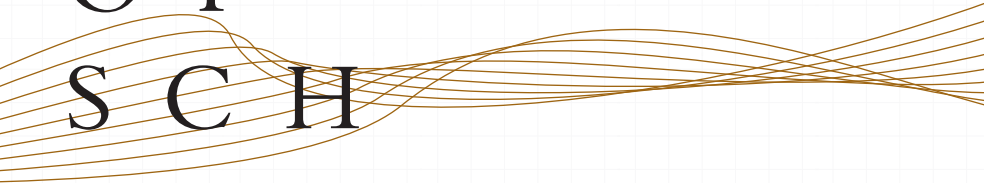


T H E  
S O U N D  
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A M E N T A L B R E A K D O W N ,  
A L I F E J O U R N E Y

D A N I E L L E L I M



T H E  
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A MENTAL BREAKDOWN,  
A LIFE JOURNEY

DANIELLE LIM



# Preface

It is estimated that 450 million people worldwide suffer from mental disorders. An estimated one in four people globally will experience a mental health condition in their lifetime. They are among the most marginalised groups in society: in developed countries, between 44% and 70% of patients with mental disorders do not receive treatment; in developing countries the figures are even more startling, with the treatment gap being close to 90%.<sup>1</sup>

Contrary to popular belief, studies have shown that more than 90% of people with mental illness do not become violent.<sup>2</sup>

This book tells the true story of my uncle Seng, my mother Chu, and their journey with mental illness. I hope this story will shed light on the loneliness and stigma associated with mental illness, increase awareness and understanding of mental illnesses, give comfort to caregivers whose struggles often go unnoticed, encourage those at risk to seek help early, and prod the rest of us to treat those afflicted with respect and dignity.

I also hope that through this and other similar stories, we can come to see that there can be great beauty in brokenness, that great suffering can bring forth great courage, and that many whose lives have been broken can carry on living beautiful lives.

The details of this memoir, including dates and places, are presented to the best of memory. Certain names have been changed for reasons of privacy.

# PART ONE

# chapter 1

**M**y slippers, where are my slippers?

He lies on the road, his rough brown skin against the rough black tarmac, his old brown slippers that were flying in the air just a few moments ago now out of sight. *My slippers, where are my slippers?* He tries to get up to look for his slippers, but a sharp pain pierces through like a *satay* stick skewering into the flesh, as sharp as a scream coming from someone he can hear but cannot see. He remembers himself flying in the air, but doesn't know why; he was just walking the same way he walked every day, and he waited for the green man to start beeping in the same way he waited every day. He remembers feeling hungry, and thinking that it must be time to go home for dinner. He remembers his mother's voice, telling him to come and eat.

Now there are faces hovering over him, and unfamiliar voices asking, Are you okay? He touches his stomach to see if there really is a stick lodged there, but there is only his stomach and the pain is starting to shoot through his whole body. When he lifts his hand, it is wet and red.

When the sounds fade away, he hears two things – a siren that sounds like a police car siren, and the distant sound of someone sweeping fallen leaves in the heat of the afternoon sun.

\*

*Can a life weave along through the same notes and yet come to play forth different sounds?*

*When I think of my uncle, I hear the sounds:*

- *Seng, an ordinary name;*
- *Rough brown bristles tied to one end of a wooden stick brushing against the rough brown leaves;*
- *Rubber slippers brushing against the floor;*
- *Voices hushed in scholarly discussion;*
- *Other voices calling out “xiao lang, xiao lang”;*
- *Chopped garlic and bean sprouts sizzling in a wok.*

*Perhaps each of our lives has its own sound, meandering alone amidst other sounds, and sometimes, another sound comes along, mirroring the first, moving in tandem, nudging the first along. Music? Who cares to listen? Well, you never know.*

## chapter 7

Mum is standing near the kitchen sink, chopping the garlic on the chopping board. I sit at the kitchen table, doing the all-important job assigned to me of ‘plucking the vegetables’, as Mum always says. I pluck the leaves from the stems; Mum says these are sweet potato leaves but all the vegetables she asks me to pluck look the same to me, except for the tadpole-like bean sprouts with their wriggly tails. And they don’t just all look the same, they all taste the same too. You would think that a nine-year-old girl and her eleven-year-old sister should be well-trained in eating their vegetables, but no, Mum has to force those plants down our throats, and sometimes our stomachs push them back out again.

