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Beyond the Village Gate

Towards the Blue: Adventures of a City Wimp

CROSSING DISTANCE

Mei Ching Tan

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To my father, mother, sisters,
grandmother,
Allen,
and the rest of my family,
and to the child in all of us

IN THE QUIET

The bell rang.

“Assembly’s a pain in the butt,” I said. 7:20 a.m. What better time to listen to AB, Principal A-Bore, give long speeches that wound round our necks until we choked? The whole school, from Primary Ones to Secondary Fours, had to line up in the courtyard like toothpicks in a box. We fidgeted. The ground was rough cement in patches and smooth most everywhere, probably polished by many, many shuffling feet like ours.

When we were released into church for the morning sermon, Jenny said, “Maybe if I come late I don’t have to attend assembly.”

“But if you come late, the prefects will catch you and then you have to go detention,” I said.

We sighed, sitting down on the hard benches in the chapel. At least it was cooler inside. Our school was a mission school, no nun teachers in this day and age, but regular teachers who got pregnant now and then, and teachers like Mrs C who had children, though we didn’t want to imagine how she might have

gotten them. The morning (yawning) session started. As always, the Reverend talked into his Bible and gestured dramatically with his free hand. A few of us at the back watched Ellen. She sat perfectly still for the first few minutes, then her head nodded more and more heavily. "Let us sing hymn 160," the Reverend said. Ellen woke up long enough to stand, but right into the first line of the hymn, she started nodding and almost fell over. Audrey, out of the kindness of her youth, put out a hand to steady her. The rest of us tried to keep a straight face.

School was the place to cultivate the art of getting out of things. Getting out of class before the bell rang – "teacher, must go toilet, very high tide." Getting out of doing homework – "that chapter was done in my old exercise book. Really. I threw it away already." Getting out of classroom duties – "pick up the big rubbish, dust you can't see, floor is grey what."

"How to get out of Maths class?" I asked rhetorically as we filed out of church for classes.

Audrey said, "I have a way!"

"Huh?" I wanted her to elaborate, but ET was already in class, writing out sums on the blackboard.

"Yuck, cockroach!" someone said. Immediately, someone else shrieked. I saw something brown scuttling across the floor and stepped on it. It got mushed. "Yuck!" Ellen said. I shrugged. I wasn't afraid of spiders or lizards or rats either, dead or alive. I wasn't even afraid of teachers.

"Come here." Mrs Chew, alias ET, gestured to me

when we sat down and took out our books. "Why didn't you complete the longitude and latitude problems in the Maths test?"

"Don't like them." I could feel everyone's eyes and ears on me.

Mrs Chew frowned. "You have to try."

"Why? I passed the test, right?"

She frowned some more, nothing to say. I could feel the respect barometer rise in the class.

"Wah, you very brave," Audrey told me after class, turning around in her seat just in front of me.

"Hey, what plan you got to escape assembly?" I said. Before she could tell me, Mrs Ho came in and started Composition. Audrey turned back to her desk. "A trip at sea," Mrs Ho said. Some people groaned. I started writing right away. There was a dream I had always remembered. I probably had it when I was about nine. I was walking by some speckled marble seats when a great flood came and swirled me underwater. I saw glistening fishes swimming around. Somebody floated by limply. I grabbed her and tried to make for the surface. A shark came. I swam like crazy. The woman slowed me down, but I couldn't abandon her. The shark closed down on us. I cringed for the pain of sharp teeth – I was so afraid – but there was no sharp teeth, no pain – the shark had no teeth, total gum bald. The shark forgot to wear its dentures! It swallowed us whole, then spit us out, propelling us like torpedoes. This shark didn't eat dead people! I realised the person I was carrying was long gone.

I didn't know that, but she saved my life. I reached up and found a marble seat. I pulled myself out. Safe! I looked down. Everything was gone, the water, the fishes. The sidewalk was bone-dry. The water had only been as high as the marble seats. Why didn't I just stand up?

I stopped writing here. I remembered the thought that came to me in the dream all those years ago: What was appearance and apparent was deceiving; beyond the fabric of our world were other worlds, and every now and then, paths crossed, chaos ensued, but it was only a passing, and it will pass away. Awake, I had thought: I changed the world I was in, when I wanted it badly enough. I made everything work out.

"Geez, you read too many books," Jenny said over my shoulder.

I wondered how to end my composition. I couldn't write down those thoughts I had; they scared even me. So I wrote, "That was my most memorable trip at sea."

"Have you heard of Leon Uris and his book, Exodus?" Audrey asked, turning around in her seat again. "It's about Israel."

"War story?" I said.

"Kind of. A bit of history, too, but not like what we learn in school."

"Hope not. Hope you have better taste than that."

Jenny made a face. "What's so nice about war stories?"

"Stories of strength and courage," I said. "So close to death, and people always chose life."

Audrey nodded, but Jenny didn't look convinced. The bell rang and we broke for recess.

The flies were tremendously active on the tables in the tuckshop. I rolled up some newspaper and began hitting them.

"Pretty good," Audrey remarked in admiration.

I shrugged. My cousin Paul and I used to do this when we went to chalets. Hitting flies took a certain sort of skill, a control of the arm and swiftness of the blow, sudden, merciless, complete. The trick was to approach the fly very slowly, and when almost directly above, to be so quick that the fly didn't know what was coming, didn't have a chance to react. Sometimes Paul and I each opened up a plastic bag and caught the flies alive. We would fill up the bags with water and watch them struggle. They couldn't get free, but they struggled all the same. Then we emptied the bags into the toilet. The flies were too wet to fly and we pulled the flush immediately. There was no escape.

