

## Shaun Seah

### 'I Remember Every Step'

30th April 2020, a thundering tropical downpour creates a wall of mist that erases the world beyond our public housing flat pitched on the 26th floor. Facing north-wards on a good day, I can even see the Malaysian coast from my study desk. Foregrounding that foreign, faraway land are skyscrapers of all manner of shape, size and aesthetics – from the sleek, gravity-defying malls and private apartments for the multi-millionaire expatriates and high-earning professionals, to the humble public apartments that, just like mine, house the people that sweep, clean and oil their Singaporean dream which for many remains a mere mirage. My block sits astride the island-city's busiest expressway – a groundbreaking infrastructural project finished in 1988 that marked the final transition from 'Third World to First'. For me, the eight-laned expressway is nothing but a constant drone that rudely awakens me and juxtaposes my discomfort to the daily migratory patterns of those who can afford to drive – cars in Singapore typically cost more than £70,000 – even from some 150 metres above. It was not until Singapore's lockdown some four weeks back that I finally managed some shut eye past the morning peak hour. When I am not at Cambridge, this is home.

The tropical thunderstorm has, for the time being, obscured everything outside and I had a good rest. For me, all of these little things are most noticeable whenever I return from one home to the other – sometime in early March, home was still a well-appointed, well-lit and (to the credit of the College's indomitable Maintenance and Housekeepers) exceedingly well-maintained room. I was almost able to take for granted the calm and quiet of Storey's Way and Cambridge, surrounded by images of genteel suburbia I had only dreamt of living in from my healthy childhood diet of authors, scientists and biographies of Great Men who all recalled their days as mere undergraduates. Essay deadlines notwithstanding, there was always time for a sip of tea by the window on a clear Spring evening, counting the minutes as each day got longer which this son of the tropics found a novel treat. I imagined Lee would have done the same to wind down in the middle of the chaos that Lent Term typically entails. In that way, I found myself as a fellow traveler in his footsteps; it did not seem to matter that he was rushing to Supervisions with dons in 1947 while I, 2017. What I enjoyed most was that there was much space to dream while I remained firmly ensconced in the bosom of privilege that is a Cambridge education albeit in a collegiate community that did the most to always remind each other of it. I could work, play and rest in the fresh, cool air and wide, open spaces I could previously only see on computer desktop screens.

Many Singaporeans have come to Cambridge and Fitzwilliam since, having had to jump through the hoops of not only the university's robust interview and assessment system, but to qualify financially. This could be through adequate familial wealth to finance it, although that require you to belong to perhaps the top 5% strata of the island's population. Indeed, if you only spoke to Singaporeans from Cambridge, it would almost seem like every Singaporean child had parents who were Surgeons, Managing Partners or Government

Ministers! For the rest of us, it requires jumping through months of selections in Lee Kuan Yew's 'meritocracy' to land ourselves any plethora of scholarships in rewarding arenas of public service. I opted for the Navy, and it took another year and a half of military training and careful election before one was deemed worthy of the £300,000 they entrusted in my education. For some, this is an uncomfortable compromise between passion and pragmatism. For me, it was an easy choice; doing something I had grown to love that would pay for the study of a subject I had always loved. But a privilege it always remained, as I was highly conscious of life in Cambridge as a 'pretension' to a life out of reach, divided from my humble lived realities by a 13-hour flight over eight time zones and three generations of striving. When my grandmother, 'Porpor' came to visit in Easter 2018, our shared, decades-old journey of striving to the life I enjoyed abroad was epitomized in a simple tea we had on a sunny morning by Ely. Porpor was visibly disconcerted as we were approached by a pleasant, middle-aged English lady simply asking for our order. In her experience in restaurants, one typically was not seated when speaking with a Caucasian about what they would like to have! In fact, the cake, crumpets, clotted cream and scones we enjoyed seemed to spark a deep memory in her, and she soon excitedly exclaimed 'so this is what they taste like fresh!'. Porpor explained that her mother usually brought these treats home as two-day old Christmas leftovers from the British family she served.