But plucking them is fun and I like being in the kitchen with Mum. Actually, I like being anywhere with Mum; I guess that’s why Mum was the only mother who had to sit at the school porch where I could see her from my classroom, back when I first started Primary One. And I guess that’s why Dad says I’m like chewing gum, too soft and sticky. Must learn to be more independent like my sister, he says.

*Chsh!* Mum throws the garlic into the wok. There is a fragrance of chopped garlic sizzling in oil, until the plants go in. Next, Mum fries some *toufu*, and scrambles some eggs with *chye poh*, which Mum says is preserved radish. I sit there thinking I want to be a great cook like her when I grow up, and I ask her, Mum, how come you can cook so fast? She has a strange happy-sad look on her face, wipes the sweat from her face with the back of her hand, and says that if you do something every day, day after day, year after year, you’re bound to become good at it. She scoops some of the food

into two separate *tingkats*, those stacked metal containers we use to bring food to Ah Ma and Ah Gu. My Ah Gong, Mum's father, passed on many years ago, even before I was born, so I've never even seen him.

It is the school holidays, but Dad has to go back for meetings at his school, and Chae, which means 'jie' or 'elder sister' in Chinese, had to go to school for some extra-curricular activity, so Mum and I take bus number 232 to Lorong 2 Toa Payoh where Ah Ma lives. Ah Gu lives there too, but Mum says he is staying at Woodbridge Hospital for the time being and I think how nice it is to be able to stay somewhere else for a while, like a holiday away from home.

Ah Ma is sitting on the old sofa, knocking at her knees and her knuckles. She is wearing her usual blue blouse and black pants – I recently learnt in school that it's called a *samfu* – and her all-white hair which is usually tucked neatly into a bun is a little messy today, with some strands coming loose.

Ma! Mum calls out. The small one-hall-one-bedroom flat is dark and musty and quiet except for my 78-year-old Ah Ma knocking at her joints and sniffing softly. She is holding her handkerchief which she uses to wipe the tears from her eyes.

Chu! Ah Ma replies.

Ah Ma! I call out.

She stops tearing and her face lights up a little. Lin! she calls me. She holds my hand and squeezes it, the same way she would hold my hand tight, not too long ago, when she would wait for me and take me home from the kindergarten each day.

Mum puts the *tingkat* on the table, walks to the window and opens up the old metal window panes, letting in some light and air. We sit on the sofa and they start talking.



How is Seng? Ah Ma asks.

He's much better, Mum says. The doctors say he can come home soon. I'm going to visit him after this, and thinking of leaving Lin with you while I go. What to do, it's school holidays and I can't leave her at home alone for so long.

I'm not sure if I'm supposed to be listening or not, but regardless, I start protesting and pestering to follow Mum. I love my Ah Ma but I don't want to sit in the old, dark flat for goodness knows how long and not know what to do. I'll probably start crying as well, if Ah Ma continues to cry.

Mum shoots me a stern look, the same forbidding look Chae and I get when we bicker at home or are noisy in church. My eyes start filling up, and I have no handkerchief to wipe the tears away. Mum and Dad can whisper all they want when they think I'm not listening, What do we do with her? She's such a crybaby. I don't care if I'm a crybaby as long as I get to go with Mum.

A child shouldn't be going to such a place, Ah Ma says.

I know, Mum sighs. She shoots me that look again. Just this once, she says, then softens as she takes one of the two *tingkats* with one hand and holds my hand with the other. What to do, she sighs again.

