

The Beating and other stories  
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**DAVE CHUA**

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The woman was picked up from work and brought in for questioning. The truth came out. You might even have read about it. She was sent to prison, even though they didn't quite pinpoint what she did wrong. The boy was taken away, but he missed television and the woman, but he always did his jumping jacks.

So would you be interested? You'll think about it? There are others, you know. Not just this one.

It's only a property after all, not a home, right? You'll move on when you're more successful, get something bigger. Remember to call me again. I'm sure I'll be able to find something for you. Appreciation past ten years has been seven percent; good investment, really. Don't be shy. There are always other options if you don't like this place, if you feel its history too much to bear.

I also have condos on hand. Just let me know when you would like to have a viewing. Let me know what home you want to make, and I can always help you.

## Chute

Everything I remembered about my father was how he smelled of sweat and earth. Whenever he came back from work, he had soil-stained hands and dirty hair. If we were using the bathroom, we would vacate it at once so that he could wash his work off. I would have to clean the toilet after that, scrubbing away the bits of stone, grey hair, and dirt and mopping the floor with some lime-scented detergent, before anyone could use it again.

He disappeared when I was six, taking with him his dirt-scuffed black boots, and nobody knew where he went, or no one would tell me. There was one relative who did say that he went up to Malaysia to skin crocodiles for luggage, after finding it increasingly difficult to mingle with friends who now wore long-sleeved shirts and drove German cars while he remained close to blood and earth. The world of tongues and handshakes had displaced that of muscle and calloused hands.

My mother was pregnant at the time, and, after his disappearance, she converted to Christianity for solace. She brought me to a church where a fluorescent cross would burn in the night like a beacon, silent and shining.

My mother's devotion to Christianity made our relatives uncomfortable and their visits rare. It was a condition I did not mind because the sympathy showing from their eyes was far worse than the absence of my father.

When it was apparent to us that my father was not coming back, my mother sold our shophouse and bought a three-room flat about five minutes away from the church. We had poorer neighbours and lift lobbies with white blobs painted to cover the occasional scrawls left by loan sharks. The brightly lit cross became part of our lives from then on.

When my brother was born, my mother named him Joseph and said that she had a vision the night before he arrived that he would grow up to be a priest. At the time, I was seven, and the sight of my mewling sibling who was cradled in a warm furry pink towel made me think of him giving sermons, singing from a hymnal, and throwing his arms open to receive anyone as our pastor did. The connection felt odd.

But who else could have a say in the fate of a fatherless newborn child? My mother had decided how to shape him as farmers might have imprinted on their livestock their destinies. A black cross was placed above Joseph's bed, and she read passages from the Bible to him every weekday night while I took over this chore on Saturdays and Sundays.

My mother would scold the neighbours for burning joss paper along the corridor and take a longer route to the lift because she did not want to expose Joseph to the mandalas drawn on the floor outside our Hindu neighbours' homes. (I believe that she even called the town council before to complain about such acts and argue that one's home ought rightfully to end at the door.)

She returned to her job as a nurse after her maternity leave, and her diligence and hard work, driven by a deep-seated God-fuelled fury, got her a promotion to head nurse at the hospital. Like my father, she brought back her own odour from work as well as chalky medicine, which she needed to get us through our sicknesses without having to see a doctor.

My brother grew up reverential to the Lord. My mother had it fixed in her mind that only he could grow up to be a pastor and even discussed it with our preacher, a fat and wide man with a face like a box. Pastor Toh was kind and told her that she should not be so resolute in determining his path in life, saying that God would choose what suited him best, but she said that God had already told her about Joseph's path.

As there were only two bedrooms in our flat, Joseph and I stayed in the common room next to the corridor. At night, we could sometimes hear the drunks stagger out of the lifts onto the corridors and even smell the pee they left behind. Our beds were pressed against the walls, leaving only a thin lane between which we could walk.

When he was ten, my brother would wake up in the morning to read his Bible and make notes with my yellow marker. My mother was very pleased with his progress. I cleaned my mother's room once and found brochures for a divinity school in Massachusetts she had kept.

My brother, with the smile of a fortune god, was filial to the point of cloying. When Ma returned home from her night shift, he would put down a washbasin with water for her to dip her feet into. He even started putting flowers, browning chrysanthemums and fallen frangipani, into it.

Ma accepted the washbasin from my brother like the Apostles did from Jesus. She would eat while her feet paddled softly in the basin, which was placed just under the dining table. In the smallness of the flat, I knew every sound, even if I could not hear it. The lapping made me aware of how lacking my own faith and will to love her were.

Whenever I questioned my brother, he seemed to think that doing this for Ma was normal, even necessary. He could go into a sermon about her sacrifices, and I really did not want to be reminded of them.

