

O Thiam Chin

Grasshoppers

I have always enjoyed being alone. Unlike boys my age who play football or fight video-game monsters, I prefer to do things by myself. One of my favourite pastimes is catching grasshoppers, which are quite easy to trap if you have the patience. I can spend hours searching for them in the large grassy field near the kopitiam, the coffee shop where my mother works. A food hawker, she has to be up by six o'clock every day to buy ingredients from the wet market. I like to wake up at the same time she does and watch her prepare for the day. She moves around the flat with light footsteps, hardly making any noise, and when she's ready to leave she always reminds me to behave while she's away. As soon as the front door closes, I jump up from the sofa, peep through the window facing the corridor and watch her limp towards the lift lobby.

When she returns from the wet market, she'll call for me, telling me to come have breakfast before it's cold. She always remembers to buy my favourite fishball mee-hoon, and it'll still be piping hot when I dig in. My mother is a woman with quiet, simple ways. She grew up in a kampong and often tells me stories about her childhood. That was back in the early 70s, when there were still kampongs throughout Singapore— clusters of single-storey, zinc-roofed houses nestled closely together – where people tended small fruit-and-vegetable fields, and reared chickens, ducks and pigs. One thing she never mentions in front of me is my father, and because I know it's something that upsets her I never ask about him. He has become the invisible person who exists between us.

We have lived in Ang Mo Kio, in the heart of Singapore, for as long as I can remember, though my mother tells me I was born in a kampong in Choa Chu Kang, in the north-western part of the island. She says I was in such a rush to enter the world that she didn't make it to the hospital in time, and I was born in the very house where she started life thirty-five years earlier. She says I'm a kampong boy through and through, even though I now live in a housing estate among towering blocks of flats.

I'm only twelve but my mother tells me I behave like a person thrice my age. I don't know what she means, though I can sense her pleasure in saying this so I

just nod. Last year she declared I was old enough to take on adult responsibilities and gave me the keys to the flat.

Some days, when she's at the wet market, I wander around our neighbourhood. I like the mornings, when the air is crisp and the estate is slowly rousing from sleep.

During my secret jaunts I often come across an old couple who like to stroll around a small hibiscus and bougainvillea garden near the estate. They move slowly, in step with each other, looking at the flowers, sometimes pausing to touch them. The old man holds on to the woman's arm with a fierce grip, afraid of tumbling, but it takes only a glance at the woman's face to know that she would never let him fall. When they bend their heads in unison, in close conversation, their white hair looks like a soufflé of clouds hovering above their faces. I often wonder what they are saying, what they have been saying all these years, and imagine what it's like to be with someone for so long. Then they notice me and smile, and I walk away, embarrassed by my thoughts.

Occasionally I see the dirty man who sleeps on a wooden bench and mutters in his sleep. I know he lives nearby, in a block where the old folk stay, and spends his days roaming the neighbourhood, cursing to nobody in particular, jabbing his fingers in the air. I have seen him before at the kopitiam where my mother gives him food or a few dollars, out of pity. She told me his children had abandoned him when they moved to a better housing estate. I look at his crusty heels, embedded with jagged lines of dirt, and think about the ground he has to cover each day to expend his anger.

I rarely stray from my world: a few blocks of flats, a garden, my school, the wet market and the kopitiam. She says there are dangers everywhere, even though we can't see them, and we have to be alert at all times. I try to look out for these dangers, not knowing what they are and, so far, the only threatening thing I have encountered has been a mangy, agitated dog. When I have stayed out long enough, I head home, change into my sleep clothes and wait for my mother to return.

My mother refuses to tell me why she limps, saying only that she had an accident a long time ago. It was from not being aware of dangers, she once warned. I look at her uneven legs, the ungainly up-and-down movement of her body when she walks, and know there is more to her story than she is willing to reveal.