We go to a coffee shop to buy a packet of *kopi-o*, Ah Gu's favourite black coffee, and a pack of cigarettes, then we get onto some unfamiliar buses to an unfamiliar place called Yio Chu Kang. Mum is not angry anymore and she tells me not to be afraid when I go into the hospital. The people there may behave strangely but most of them will not harm others. Those who are violent are confined in the hospital so we won't see them. I listen and wonder if this is what going on an adventure feels like.

As we walk into the building, I see a long, narrow hallway with wire barricades on both sides. Mum says the wire barricades separate the wards from the hallway, to prevent the patients from getting out and to protect visitors coming in and out. The long hallway, with wards on both sides, is the only way to go in and out to visit patients. She points to one side of the hallway, saying the wards on that side are used as dormitories for the patients to sleep in, while the wards on the other side function as day rooms for meals and recreation. The way she is pointing here and there and telling me about the place reminds me of my form teacher showing us around the school on our first day in Primary One. I remember thinking, then, how well she knows this strange, unfamiliar place.

Now there are people pressed against the wire barricades beside us, calling out, Hello girl ah! Have money or not? Can give me some?

I jump and cling to Mum. She tells me it's okay, they don't mean any harm. More people start coming to the barricades, calling out, Auntee, got cigarette? Can give me? Auntee, have pity on me!

Mum smiles and says to them politely, No, don't have, sorry. As we walk on in this jail-like place, I start to think that maybe staying with Ah Ma might not have been so bad after all. Mum holds my hand tight and tells me many of them ask for money because they have been abandoned here by their families. That's really sad, I think. No wonder this feels like such a sad place. And then I think, luckily, we didn't abandon Ah Gu here.

I am relieved to see him as we enter one of the day wards. He is sitting at a table looking towards the entrance, like he's hoping and waiting for somebody to come. He is no longer smiling at his imaginary friend, nor is he making strange actions with his hands.

## chapter 13

**D**id you ever notice that when you ask a question, you often get a sort-of-an-answer only much later?

After the shriveled up bean sprouts incident, I thought a little about Mum's question: do you know how hard it is if people call you mad? I tried to imagine my rival clique in class calling me 'mad'. They were already calling me names like 'waggy waggy ponytail', which hurt quite a bit though I couldn't explain why. It's true I had a pony tail which 'wagged' – wouldn't your pony tail swing from side to side when you walked, if you had one? So I guess it was not so much the words themselves, but the spite with which they were uttered, that hurt. I tried to imagine this group of girls calling me 'mad' instead of 'waggy waggy ponytail', but for some reason, it didn't work. I suppose there's only so much you can imagine. So truth be told, after a while, I forgot all about the question.

It is only more than a year later, as I watch a scene unfold before my eyes, that the question comes flying back into my head.

I am having lunch with Mum at a hawker centre. Dad is at work and Chae is still in school – she is now in secondary school so it is usually late afternoon by the time she gets home – so it's just me and Mum. Mum orders fishball *mee-pok*, which is my favourite flat noodle. The noodles are cooked by a middle-aged woman at the stall, after which a middle-aged man carries the bowls to our table on a metal tray. I don't notice very much about him, until a small commotion is stirred up near to where we are seated. Another stallholder, a fat man with a loud voice, seems to be angry with the *mee-pok* man, saying loudly in Hokkien, Why you knock me? You purposely, is it?

Sorry lah, accident, the *mee-pok* man replies in Hokkien. He doesn't look at the fat stallholder; he doesn't look at anyone, just walks slowly back to his stall. The fat stallholder stares at him with a look of disgust, then turns away, jabs his finger into the air in the direction of the *mee-pok* man, and says loudly, *Xiao lang!* He turns to the people seated in front of his stall and tells them, Be careful, don't go too near him, he's mad!

Now the people around us start whispering to one another, stealing glances at the *mee-pok* man like frightened children looking at a barking dog. But the *mee-pok* man doesn't seem like a barking dog; he's just minding his own business, helping his wife or sister serve the bowls of noodles. He must have heard what the fat stallholder had said, because he doesn't dare to look at anyone. People nudge each other and talk in hushed tones when he walks near; some even finish their lunch quickly so they can leave. Now nobody seems to want to order fishball noodles anymore.

