. Those eyes locked with mine for a while, and seemed to blaze at them, until I looked away. When I turned my eyes back to him again, he continued to glare at me. After what felt like an eternity, he twitched his lips in the faintest hint of a smile, and closed both eyes, as though having no further interest in me. I guessed he must have approved of what he saw, or perhaps it was the fact that I had introduced myself as a former student—I learned later, through some newspaper interview, that he had always been jealous of people receiving her attention.

Thus dismissed, I bade goodbye to him, and to her, and offered that perhaps we would see each other again in the park some other time. We did. Every time that I was out on my walking regime, which meant in mid-morning or

early afternoon, on a mild or sunny day. There was no fixed pattern to my choice of days to walk, but almost every time that I was out there, the Honda was there, invariably at the same spot. That spot, I found out later, during a casual stroll in the park with Choo, was a vantage point, from which to get a commanding view of the Straits of Singapore, and to catch the breeze. The usual time would seem to be between two to three hours' duration, for the car was always there, whether I commenced my walk a little later than usual, and would still be there, even if I took a little longer time to pass it again on my return leg.

We informally established a routine, where I would look out for the car and for her as I neared that point, and wave if I saw her standing outside the car, and move on. She would wave back. Sometimes, she would initiate the greeting by stretching out her hand from within the car on the driver's side. Once in a while, but only very occasionally, I would veer from my path, to go over to have a quick chat.

It was usually just small talk, about how Choo and I were doing, how the kids were, and what, if anything, we knew of what was happening with our classmates from the Pre-U days. We never touched on her relationship with him, nor on his state of health. She probably assumed I was in the know, whereas the truth was I was not very well informed nor the least curious. But one can't totally avoid hearing the occasional gossip or picking up some sound bites from social gatherings, especially from the far-and-few-in-between class reunions. The press, which can be rather relentless in their pursuit of newsworthy public figures, had shown admirable restraint in their case. Still, in spite of all these, and my lack of desire for any details, a vague mental picture of this couple did form in my mind.

Theirs was what could best be labelled as a late-summer mid-autumn romance. They had first met when she had just about hit forty, and he sixty. She was still single, and he had been long married, with a grown up son. She wasn't unattractive, but as Choo and I speculated, she might have been just a tad too brainy and too outspoken, and probably too intimidating for the typical Singaporean man. He wasn't exactly tall, dark or handsome, but he did have the reputation of possessing an exceptional intellect. He was then one of the most powerful men in the country, and arguably the smartest of his era. We figured that this was truly a case of the meeting of two great minds.

As far as I could surmise, it wasn't love at first sight. Their paths had crossed in the course of their work. No longer a teacher, she had remained an educationist, helming a research division. He was the man overseeing education for the country, and was personally interested in the research work that she was engaged in. The work required them to meet regularly at committee meetings, and sometimes for one-on-one discussions about projects that he wanted her division to conduct. From all accounts, it was all business. If there were any flicker of attraction on the part of one for the other, none was evident to the opposite party, nor to any of their mutual colleagues.

Until after the announcement of his retirement from public office at the age of sixty-five, ostensibly for reasons of bladder cancer. By then she had left the education field, had joined the finance sector, and was no longer working in Singapore. Rumours began to swirl that he had divorced his wife, and the two ex-colleagues had been seen in the company of each other in various locations, mostly China. Much later, again through the grapevine, we learned that they had been officially married. I remember concluding

then that she couldn't have married him for his money—for he wouldn't have had much, having reportedly been very generous with his first wife, giving her practically all his assets, including their marital home, and not having enjoyed the multi-million dollar ministerial pay packet (that was instituted much later, after his time in office). The rumours said that he had moved into her house in a high-end Katong neighbourhood. This was confirmed later when she hosted a dinner at home for some of us from her Pre-U class.

That was much later, after news had already been circulating for a while that he had not been well, and that he might have suffered a stroke, or two. Some years earlier, she had accepted the invitation to be the guest-of-honour at our class reunion dinner, but had sent an apology to say that she would be late for the event, as she had to take care of her husband to make sure he had had his dinner, and his bath, and was comfortable, before she could take off. In like fashion, once, when hosting us for dinner at her home, she allowed us to mingle on our own, while making sure that the maids and a sister of hers took care of us; she sat down for dinner with us eventually, much later than was normal for a Singaporean dinner, apologizing and saying that he had just been properly tucked in for the night.

That meal coincided with a period when I no longer saw them at the park, whatever the season. I figured that his health must have deteriorated to a point where it was no longer logistically feasible for her to take him out for his day in the park. The time must be nearing, I remember telling myself.

Not too long after, it became official. There was a state funeral, although I understood that she had been reluctant

to sanction one. I didn't attend the wake. I was traveling. I hardly knew the man. All we had was that brief encounter in the park some years earlier. Plus, I figured there would long lines of people wanting to pay their respects.

Choo went with a few of our classmates to the wake at her home. I was told that despite the large number of other people there, she found some time to come sit with her old students. After the funeral proceedings were over, Choo phoned her a few times, "just to chat." According to Choo, she appreciated the calls, but said she was too much in grief to talk for any length of time. From what I heard, she had observed a personal mourning period of one year, wearing black and engaging in no social events. As for the grieving, I don't know where along that journey she is, but as she tells Choo, she is still missing him to this day.

As for me, I still, from time to time, glance up from my walks, to see if I could catch a glimpse of a silver-grey Honda Odyssey parked on that spot on the service road leading off from the Bougainvillea Garden which has since been created in that area of the park.