At the kopitiam my mother sells popiah, spring rolls, a trade she picked up from her father, my late grandfather, something she's been doing since I can remember. I help at her stall after school and on weekends; when it's quiet I like to play in the field, catching handfuls of grasshoppers with the transparent plastic bags my mother uses for takeaways. Their bulbous eyes, angular faces and compact, segmented bodies fascinate me. When I shake the bag they're in and bring it to my ear, I can feel the insistent thumping of the grasshoppers, like fast, tiny heartbeats.

Auntie Siew Bee works as a server at the drinks stall next to my mother's, and gives me canned drinks when her boss is not around. During the long lull between lunch and dinner, when there are few customers, she and my mother talk in the kopitiam while separating sticky popiah skins or plucking black seed coats from the heads of bean sprouts. They let me listen in on their conversations but if the topic becomes personal my mother will ask me to play in the field or run an errand.

Once, when my mother was busy at the stall, Auntie Siew Bee sat beside me and put her hand on my back, her eyes sad but knowing.

'Your mother has had a hard life,' she said. 'It could have been better, if not for your scoundrel father.' My ears latched on to her words, eager to hear what she had to tell me. She hesitated, but continued. 'Your father treated her badly for many years, and your mother couldn't do a thing because she had you to think about. He beat her up when he was angry or drunk, and one time he hurt her so badly she had to be hospitalised for a week. That's why she limps.' Auntie Siew Bee suddenly drew back, caught off-guard by her own words. 'Maybe you were too young to remember.' Then she rose to clear the empty plates and beer glasses from a nearby table, leaving me even more curious about my parents' past.

Sometimes after spending an afternoon chasing and catching grasshoppers, I lie on my back in the grassy field and marvel at the changing moods above. I try to take in the whole sky, stretching my vision as wide as possible, aware that there are parts beyond my scope. The never-endingness of the world makes it impossible to take everything in or comprehend it all at once. I gaze at my grasshoppers and wonder what the world looks like through their eyes.

When I show my mother the grasshoppers I've caught, she tells me to release them. She says insects are like humans, just smaller, and that they too have a life. When I open the bag and wait for the grasshoppers to jump out, the strongest

with thin, sharp-angled hind legs, leap out first, propelling themselves forward, landing on the flat blades of grass. It sometimes amazes me to see how high and far they can hop, given their tiny bodies. In school, during physical education tests, I often fail my standing broad jump by a few centimetres, no matter how hard I try.

To force the smaller grasshoppers to flee, I give the bag a few rough shakes but there's usually one left. I reach in and slowly bring it out, holding it gently in my fist and feeling it ticking with life. When I open my hand the grasshopper doesn't move, then in the next beat springs away, disappearing into the dense grass.

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The kopitiam where my mother works has several stalls that sell other kinds of food, like duck rice, fish soup, rojak, fried carrot cake and zi-char. It draws its customers from the surrounding blocks of flats, where people come for their daily meals, or a snack. When my mother is too busy or tired to cook, I eat there, although my mother frowns at this and says the dishes are unhealthy, oily or lacking in proper nutrients. But when the stall owners give me meals free of charge my mother never tells me to say no, instead reminding me to thank them. When I'm at the kopitiam, these stall-owners talk to me, ruffle my hair and give me money for snacks.

Among the stall-owners, I especially like Uncle Ben, who sells duck rice and wears an apron stained with dark gravy. He owned a farm when he was much younger. Then the government came along and offered him a large sum of money to close his business and move into a housing estate. He didn't have a choice so he took the money, slaughtered the animals and invited his kampong friends for a feast that lasted three long days. At the end, there was so much food left he had to ask his guests to take home doggie bags weighing more than five kilograms each. 'Can you imagine how much food we had and how much was left,' he said, stretching out his hefty arms in a proud gesture. 'If you had been there, I'd have fed you till you were as plump as a piglet, not like now, so skinny.' Then he tickled my sides with his greasy fingers until I broke out in giggles.