Mum has an indignant look on her face. She tells the old couple sharing our table, No need to be scared. I heard he had a nervous breakdown, but I've never seen him violent. My own brother had a mental breakdown long ago, but he has never hurt anyone.

People usually leave their bowls and plates on the table when they finish their food and that's what we usually do too, but when we finish our noodles today, Mum carries the bowls herself to return them to the *mee-pok* man and the lady. The lady thanks her, so does the *mee-pok* man but he doesn't look at her, he looks down.

As we walk out of the hawker centre, I think of the times I'm called 'waggy waggy ponytail' – do I also look down? Come to think of it, yes, I think so. I suppose if it feels horrible to be called 'waggy waggy ponytail' when you do have a ponytail, it must also

feel horrible to be called '*xiao lang*' when you do have a mental illness.

Mum takes me by bus to the Toa Payoh Town Centre; she says she has to buy some things from the NTUC supermarket there. As we walk towards the bus stop, I ask her why people are so afraid of those with mental illness. She says that people are afraid they will get violent.

She says, Of course, some do get violent, but most don't. Even normal people get violent sometimes, you know. If it's a stranger and you're not sure if he or she can be violent, then it's understandable to keep a distance, but there's no need to call names and so on. And, if it's someone you know, like a neighbour or like the *mee-pok* man who's been working at the hawker centre and has never been violent, like your Ah Gu, then there's really no reason to treat them like that. It hurts them.

Does Ah Gu get treated the way the *mee-pok* man was treated?

I guess so. That's why he never eats at the coffee shop or hawker centre. When he goes out, he just walks, buys food if he has to and goes home.

Doesn't he get lonely like that, with no friends?

Of course. It's a very lonely life for him.

Soon, we reach Toa Payoh Town Centre. The weather is hot as usual and I'm delighted to see an ice-cream man with his ice-cream push-cart, selling ice-cream at one corner. He sees Mum and calls out, Chu!

Mum smiles and greets him. So they know each other, and that's even better because it means I'll get free ice-cream.

As I stand there relishing my ice-cream, Mum and the ice-cream man stand there chatting. They seem to have known each other for a long time.

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## About the Author

Danielle Lim holds Master of Arts and Bachelor of Arts degrees from The University of Oxford. Based in Singapore, she has written for a national gallery as Curator of the Ministry of Education Heritage Centre. In that capacity she wrote over a hundred short stories featured as part of the heritage gallery. Her professional experience includes 11 years at management level in the tertiary/global education sector, and 6 years in the financial sector. As of 2014, Danielle is an Adjunct Lecturer at Nanyang Polytechnic, as well as Associate Lecturer at the Republic Polytechnic.

*Can a life weave along through the same notes and yet come to play forth different sounds?*

*The Sound of Sch* is the true story of a journey with mental illness, beautifully told by Danielle Lim from a time when she grew up witnessing her uncle's untold struggle with a crippling mental and social disease, and her mother's difficult role as caregiver. The story takes place between 1961 and 1994, backdropped by a fast-globalising Singapore where stigmatisation of persons afflicted with mental illness nevertheless remains deep-seated. Unflinchingly raw and honest in its portrayal of living with schizophrenia, *The Sound of Sch* is a moving account of human resiliency and sacrifice in the face of brokenness.

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*"Danielle has skilfully woven the theme of human struggle against mental illness amidst the backdrop of Singapore's emergence as a modern city ... Highly recommended!"*

— Dr Delvin Ng, Family Physician

*"... A compelling tale of duty and sacrifice ... I finished it at one sitting. Beautifully written."*

— Ms Hazel Tan, working mother

*"The Sound of Sch is a great read. It takes you on an engrossing journey into the unnoticed and hidden world of those living with mental illness – the afflicted and their caregivers ... Danielle's from-the-heart depiction intrigues you as you turn the pages ... An impactful, moving book."*

— Ms Emily Tan, Senior Medical Social Worker