I could never penetrate my mother's thoughts. She kept documents but not diaries. Her ways were her own, and only she was able to understand what these were. Sometimes at night, I would go to her bedroom when she was kneeling in prayer before a portrait of Jesus, but the weight of her voiced unfulfilled wishes and desires were too much for me. So, more often than not, I kept the door closed.

Once, a funeral procession with musicians dressed like cabaret cowboys with big frilly hats and brass cymbals marched past. My brother ran to the window, but my mother quickly dragged him away.

"That is what you must lead them away from," she instructed him.

My brother reminded me of the boy Krishna I saw on posters at my Indian friend's place. He was always confident, self-assured, glowing, and aware of his purpose and place in the world.

My own fate was unwritten, unclear, but it did not seem to matter to my mother. I was not a bad student; I could hope for a scholarship to go to a polytechnic or a university or save enough from giving tuition to younger upper-class kids who stayed in houses where I could hear my own echoes.

\*

When I was sixteen, during one of the church group meetings, a boy came up to me and said hi. His name was Michael, and he was good-looking; he had a square jaw and shoulders that nudged out. Michael was one-quarter Eurasian and a shot-putter in his school. I should not mind if his muscles on one arm were much thicker, my friend Linda said. I wondered if there was some kind of double meaning slipped in there which I was too dumb or naïve to know then.

Holding hands with Michael was rather easy. We just sat together during service, and soon our hands would grip each other's during hymn-singing. I would pretend to go late to service, which annoyed my mother, so that I could find him and sit with him.

Michael lived in a terrace house nearby and went to church regularly; I would often hang out with him at one of the benches in a void deck. My mother, who was often assigned the late shift, would not know, and my brother would just say I was at church, which was true in a way.

He gave me a set of wind chimes and asked that, when it rang, I should think of him, and, yes, whenever they rang, I could not get him out of my mind. It was a Pavlovian reaction although I did realise that I was being a foolish young girl.

\*

Joseph had gone for church camp for a week during the school holidays, and Michael came over to my home. I had purchased a whiteboard with my tuition money so that Ma could fill in the hours she was on duty. I really did this so that I could know when she was not around.

At first, our kisses were chaste, but, laughing at our own clumsiness and our daring behaviour, we went further each time, testing our boundaries. His hand went up my blouse; then

my hand pressed between his groin. His fingers thumbed up my legs, and my mouth slid to his ear.

He entered me one warm afternoon, holding onto my head as if to keep me steady. We had to keep our voices down in case the neighbours or a passing worker heard us. After that, Michael apologised for being clumsy, and I told him that it was all right. Men needed to be assured constantly, I remembered what a schoolmate had said before.

“I’m new to this too,” I said, but I was unable to look him in the eye. He kissed me as he left, and my eyes turned to the whiteboard. Then I cleaned the whole flat, sprayed Lysol in the air, and burned a lavender candle to cover up the smell of our sex. Once more, I was cleaning up after the path of men.

I was more prepared than I let known even to Michael. I had found and purchased a set of bed sheet and pillowcase just like the one we used the previous week, and I put the bloodied sheet in a black plastic bag and threw it down the rubbish chute. The bag made a banging sound as it fell, which surprised me, considering that there was only cloth inside. I wondered if I should have burned the bed sheet or threw it at a common garbage bin instead. I waited for my brother to return. His skin had been burnt by the sun. He entered the room, took out a poster with a verse from the Bible and a background of the beach, and eagerly placed it on the wall. Then he asked how I had been.

“Fine, I say. How was the camp?”

“It was great! I learnt a lot! Especially about the New Testament.”

And he smiled his glowing smile, and I was relieved that he suspected nothing. When my mother returned, that was all she saw. They hugged each other, and she called him a good boy; I wondered if I should have bothered with all the cleaning.

My bed sheet could have been bleeding, and they would not have noticed.

Yet the world has changed, and the weight of it pressed down and altered our quiet, predestined universe. There are things we do that deflect ourselves from the path we are on, and what I had just performed was one of them.

Michael cajoled me to return to our room, but I gave the excuse that I never knew when my brother would be around. When I asked that we just meet to talk or eat, he was more reluctant. He soon stopped disturbing me, and we met up less. But I should have known better than to deny a boy who always got what he wanted. I would wake up at night with the wind chimes glowering, spraying our room with sound, and I heard them as though they were next to my ear.

\*

Two months later, my brother whispered to me in our room. The howls of an ambulance filled the night.

“Michael is saying things about you.”

“What things?”

He paused. I turned to look at him, and he stared back.

“That you two have been...”

He left the sentence unfinished. My pristine brother was not to be touched even by words of sin.

“And he told you?”

“He was speaking loudly after band practice.”

I got up from bed upset. A worm was crawling in my stomach and was starting to dig itself out. It was starting to bite, and now it was going to feast.

“Is it true?”

I stared at the floor.