He once told me he knew my father way before I was born. In fact, he had hired him as an assistant cook and that was how my parents met. I must have looked surprised because the expression on his face shifted ever so slightly as he leaned in and told me this was our secret. From him, I found out how my father had a

quick temper and drank beyond his limits. 'I told him to stop his drinking but he refused to listen,' Uncle Ben said. 'Even when your mother was pregnant he drank like a fish, spending your mother's money and his on alcohol. In the end I had to fire him.'

When I asked about my father's whereabouts he said he could be dead for all he knew; that he had not seen him since he disappeared eight years ago, after the loan sharks started hounding him.

'He really landed your mother in deep shit,' Uncle Ben said. 'I'm sorry to say it but your father was good for nothing. Bastard! Luckily I had some savings I could lend your mother. If not, I can't imagine what would have happened to you or her.' Sensing he might have crossed the line, he softened his tone and changed the topic. After this I couldn't picture my father without feeling shame and repulsion.

Sometimes, when he was in the mood to talk, Uncle Ben told me stories about his childhood. When he was my age he kept crickets in small glass bottles and trained them to fight. Tiger, his favourite, won against all its opponents and helped earn him extra pocket money. But one day he was playing with it and, when he wasn't looking, a stray cat crept up and ate Tiger, leaving behind only a severed brown leg. Uncle Ben buried it under a rambutan tree beside his kampong house and gave up cricket-fighting.

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A few days before my mother's birthday, her thirty-sixth, I planned a surprise. From my daily pocket money and the change the stall owners gave me, I saved ten dollars, which I hoped was enough to buy a small cake and a gift. A few months earlier I had discovered her date of birth from her identification card, which she kept in a plastic case in her wardrobe. She looks very different in the photograph on the card, with long, dark hair tucked behind her ears and a bright, lively spark in her eyes. I stared at the picture, trying to find my mother behind the smiling young girl. My mother doesn't like me going through her things so I had to take great care to put everything back in place. Once, she caught me rummaging through the drawer of her dresser, where she keeps jewellery, letters and wedding photographs, and caned me. She told me it was wrong to look through other people's belongings and that she didn't raise me to be a thief. When I asked her who the man in the photograph was, she brought the cane

down on my thighs again, crying hard even as she left long streaks all over my legs.

On her birthday I headed to the neighbourhood bakery, where I realised I could afford only a slice and not a whole cake. I deliberated for some time before choosing her favourite flavour: pandan. I also bought a photo frame with a border of plastic flowers and inserted a photograph of us taken during my birthday trip to Sentosa the year before. In it, she had her arm across my tanned shoulders and was holding a hand above her eyes, shielding them from the sun. I put the cake in the fridge and hid the frame under her pillow.

Then I went to the kopitiam and waited for my mother to finish work. It was dinner time and the place was packed with customers eating while watching the news on a TV hanging on the wall. The sticky smell of deep frying and cigarette smoke permeated the air, suffusing the kopitiam with an oppressive warmth. Drink orders flew through the air as servers moved from table to table, clearing cups and relaying requests. From a table of beer drinkers, a man burst out laughing, inciting another with 'Bottoms up!'. A short queue had formed in front of Uncle Ben's stall, where he was busy chopping up glistening roasted ducks. My mother saw me and pushed out two orders of popiah, indicating with a nod where to take the plates. I served the food and dropped the payment into a large tin can in which my mother kept her money. There was a constant stream of customers, and I had to double up, serving the popiah and washing plates and chopsticks. For the next hour or so I forgot why I was there in the first place.

When the dinner crowd started to dwindle, and the ingredients ran out, my mother called it a day. I offered to help with the dishes but she shoved a two-dollar note in my hand and told me to buy what I wanted. I put the money in my pocket and walked to the edge of the dark field. The sky was the colour of a bruise and speckled with stars. I turned and looked back into the brightness of the kopitiam, at my mother busy behind her stall, cleaning and putting away the cooking utensils. I liked to observe my mother when she's unconscious of her movements, the rhythms of her body in motion. When she looked around for me, I could feel my body moving in response, taking a step forward, towards her. When she was finally done, and the lights above the stall were switched off, I returned to the kopitiam and we walked home together.