Today, I sat down for breakfast with Porpor in the Telok Blangah neighbourhood of Singapore where my family has resided for the better part of the past fifty years. She smells the rain coming from the sea well before the first sound of thunder, and we quickly move to close our windows – all three that we have. This humble flat in Telok Blangah was home in 1980 when my taxi-driver grandfather left a housewife and her three children for the city and a life of fast women, fast cars and fast cash. It was home when my own parents parted ways in 2000 and my own mother reappeared hand in tow with a toddler. And so, it remains home today as Porpor and I gather for a quiet breakfast as mummy 'works from home' as a small local company logistics manager, managing the stresses and uncertainties of every humble salary-earner amidst this economic storm. Breakfast is buttered store-bought bread and sugar, as it has been for Porpor since she began to be able to afford breakfast in her late teens. Telok Blangah is a mere short 15-minutes' bus ride from the city but has its roots as a humble fishing village beside a cemetery which today houses what seems to be a hundred thousand former industrial workers, triad members and schoolteachers all rendered equally docile and amiable by the passage of time. Porpor used to spend every morning with their wives, trekking up the gentle hillock park we have nearby and trading gossip, recipes, and 'most recommended temples' for their monthly Taoist prayers. While the pandemic rages, I take the place of a dozen 70-year old grandmothers in these morning conversations. In my halting Mandarin learnt as a second language and further eviscerated from three years abroad, I try my best.

This morning, I decided we would talk about memory. I was just about to submit my thesis and so decided to show Porpor a few samples of the archival footage I found of Singapore in my period of inquiry (1959-81). The first video I showed her was a sleek documentary on the 1960s produced by the local news network probably designed to facilitate conversations just like these – important to bridge the gap between Singaporeans today and the many of a

generation that grew up knowing nothing but squalor, crime, riot and the colonial colour bar. She registered no recall of the articulate, English-educated interviewees – even if they were the first local to win the 1961 Singapore Grand Prix, or the woman who gained Singapore's first sporting titles in swimming. Cars, speaking English and swimming pools were luxuries in themselves! Sure, their exploits may have been registered on the radio, but who had time to cram into a subdivided room with three other families to share the one wireless they had. Clips of young people at school, concerts and disco-bars that sought to show 'ordinary lives' of the 1960s continued to puzzle Porpor as though they had lived in a whole other world. I also showed her a British Pathe travelogue prepared for expatriates making their first trip to the mystical 'Far East' by BOAC aeroplanes from Heathrow via Cairo and Delhi. The first thing she pointed out was that the entire flight's passenger complement was white. Not only that, but the port-city the video showed with its sleek modern roads, automobiles and classy seaside bars too betrayed a Caucasian composition. The only familiar faces that peeked out in the travelogue were the bellboys, the drivers, and the uniformed Amahs, 'loyal Chinese servants' as the narrator described, scrubbing the children's feet the moment they got out of the pool. Porpor simply explained that planes didn't exist for ordinary people until we got independence.

But curiously enough, no detail escaped her whenever the camera panned to shots of 'streetside Singapore'. Now you have to understand that my grandmother is 73-years old, received no schooling, and spent her life being one of those very same 'loyal Chinese servants' cleaning a hundred expatriate homes. Her eyesight was also failing her; in Michaelmas of my second year while I squinted in libraries reading Macaulay and Gibbon, she was undergoing surgery for cataracts and for those same three months could not see out of either eye particularly clearly. And so it was all the more pleasantly surprising to me when she paused the video many times to give me a source interpretation lecture far more exciting than any lecturer could manage. After a fleeting 2-second black and white clip of policewomen on patrol, she pointed out the exact street corner she lived on and draw attention to the faint image of a Hindu Temple (Sri Mariamman) she passed every day on her way to her father's tailor shop from home. In the next clip, she spotted a distinct clocktower and fingered the exact spot of her family's one-room abode, "No. 33 Hock Lam Street – right above the pork slaughterhouse. You can see the signboard here!" A scene of a street peddler invited a 20-minute detailed source interpretation as she pointed out how the shopkeepers used to weigh spices, where people did their laundry, and even the times of day that different hawkers would peddle their wares at the same spot. As a historian whose only possible academic strength lay in factual recall, I began to feel that I was sat beside someone whose capacity in this far exceeded mine.