"So small, yet so quick," Jenny said of the flies.

"Small. Did you know that if a volume of air the size of our little finger got into your bloodstream you'll have a brain haemorrhage?" I said. "Burst vessels."

Jenny frowned at me, "Why you always talk about such gross stuff?"

"I found that out when I was six and my grandmother died," I said. When Jenny made a

face, I continued, “On the hospital bed, she had two tubes stuck into each arm. One was purple, the other transparent. I thought they pumped air into her body. But of course it wasn’t.”

I remembered my grandmother’s fingers by the bed. That was all I could see of her. I wasn’t tall enough to look over the bed yet.

“Did you go to the funeral?” Audrey asked.

“Yeah, it was like something from TV. The coffin was surrounded by flowers, priests chanted prayers, people wore dull colours, spoke in low voices, and looked solemn.”

“Weren’t you sad at all?” Jenny asked.

“Did you cry?” Audrey asked.

“Everyone was crying,” I said. I didn’t ask why it was so sad. Everyone seemed to know, so I cried hard for Grandma too, to show that I understood. “But not me, not really.”

“So heartless,” Jenny said.

It was after school and before library duty when Audrey told me what her plan for escaping assembly was. We had the first lunch break and were on our way to A&W.

“See,” Audrey told me, “Wednesdays Chinese begins at 9:00. I don’t have Maths at 8:00, right, because I dropped it, so I’m going to come to school at 8:45.”

“What if the prefects caught you? Late five

minutes one hour detention class. Late ten minutes two hours. For you, you’ll have seventeen hours detention – break record, man!”

“No, lah. Listen. The prefects have classes at 8:00. They’ll be gone by the time I reach here. And there won’t be anyone around.”

“Except the drink-seller.”

We laughed. I noticed for the first time how neat and small her teeth were – they were all quite the same size – amazing. “You lucky pig, no Maths class.” I envied her getting around assembly and detention in one clean, smart move. And no Maths!

At A&W we ate fries with ketchup and chili sauce. Then we turned our watches back, mine ten minutes and hers eight minutes behind the actual time. In case we went back late and were questioned, we could always point to our watches and say, “See? Not late what.”

We didn’t talk about anything much, nothing of consequence anyway. One good thing about Audrey – she didn’t mind talking about things of little consequence.

*

Another “particularly” hot March day was here – “isn’t it par-ti-cu-lar-ly hot today?” we’d drag it out. We were, as usual, lined up for assembly. AB appeared at the second-storey window of the hall overlooking the courtyard. She waited a moment or two, then the bell screamed like a banshee. Here we go again, I thought.

AB looked as if she was about to say, “We are gathered here today...” which meant that she would probably embark on one of her par-ti-cu-lar-ly long subjects.

“Girls, girls, let me remind you of the importance of good behaviour while still in school uniform. The other day, I saw three girls in school uniforms at a shopping centre. They were not from our school, but I thought it gave a very bad impression. These girls had very long hair and they didn’t tie it up. Very untidy and gave a very bad impression. Schoolgirls should have neat, short hair, no perming, no tails. Also in classes, I have noticed how many girls sit. Like tomboys. Girls must learn to sit with their knees together. Girls, girls, when you don’t sit properly, and the teacher stands in front to teach – what does she see? Very ugly...”

When AB finally let us go into the cool chapel for the “final cleansing,” most of us had already perspired through our white shirts in the hot sun. My shirt stuck to my back. It was Wednesday and since Audrey wasn’t around, Ellen half-spilled over the pew in front of her. She quickly straightened up, and started to lean sideways. When we finally got out of church it was 8:10, which was good for us – ten minutes less of Maths. No complaints here. That was one nice thing about church, when it went overtime. It was better than mental anguish and psychological boredom in Maths.

When Chinese period came, our class moved to the language lab, which was the only air-conditioned room in the whole building. Loud sighs of relief as we entered. The only problem with this room was that

everyone had to take off their shoes before they went in, and with about two hundred students coming in everyday – phooey! – talk about palpable smells! I breathed as shallowly as I could without stopping breathing altogether. I went ahead and saved a seat for Audrey beside me. She should be coming soon, none the worse for waking up later than usual. But Chinese started with a chorus of “Good morning, Mrs Lu,” and Audrey didn’t appear. Probably overslept. I hoped she didn’t get caught coming in late by a teacher.

Chinese was soon over. I didn’t do well for the weekly Chinese “listen and write”; I forgot several characters. Usually when Mrs Lu had the class exchange exercise books to correct each other’s work, Audrey would correct mine and I hers and she would usually come out far ahead of me. Then we would sign our names in Chinese to show that we didn’t mark our own books. She would sign her name with a flourish – good cause, too, with the amount of correcting she did on my page, it looked like an abstract work of art.

At first, I thought the air outside was thick because for one too many times I had breathed too shallowly in the lab, but it was a strange heaviness that had nothing to do with my lungs or the par-ti-cu-lar heat and humidity, that now and then shifted, distracting in its invisibility. We stirred restlessly, our whited shoes scraping the rough cement floor of our classroom. The wind slid by low; I heard leaves rustling about the courtyard from our second floor. Something went past us; we turned our heads in unison, only to glimpse AB’s swishing skirt.