We sauntered through the neighbourhood in the cool breeze, cutting through the outdoor carpark. A black cat lying on the hood of a Honda Civic stirred and jumped off as we approached. Near our block of flats, the smelly man came up to

us, bare-foot and swearing under his breath. He held out his dirt-streaked hand and stopped us in our tracks. He looked frightened, frightening. My mother dug around in her pocket and dropped a few coins into his hand. The man trundled on, his hand still extended, and resumed his tirade. My mother stared at his retreating shape and sighed.

‘Do you know what today is?’ I asked, hoping to change the mood.

‘Today? It’s a Thursday, right?’ she said, turning to look at me. Then she continued walking, her limp more pronounced, heavier than usual.

‘Guess, guess. It’s a special day, don’t you remember?’

‘All I know is it’s been a long, tiring day and I can’t wait to have a shower and relax. Then we can have our dinner.’

When we arrived home, I dragged her to the refrigerator. She found the cake and with a finger scraped the whipped cream off the top and tasted it. It’s delicious, she remarked, holding her smile.

‘Now you can have the rest,’ she said, passing the slice to me.

Then I took her to her bedroom and told her to search for the second surprise. She laughed, lifted my head, kissed it and went to find her present. She tore off the wrapping, studied the photograph in the frame and put it on her bedside table. Her features dissolved into a softness I hadn’t seen in a long time.

‘Happy birthday, mum,’ I said. She hugged me and announced that we were going out for a big dinner to celebrate.

Walking towards Ang Mo Kio Central, my mother held my hand. It was slightly past nine and the streetlights created overlapping ovals of deep yellow on the ground. Horns blasted while traffic streamed past us on the street. High above, among the dark branches of tall trees, flocks of birds cackled as they settled in for the night. Amid the nocturnal cacophony, we could hear the insistent chirping of the crickets coming from the thick shrubs that lined the street.

‘Do you know that it is only the male cricket that chirps? It makes the sound by rubbing its wings together,’ I said, having picked this up from a science book I borrowed from the school library.

‘Really?’

‘Yup. And do you know that Uncle Ben used to keep crickets and put them in fights to earn extra pocket money?’

‘He told you that?’

‘Yes, but he gave it up when his favourite cricket was eaten by a cat.’ My mother nodded in amusement.

‘Now my turn. Do you know the grasshopper only jumps forwards, never backwards?’ my mother said. I looked at her, astonished.

‘How did you know?’ I asked.

‘I used to catch grasshoppers too when I was your age. With my bare hands, not with a plastic bag. Next time, before you catch them, try to observe how they move. You’ll see I’m right.’

‘I will,’ I said.

‘It’s important to be like the grasshopper,’ my mother added, ‘to keep moving forward, especially when times are bad.’ She stared straight ahead, keeping her stride, and tightening her hold on me. It was hard to read the expression on her face, backlit by streetlights. Then she turned to me, smiled, and said: ‘Remember this, my son.’

As I walked beside her, I remembered the tiny grasshopper beating in my loose fist and the first leap it took as it jumped out of my hand into a new world, one far from where it came. I tried to imagine myself as the grasshopper – always jumping forward towards the unknown, never once turning back – and wondered how it was possible to face the new without fear. At the back of my mind, I sensed something – a knowledge budding, taking root, spreading. I’d soon have to leave behind my childhood, my entire history of twelve years. The thought scared me, like a freshly discovered fear, and filled me with fretful anticipation.

As Ang Mo Kio Central loomed, I set my sights on the bright dazzling lights, hoping that one day, like the grasshopper, I’d reach the place I was meant to be. I slipped my hand out of my mother’s, and stretched my fingers.

‘We’re almost there,’ my mother said.

‘Yes, we are,’ I replied.