She reached for my pen and started to sketch an outline of that shophouse apartment – "you get up the staircase here, then on your right you have the landlord's grandmother, she lay on a mattress bedridden most days in that dark corner, and then further down you have our kitchen. We used firewood, and beside the stove there was a hole in the ground where you excused yourself. Every Monday I remember, the nightsoil man came and this particular truck, how do I describe it, its blue and.... And.... (I draw up the image on Google Images searching 'night soil truck Singapore') Yes! That's it, exactly." I had never been particularly

excited by the intricacies of human waste transportation, but in that moment, Porpor's enthusiasm made the difference.

"To your left is a room where we lived. Probably no bigger than this dining area, but us 7 children and 4 adults made do. There was one bed. Nearer to the street there was a window – father used to make the girls practice sewing here till 2am, and obviously you get clumsy at 2 in the morning and the needles prick you more than once. My sister and I realized it was fun to throw the needles down on the street! The people never seemed to realise what had gently pricked their heads, and most seemed to brush it off as they rushed off on their next errand. It was so much fun; that was all the fun we had as children, there were only new clothes at Chinese New Year."

The travelogue resumed. 'With the crust and culture of a dozen civilisations, Singapore will always fascinate and surprise' (pans to a shot of a Chinese procession). Porpor identifies it immediately as a funeral band: "You can tell which big clan family sponsored it by the signboards. (2 seconds later, the signboards appear) – ah yes, the Wu Clan Association, you can see it there written – 'In Singapore, you never know what strange creature is waiting to greet you' (enter a scene of the Lion Dance, a traditional Chinese spectacle to usher in the New Year). Porpor points out the colour of the banner, identifying it as the Kia Kee Lion Dance Troupe. In the next scene, those same words appear emblazoned on their shirts. (A rhythmic beat followed by a low-pitched moan from a wind instrument): Ah that's the Malay ronggeng dance, you do it like this, swaying side to side with a sash. I never could afford to go, but my friends and I would try it sometimes in the backstreet – I know there's the 'Walsh', the 'Fox-drot'... I may not have pronounced them right, but I know them!" (In the next scene, couples do exactly that). On a shot panning over a distinct bridge that stands to this day, she even recalled a sailor-boy she once strolled with and how he valiantly kicked a flashing pervert into the river in defence of her dignity. She remembers the pims and lines on his uniform and the neat ribbons they used to tie on their caps, 'like what dolls and children used to wear' she laughingly recalled.

And for those fleeting few hours thanks to the simple pleasures of the internet, Porpor transported me back sixty years, out of our apartment and across Singapore city as she recounted those simpler, younger days. It was an imaginative escape across time and space for both of us alike from the claustrophobic realities of social distancing and a month-long home lockdown with still at least a month to go. Just as aspiring to 'make it' to a place like Cambridge was the achievement of a lifetime to me, so too was her own journey from dilapidated shophouse and uneducated single mother to owning her own public housing flat.

I found that this made a small step in resolving the disorientation I and many fellow first-generation Fitzbillies over the years have felt in our first glimpse at the steps to follow 'up' society's ladder of attainment, by showing me that it was not the first step for this family but merely the most recent in a dogged, decades-long journey of grit, striving and determination. This thought was a great way to start the morning. I returned to my laptop and peeked outside the window – the rain had stopped just as suddenly as it began. Everything seemed the same, only drenched and overcast with grey clouds. Shrugging off

the restless, bitter unease I had felt for much of the past month acclimatizing back to life in far humbler, humid and perhaps hum-drum surroundings than I have grown accustomed to, I resolved to do justice to Porpor's memory and our shared journey by quickly jotting it down. Something I always believe is that when we write down our memories, they become a small part of history and live just a little bit longer than ourselves.